

# ORDINARY LANGUAGE ANALYSIS (OLA), PROVERBS AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION

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**Abstract:** In recent times, the plausibility for proverbs as one of the instructional and educational tools for moral development has been mitigated. Perhaps this is owing to the reality of the African of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who faces the tension of Euro-Christian civilization, Arab-Islamic Invasion and her Traditional world-view. While the first two of the three have wielded considerable influence on the minds of Africans, the third has an impact that seems not only to be waning but on the intellectual defensive. Why is the African Traditional World-view on the decline? Does the African culture possess nothing significant for Africans? This study situates with proverb within the African traditional thought system as a way of providing an explanatory justification for the presence of a tool for moral development that is originally African. It employs the method the Ordinary Language Analysis (OLA) proposed by foremost African scholars, Barry Hallen and John Olubi Sodipo to regurgitate and disinter that Africans can only seek Africa in Africa but not elsewhere. With the inquiry into African proverbs, it is the conviction and submission of this study that the moral development of the African mind needs to be purged by acquaintance with the vernacular of the man of colour.

**Keywords:** OLA, Proverbs, Moral Development, Africa, Philosophy.

## Introduction

Proverbs in the writings of the late literary icon, Chinua Achebe “are the palm oil with which words are eaten.”<sup>1</sup> This goes so much to inform about the indispensable role that proverbs play in traditional African society. To this end, it may then be inquired if this role can still come to

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1 Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. (London: Heinemann 1958), 25

be in modern Africa. In other words, can proverb play the role it was accorded in traditional times in modern times? What are proverbs? How do they inform moral development in ancient times? Can the positive roles of proverbs in ancient times be rejuvenated, modified and then applied to suit modern times? What are the challenges faced if one engages with this expedition? These are the germane questions that this essay purports to investigate.

This is why this essay, in a bid to achieve its objective, has six parts, including this introduction. In the section that follows, we uncover the inner kernel of the methodology that would be employed in the course of assessing the veracity of African proverbs. The third part focuses primarily on the meaning and role of proverbs in ancient African setting. This is meant to reveal that proverbs play a very vital role in the business of moral development. In the fourth part, we critically evaluate the possibility of proverb filling the gap for moral development in modern times. In the fifth section, we propose three plausible recommendations as the sixth part concludes the essay.

### **The Ordinary Language Analysis and its Thematic Discourse**

Barry Hallen and the late John Olubi Sodipo brought the Yoruba language first applied the Ordinary Language Analysis (OLA). This is calculated to exhume some ideas and the values they represent in that language. Ideas, which are autochthonous to the *Yoruba* but to be passed on as a philosophy. Given that “the analysis of how concepts are used in ordinary language is an essential methodology of analytic philosophy”<sup>2</sup> in the Western parlance, Barry Hallen holds that Africans have the “prerogatives to describe, analyse and define issues of rationality generally as they relate to Africa’s intellectual heritage,”<sup>3</sup> and the products of utilizing these prerogatives are, in their own rights, philosophy. There are so many benefits in these as description is given more priority rather than criticism.

OLA consists primarily in employing the method of analytic philosophy to assess the ways words and concepts are understood and used in any setting. A brief overview of the inner kernel of OLA is pertinent before unfolding its consequence on some of the *Yoruba* concepts that this research examines.

2 Gbenga Fasiku. “African Philosophy and the Method of Ordinary Language Philosophy” in *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*. 2008 2(4), 85.

3 Please refer to his efforts on the discourse: Hallen, B., (2004) “*Yoruba Moral Epistemology*.” In K. Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*, New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd; Hallen, B., (1998). “Academic Philosophy and African Intellectual Liberation.” *African Philo.* 11(2).

According to Barry Hallen, ordinary language analysis or philosophy places “emphasis upon ordinary, common and collective uses of language.”<sup>4</sup> Greater importance being attached to description and to analysis rather than to criticism. It is pertinent to note as Fasiku rightly opines that there are some uses of language, which are not ordinary, common and collective. Fasiku amplifies that “in this sense, usage of language follows some regimented or strictly controlled pattern. Any strange use of language that is contrary to this technical and strict sense of language is considered primitive, illogical and unreasonable. What the ordinary language philosophy suggests is that this strict and technical use of language, which is the feature of the mainstream philosophy, is not the only way of doing philosophy.”<sup>5</sup>

In essence, the crux of the foregoing is that there are some senses in which language may be employed. “Senses that are generally accepted by a group of people but may be deemed faulty or wanting upon critical assessment from the perspective of mainstream Western-styled thinking.”<sup>6</sup> This is why upon a perusal of some concepts and words in the *Yoruba* language, it is quite startling that a direct interpretation or translation into the English language would yield little or no comprehension.

An overview of some *Yoruba* concepts, *Yoruba* maxim, proverbs, riddles, folktales, reveal much more about the unique way with which the *Yoruba* people use words and concepts. In the same manner, “utilizing source materials derived primarily from oral literature – proverbs, myth, folktales, songs, Ifá Corpus and the likes – philosophers, situated for the most part in Africa, set out to analyse the meaning of a concept that occurs in an African language and that they believe to be of philosophical prepossession and interest.”<sup>7</sup> For instance, there are several arrays of notions that have yielded dialogues, which span metaphysics, logic, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. Barry Hallen has made commendable efforts highlighting how the ordinary language analysis suits and helps African aboriginal thoughts gets closer to what passes muster as philosophy.

However, it should be stated that even OLA has a hermeneutical twist implied in it. This is because African concepts and thoughts cannot be faithfully retained if literally translated into the English Language.

The word *ikunle* literally means kneeling down but in the herme-

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4 Barry Hallen. “Does it Matter Whether Linguistic Philosophy Intersects Ethnophilo?” *APA Newsletters*. 1996 96 (1), 98.

5 Fasiku, Op. Cit, 87.

6 Emmanuel Ofuasia and Oluwaseyi Ojo. “On the Gettier Problem and *Yorùbá* Epistemology: Analytic Forays into Ethno-Philosophy.” *Philosophia*, 2016 14, 155

7 Hallen 2004, Op. Cit., 22

neutic sense it connotes respect; lacking in resistance or self-effacement. Sometimes when a *Yoruba* person says “*ori ikunle ni mo wa*” (*I am on my knees*), s/he may say that standing or bowing, without being practical (i.e. kneeling) in posture. What is being emphasized is that the humble but not arrogance is the disposition in play. This is more glaring when the *Yoruba* says “*ma duro le mi lori*” which literally translates as: “*do not stand on my head*”. People do not stand on the head of others practically but standing while a superior or elder is talking indicates lack of respect or humility. A child is therefore expected to be on his/her knees while being advised or reprimanded.

The above instances and the inner kernel of the methodology to be employed in this discourse are very necessary for the task. Hence, with the OLA subtly articulated, the next divide looks at the meaning of proverbs, its nature as well as the role it plays in ancient African societies. Now that it served as a tool for moral development in the ancient times, does not mean it would be imported completely into modernity. We shall only be considering the non-anachronistic aspects that are latent with positive impacts for the development of the morals of the modern mind.

### **The Place of Proverbs in Traditional African World-view**

In the traditional and modern African societies, proverbs are generally accepted as the quintessence in the passage and communication of ideas and ethics among both the old and the young. In fact, a scenario is best explained where a speaker encapsulates his thoughts in a suitable and appropriate proverb. Hussein underscores the point made above when he observes that Africa is a continent known for its rich oral arts and that proverbs are the most widely used in the continents’, long tradition of oral arts.<sup>8</sup> Proverbs do not play an aesthetic role, they serve as the acceptable medium of passing or transmitting knowledge and convention from generation to generation.<sup>9</sup> On this note, Lawal Ajayi and Raji stated clearly the didactic functions of *Yoruba* proverbs especially for the younger generation.<sup>10</sup>

African elders seldom use proverbs when they talk, but when proverbs are employed either for pedagogic reasons or for predictive purposes they are often terse but explanatory.<sup>11</sup> As paradigmatic entities, their life

8 J.W. Hussein. “The Social and Ethno-cultural Construction of Masculinity and Femininity in African Proverbs.” *African Study Monographs* 2005 26 (2), 60.

9 Ibid, p. 61.

10 R.A. Lawal, B. Ajayi, W. Raji. “A Pragmatic Study of Selected Pairs of *Yoruba* Proverbs.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 1997 27, 636.

11 A. Akinjide. “Exploring Proverbs as a Learning Resource in the Contemporary Society.” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*.

is predicated on the situations that bring them to life. Indeed, they are nothing but theoretical models upon which ethical, social and religious situations are tested. For Fayemi “proverbs are an essential oral tradition that Africans use in storing and retrieving any aspect of their cultural worldview.”<sup>12</sup> This means that proverbs picture reality. Elsewhere we find that:

African cultural heritage, (proverbs, taboos, dirge etc.) passed on from generation to generation, has been a source of guidance for African communities in times of peace, uncertainty, birth, life and death. It has been a basis of their self-identity, self-respect and self-confidence. It has enabled them to live in harmony with their physical, social and spiritual environments. This heritage provides a foundation for leadership, guidance, problem solving, decision-making, self-reliance and development.<sup>13</sup>

From the exploration thus far, it is the case that proverbs are used to identifying and dignifying a culture, clarifying vision, serve as metaphors to explain complex issues and create strong mental pictures of events. The question is: How do proverbs perform these cultural functions? Let us take some of these proverbs in *Yoruba* culture, for the purpose of illustrations. Consider for instance the proverb *Ikoko ti yio je ata idi re a gbona*. The proverb extols the virtue of perseverance. It says, “Success is attained through persistent efforts.” Such is the case with such other proverb; namely, *A kii nkanju la obe gbigbona*. which translates literally “one does not sip hot soup in a hurry.” This proverb extols the virtue of patience, and prudence in choice making. It says that choice-making needs to involve some elements of prudence to avoid making irrational or arbitrary choice. There are some fundamental issues at stake here. First, there is the question of decision making which rests on prudence. Second, there is the issue of rationality in decision-making, and third there is the cognitive process that underpins the decision-making. The issues are logically related in the sense that one lends support to the other. The elder who says one does not sip hot soup in a hurry knows that people do throw caution to the wind while making decision in life. Sometimes the notion of prudence demands that a person is sure of the choice he wants to make. However, this is only possible where a person acts with a reasonable sense in selecting options where they are available. In this regard, the exercise involves a judicious selection of these options.<sup>14</sup>

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2014 4(17), 109.

12 Kazeem Fayemi. “Logic in Yoruba Proverbs.” 2010 *Itupale: Online Journal of African Studies*. 2, 2.

13 M. Chick, j. Rick. “Using African Proverbs in Organisational Capacity Building.” *Praxis Note*. 2004 6, 29.

14 Akinjide, Op. Cit., 110.

Writing on the *Yoruba* world-view, Oke points out that “the *Yoruba* generally believe and behave as if they hold the view that there is an external world existing independently of its being perceived.”<sup>15</sup> Like every other African group, in the *Yoruba* thought system, tables, trees, chairs and so on are objects, which exist independently of their being perceived. As Oke has remarked, “the *Yoruba* thought does not give room for naïve realist theory of perception.”<sup>16</sup> The reason for this is that in *Yoruba* thought, sense experience is not regarded as absolute authority on the nature and reality of the external world. This view rests on one singular point: the world may not always be as it appears to the senses. Thus among the *Yoruba*, a person sees an object with one property e.g. size, which he does not take to constitute an immediate perceptual object. Whereas a table has a shape and a size, neither the shape nor the size constitutes the table. Indeed, objects are sometimes said to possess certain symbolic meaning, which may count to be esoteric. In this regard, symbolism rules the African world.

For Hallen and Sodipo, one essential condition of knowledge in *Yoruba* thought system is that perceptual experience must be first-hand, a notion that is shared by most African people.<sup>17</sup> This notion is directly linked with the notion of direct perception where perception is sensation plus judgment. Sensation is here defined in terms of simple seeing, while judgment is defined to mean inference and interpretation. Thus, we have a situation where an object is presented to the percipient but the meaning is given in interpretation. In *Yoruba* culture, the question is not whether an object is directly or indirectly given to the percipient, rather it is usually whether such an object provides any meaningful explanation of its environment. In an attempt to understand their environment, *Yoruba* employ such cultural resources as taboos, proverbs, folktales, myths and so on to explain their environment. This paper is interested in how these cultural resources especially proverbs are used to explain the *Yoruba* cultural environment, and how proverbs serve as pedagogical strategy to teach the virtues of patience, prudence, perseverance, rational choice, honesty, transparency and many other ethical virtues in human interaction. The applied methodology here does not intend to test the veridicality of the proverbs as set in this paper, rather it was meant to demonstrate the different logics of knowledge between *Yoruba* thought system and psychological analy-

15 Moses Oke. *A Critical Study of the Viability of Phenomenalism as an Alternative Theory of Perception*. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Ile- Ife, Obafemi Awolowo University 1989, 384.

16 Ibid, 385.

17 Barry Hallen and John Sodipo. *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997).

ses. In this regard, therefore, the cultural resources are not intended to be exposed to an evaluation of some psychological analyses.<sup>18</sup>

Discussions of African values are predicated on the acceptance of African culture; except that there may be no consensus among scholars on what may count as African culture.<sup>19</sup> Primarily, this is due to the varied beliefs and traditions that exist among African people. However, this may not count as a major reason to deny African culture. Hay (1958:5) tends to reinforce this belief with the analysis of the Japanese culture vis-à-vis the western culture.<sup>20</sup> According to him, ‘western culture’ is not the culture of any specific country or people; rather it is only an imaginary construct. In other words, for him “there is actually no such thing as ‘the west’ and so there cannot be any reality in the idea of ‘Western culture’.” Hay continues that although held in relation to an attack on ethnocentricity, which rests on the assumption that America and Europe represent universalized models of civilization and culture.<sup>21</sup> The implication is that the reference to African culture too rests on the assumption that we are dealing with a socially constructed term. Thus, the term ‘African culture’ may be considered a ‘construct’ designed for marking out ‘African culture’ from the rest of the world. In this respect, the particularity of certain cultural elements among African people does not invalidate any attempt to discuss the present issue under a general framework. The same view tends to be fundamental to any discussion on the youth culture and values, especially as it relates to young people in the sub-Saharan Africa. However, for the purpose of this work African culture and values depict the culture and values that are indigenous to African people. In this respect, African culture is defined in terms of a people’s way of life-taste, fashion, marriage, customs and so forth.

Proverbs also constitute a repertoire of *Yoruba* ideological configuration on gender, politics, socio-economics, race, sex, etc. In recent times, language has ceased from being perceived as a medium of communication alone. It is perceived largely as a reflection of our total being. On this note, Ajolore, observed that in a gendered society, of which *Yoruba* land is a potent part, language is used to express how groups should behave and relate to the external world and to each other.<sup>22</sup> Once they have entered

18 Akinjide, Op Cit, III.

19 Moses Makinde. *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University 2007), 232.

20 W.L. Hay. “An Approach to the Study of Trait Implication and Trait Similarity.” In R. Targuiri and L. Petrullo (Eds). *Person Perception and Interpersonal Behaviour*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1985), 5.

21 Ibid, 17.

22 O. Ajolore. “Lexical Borrowing in *Yoruba*.” In A. Afolayan. (Ed.) *Yoruba*

into relationship of dominance and subordination, the social groups make distinctions among themselves through forms of signification.

Underscoring the above assertion, Hussein wondered why little attention was being given to the ideological tones of proverbs in Africa.<sup>23</sup> He emphasized that some proverbs relating to man-human relationship were interpreted within their generalized import, that within their sexist and thus ideological import. He opined further that if some African proverbs examined psychoanalytically, it would be discovered that “groups who occupy a subordinate or oppressed position in society invariably suffer from linguistic disparagement.”<sup>24</sup>

*Yoruba* proverbs also serve as a potent instrument of social control. Deviant behaviour and social miscreants have characterized human society right from the twilight. The *Yoruba* society is not an exception in this regard. Language, therefore, serves as a means of ensuring social conformity. Proverbs, as an integral part of language aptly plays this role. On this note, Lawal, Ajayi and Raji emphasized that proverbs are used to reinforce and sustain the traditional respect for elders and that they are also used as a potent means of social control where they become handy in settling quarrels and disputes.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Relevance of Proverbs for Moral Development in a Globalized Africa**

The previous section has been concerned with the business of making us acquaint with the business of what proverbs means and how it is employed as a tool for character formation among Africans. This section intends to show how proverbs can still serve this role despite the fact that globalization of culture and European influences still pose a very serious obstacle.

Of what importance then is the study of this cultural resource to the education of African persons for moral development in contemporary times? The education of African child usually begins from home, and it comes in terms of the interaction between the child and his/her environment. In this regard, education is not confined to the experience a child acquires in school. Such forms of education may take place at home. For instance, parents sometimes use proverbs, taboos and folklore to educate their children at home. These cultural resources are used to draw attention to the consequence(s) of bad conduct. African parents do not spare their

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Language and Literature (Ibadan: University Press Ltd 2002), 150.

23 Hussein, Op. Cit., 61.

24 Ayo Kehinde. “Proverbs as Thematic Vehicle in Recent African Short Fiction”. *Proverbium*. 2004 21, 120.

25 Lawal et al, Op. Cit., 637.

children when they involve in misconduct. Corporal punishment is one of those measures often used to correct children's misconduct. However, it may sometimes turn out to be counter-productive when it is used very often. Instead of corporal punishment, parents may remind their erring children of the consequences of their actions through such cultural resources as folktales, taboos and proverbs. There are lessons for them to learn from folklore, proverbs and taboos as elders often organize moonlight stories where folktales are told and interpreted by young children.

Marah (2006:18) captures this form of education when he says, "stories are used not only to amuse and express feelings, but to also teach ideal form of behavior and morality."<sup>26</sup> In schools, a teacher may use proverbs to caution his/her pupils/students against bad conduct. When the need arises, a teacher may use the proverb: *Bi a ba so 'ko sarin oja ara ile eni nii ba*, which translates "If you throw a stone to the market place you may hit your own household." This proverb performs some cautionary roles: (a) by warning students of the consequences of wrongdoing, and (b) by deterring them from engaging in social vices. The moral values embodied in this proverb are expected to moderate the students' conduct and behaviour. Thus, proverbs are expected to provide a theoretical framework for championing (i) the virtue of patience, (ii) the notion of prudence in anything a person does, and (iii) the use of rational enquiry in conjunction with prudence where one is faced with choice-making. However, the epistemological import of proverbs lies in the predominant stress that is laid on the fact that: (i) behind every perceptual experience is the problems of perception (ii) the awareness of these problems may help to effect a cautionary role on how we perceive and interpret human behaviour (iii) facial expressions are much more complex, sometimes incongruent with intentional dispositions.

From the discussion so far, it is obvious that although proverbs mean well for Africa, it faces a lot of challenges. This cannot be wished away out of the reality that several factors militate against the role(s) that proverb can play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century African community.

Firstly, the impact of the continuous program of globalization of culture is fast making cultural assimilation from other parts of the world supersede those that are indigenously African. This is one of the reasons why it has been very difficult to ascertain and point out the connection and relevance of proverb to moral development in today's African setting.

Secondly, African indigenous languages are fast been replaced by the languages of the colonial masters. It is very easy to find Africans who cannot speak their own indigenous tongues. In this case, the full force of

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26 J.K. Marah. "The Virtues and Challenges in Traditional Education." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 2006 1(4), 18.

meaning implied in proverbs is lost if converted to their indigenous interpretation. In these face of these two crucial challenges, what is to be done?

### **Proposals for Proverbs in School Curriculum: On Moral Development**

It is important to begin by stating that policy makers in the education sector must take cognizance of the role of the indigenous language in the dissemination of thoughts and ideas. This is important because regardless of one's height of study, the mother tongue plays a pivot part in our perception of the world. This idea is accentuated but needs not much elaboration when attention is given to the membership and emotional solidarity among members of religious institutions where the vernacular is used vis-à-vis those that are steeped fully in the foreign languages. One will realize that most of the religious organisations where the vernacular is in operation have a deeper affinity with the Gospel because it seems to them that they are been reprimanded morally. Now when the preacher proceeds to employ the proverbs of these indigenous languages, there is no doubt that the message will easily connect. Education can learn a lot from religion in this mould. Consequently, teaching and learning in the indigenous language must be given priority over the foreign language.

Secondly, deliberate efforts should be made to improve on the general well-being of school system to safe guard teaming students from social vices and this can be achieved by funding of native linguistic researches to be done in the indigenous languages. This effort has two key advantages. Initially, it will build group solidarity among the students as they bond with each other, given the freedom to express new findings through research. Secondly and most importantly, this move will necessarily fill the gulf between theory and practice and connecting the young with the old in tandem. This will need a little elaboration.

Through the inculcation of research, gates that will engender interest in indigenous languages, the students automatically connect with the society. The era of the armchair scholar will be easily done away with. Research into how idioms, proverbs are used in any local domain will surge. In turn, this will yield original knowledge by Africans for Africa not the one documented for Africans by non-Africans. More so, the gap between the old and the young will be bridged. It will not be an uncommon sight for students to start engaging the parents and grandparents over hitherto unknown and depreciate knowledge claims. Given that the medium of communication is in the local dialect, the old are more readily and willing to be immersed in the pool of knowledge.

Lastly, and as it is characteristic of African heads of government, there must be resurgence in the necessary political will for education to

grow. Hence, there should be continuity in government policies for education even if there is discontinuity in head of government. The government should allocate funds to the education system to run the schools. They also have interest in that field and visit all schools frequently to ensure the necessary equipment/facilities, instructional materials, infrastructures and all that are necessary/needed for effective teaching and learning are provided so that the purpose for the educational policy will be achieved

### Conclusion

In line with Toyin Falola's suggestion that "the humanities must search for Africa in Africa and not elsewhere,"<sup>27</sup> it is useful and valuable for the African historians, to always explore and exploit available oral traditions such as the proverb to revisit the past and its cultures, as it has become clear that past cultures have shaped present cultures, which is why we have, at the same time, elements of the primordial and civic competing within the same space."<sup>28</sup> As illustrated above, the *Yoruba* proverbs have not succinctly captured the historical experiences of pre-colonial and post-colonial societies. The different examples cited in this paper have given an apt insight into a number of issues which history burdens itself with.<sup>29</sup> Given the state of the globalization of culture and the problem of lack of comprehension of their indigenous languages of Africans in contemporary times, the input of proverbs seems to have depreciated heavily. Lastly, the tinkering of the traditional Africans on the subject of moral development is worthy of further academic attention. This research implores the need to desist from the outlook that primitive Africans lacked the intellectual capacity for critical thought. All Western literatures that had hitherto argued in the following manner are merely strengthening the hegemony of the global north at the detriment of the indigenous ideas of the south leading to what Bonaventura de Sousa Santos calls epistemicide – "the murder of knowledge. The loss of epistemic confidence that currently afflicts modern science has facilitated the identification of the scope and gravity of the epistemicides perpetrated by the hegemonic Eurocentric modernity."<sup>30</sup>

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27 Toyin Falola. "Nationalising Africa, Culturalising the West, and Reformulating the Humanities in Africa." In Akinriande, S. Fashina, D. Ogungbile, D. & Famakinwa, J. (Eds). *Rethinking Humanities in Africa*, pp. 89-114Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press 2007), 31.

28 Ibid, 31.

29 B.O. Olabode, S.O. Siyanbola. "Proverbs and Taboos as Panacea to Environmental Problems in Nigeria: A Case of Selected *Yoruba* Proverbs." *Journal of Arts and Contemporary Society*. 2013 5(2), 66.

30 Bonaventura de Sousa Santos. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice*

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