



reflections on mother's words

...and how they shaped me

proverbs

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PROVERBS

(a memoir)

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DEDICATION

This short memoir is dedicated to:

Mothers, guiding their children aright.

How shall we walk and not stumble?

Beyond stumbling, we sometimes miss our path.

In the face of all these, we strive to keep moving as much as we breathe.

Many times, all that we have to keep us going are words. On my journey, crossing

a quarter of a century, I reflect on some of these words –

the proverbs of my mother.

The Proverbs and their Lessons

“Má fisó kín kín bá di jè” ----- Self-Restraint and Reliability.

“A ò ti pa ètù a l'Adeyinka lá ma tẹ fún”----- Don't make careless promises.

“Ti isù èni bà tu, a ma n fí òwó boje ni”----- Be discreet.

“Ti á bà gùn yàn nínù ẹwè, tí à ró éfó nínù epó epà, èni màà yó, màà yó” - Never lose hope

“A ó kín fí ólà jé iyò” ----- Be prudent

“Ijakumọ kì rin de ọsan, Eni a bi re ki rin de orù”----- Avoid messy situations

“Tí ólórùn bà n shó ê, iwó nà mà shó àrà é” ----- Take guided steps.

“Bi ómòde ba lasó bì àgbà, kó lé ní akìsà bì àgbà” ----- Respect Elders

“Iti ógédè kín sé nkán tí à n yò ádá tí”----- Wisdom and resource control.

“Nkán tí wón bà fí êlémó shó, l'òun shó” ----- Mind your business.

INTRODUCTION

On this 7-hour flight to a desert, far away in the Middle East, I leave the country of my birth with just one box and a shaved head, weighed with thoughts, memories and dreams. Emirates’ “When Women Win” podcast is playing and I am intrigued with how Rana Nawas engages her guests. This is 6 months after I began to host the Climate Talk Podcast, before now nothing about Podcast made sense. It was boring!

I am not sure this is an Airbus A380 or a Boeing 777, what I am sure of is that this temperature is a sharp contrast to what a Thursday evening is on the street of Lagos, Nigeria; the home of my birth. It feels like 10 degree Celsius; I am almost freezing and the only warmth I feel is from my dear Mother, thousands of miles away.

It is 2019 and for the first time in my adult life, I am excited that September 20 is approaching. Before now, though I’ll celebrate it with folks and respond to messages, I dreaded my birthdays. What reason? I can’t explain. Possibly there is more than one reason, however, that which stands tall is the fear that time is running fast and I was yet to figure out how exactly my life would turn out.

Today, I am thankful for the journey so far – the smooth and rocky paths. I am thankful for the gift of people – strangers, friends, folks; for health, for surprises, for life, for family – things I cannot control. As I cross a quarter of a century, I reflect on my journey, some events that have stuck since boyhood, and decisions guiding me through on my many unprecedented adventures; *all woven into Proverbs* – words from my dear mother.

As a poet, I once learnt that words are like money, you don't spend them carelessly. Mrs. Victoria isn't a poet, yet, no one proved it truer than she did. She speaks scantily and most times softly, listening more than speaking, her words are always direct, intentional and instructive, depending on the situation - sometimes soothing, sometimes craftily honest that it hurts deeply. Most times, *woven with Proverbs*.

In this book, it is on some of these proverbs from my dear mother that I reflect on and document for posterity and safe to say, this book is dedicated to my mother – **Modupe Victoria Adebote**, the angel under whose guidance I blossomed.

PROLOGUE

Ówè lèèsìn òró, òró lèèsín Ówè. Tí òrò bà sònù, Ówè l'afin wà"

To my knowledge (my Yoruba knowledge is basic); this is the most common Yoruba saying that explains the relevance of Proverbs or Wise Sayings. My literal translation would mean “Proverbs are the horse of words. Words are the horse of proverbs. When words go missing, we’ll seek them using proverbs.”

“Proverbs will guide you” this is my summarized understanding of this Yoruba saying. I know it barely makes sense so at this I should clearly state again that my Yoruba proficiency is very below average. Don’t tell Ms. Soore, my high school Yoruba teacher.

At this point of my life, as I reflect on my formative years, I wonder, was it intentional? Was it by chance? I wouldn’t know why my dear mother chooses to communicate the salient issues of life to her three sons and other wards using Proverbs.

Here, I am happy to share some of these Proverbs that resonates with me which continues to guide me at different crossroads as I journey through life.

“Mâ fìsò kîn kîn bã di jè”

(Self-Restraint and Reliability)

Don't soil your whole buttocks with a little (silent) fart.

Imagine yourself in a stuffy plane with windows shut and a well-dressed, smiling young lady with all perfect curves walks down the aisle and drops a fart right by your side? Certainly, and very quickly the beauty and attraction you held just a few seconds ago will fade and for the rest of the trip, your impression of the lady (we are imagining) will be replaced with disdain, maybe disgust – depends on the terrible effect of the fart. It doesn't matter if it was a little (silent) fart.

"Mâ fìsò kîn kîn bã di jè this is one of Mum's clear ways of communicating "Patience, Self-Restraint and Reliability". I appear to be a naturally carefree person who sometimes takes extremely impulsive decisions. Mum must have figured out how destructive this could be for her ambitious son that she would keep reminding me, "*Seyi, mâ fì isò kîn kîn bã di jè*". This has helped me to be patient, to restrain myself from making brash decisions and to be reliable – to some extent. At the verge of impatience or *anyhowness*, sometimes when working on a project requiring attention to little details, this proverb echoes in my head.

Indeed, it takes just one little fart to soil one's entire buttocks and of course, reputation. And oh! if you've seen (and remember) that scene from the Bollywood movie - 3 idiots, you'll agree with Chatur 'Silencer' Ramalingam that "*a silent fart is dangerous.*"

“A ò ti pa ètù a l'Adeyinka lá ma tẹ́ fún”

(Don't make careless promises)

We have decided to sell an antelope we are yet to kill to Mr. Adeyinka.

This saying “A ò ti pa ètù a l'Adeyinka lá ma tẹ́ fún” Based on my basic Yoruba knowledge this proverb will be interpreted as “*we are yet to kill an antelope; we have decided to sell the antelope to Mr. Adeyinka*”

On the surface of this planet, among over 7 billion people, I haven't found a good-hearted man like Samson Adetunji. It is puzzling to imagine how good a man can be that it sometimes becomes a problem. Perhaps if Dad was a businessman, he may have understood the matrix “it is better to under-promise and end up over-delivering.”

Not once, not one hundred times, I have watched my Dad make commitments to help others at the expense of his ability or contrary to reality and this knocks Mum out all the time. It appalls me too.

How much sense does this make? Don't tell me about faith here, even Abraham's *intention* to sacrifice Isaac was once – only once and it was a n intention.

It was in my penultimate year as a University student that I heard my Mum use this proverb for the first time. At first, it sounded so hilarious that I laughed really hard, listening as she explained it.

Then again, did I find this interesting because I was learning so much about Wildlife conservation at that time? Maybe, maybe not. Now, imagine a hunter on his way to the forest for a hunt, stops at the village square to announce that he will sell a yet-to-be-captured Antelope to a stranger, by name, Adeyinka. Just imagine! This may make more sense to you if you ever went hunting and have knowledge about how unpredictable gathering spoils.

Since I heard this, I have learned to be very careful about making commitments. I am gradually learning to take my stand and only promise what I have as I sojourn into the development space and business world.

Summarily, only commit to things you are sure of delivering.

"Ti isù èni bà tu, a ma n' fí òwó boje ni"

(Be discreet)

If your yam is soft, you have to cover it with your hand while eating.

I will share the translation right away - *If your yam is soft, you have to cover it with your hand while eating.* Let me put it in context now. Pounded yam is a favourite meal in South-West and some North-Central parts of Nigeria. Before the arrival of Pounded Yam, the only way of preparing Pounded Yam is by boiling the yam till it becomes soft, transferring them to a mortar and pounding hard with a pestle. This is typically a tedious task, culturally, the work of men (this is not up for debate).

It may help to say that I didn't get to pound any until I was 23 years-old, thereabout. Like I discovered, sometimes the pieces of yam are so hard and uncooperative that with your best efforts, skills, proficiency, the dissipated energy and the noise you make, the Pounded yam comes out with lumps and unpleasant for the mouth. At other times, the yam will "tù" (be soft), so soft that in less than

60 seconds you'll feel like the best yam pounder to ever walk the surface of the earth.

I am tempted to be verbose in explaining this Proverb but that would be needless.

The lesson herein is that when things around you seem to be going on perfectly, you don't go all over the place (village square) announcing your successes to the whole world. In this generation of 280-character tweets, chain-like WhatsApp status, and fav-hungry Instagram posts... Hmmm!

Discretion is important.

Ti á bà gùn yàn nínù ewè, tî à ró éfó nínù epó epà, ènì màà yó, màà yó

(Never lose hope)

If we pound yam inside leaves and we stir vegetable soup in peels of groundnut, he that will be filled will be filled.

I have just explained the process of preparing Pounded Yam. Now imagine replacing the mortar with leaves. Is it possible to pound pieces of yam in wrapped leaves? Freaking impossible! Sometimes, I wonder how deep our elders dug to archive words like this. The translation of this Proverb is: *If we pound yam inside leaves and we stir vegetable soup in peels of groundnut, he that will be filled will be filled.*

If you are familiar with the process of preparing vegetable soup, you will agree that it takes consistent stirring to make a very tasty vegetable soup. How can you do that in groundnut peel? How?

Perhaps, these set of elders had a hangover on natural palm wine when they came together to say: “Ti á bà gùn yàn nínù ewè, tí à ró éfó nínù epó epà, èni màà yó, màà yó”

The lesson for me in clear terms is, “Seyi, be focused on the goal and work towards it.”

When things get rough and the economy is biting in the face of realities; when it seems like there is no headway and all doors are closed; when a project gets messy or a working condition is bile-full, this proverb reminds me that one can make headway and live satisfactorily.

“A ó kín fí ólà jé iyò”

(Be prudent with your resources).

We don't consume salt on the basis of our wealth.

You still don't get it? Let me put this in a clearer perspective: Aliko Dangote is Nigeria's richest man – officially, one of his many businesses is Dangote Salt. Would Dangote because of his wealth and his unrestricted access to cooking salt, pour a bag of salt in a pot of Jollof Rice deserving just two teaspoon measure? Your guess is right. No!

Figuratively, my Mum uses this proverb when I am in the kitchen. She thinks I over-salt meals; my taste buds think otherwise. More importantly, outside the kitchen, on the street of Lagos, rural areas of Enugu, the metropolis of Abuja and the cities of countries visited, this proverb has made me understand “Prudence”.

In this context *Prudence* means the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason. I do not have to taste over-salted meals to be reminded that “A ó kín fí ólà jé iyò”. To a large extent, this explains why I would not be pushed to go for things I think I can afford, except I find them really needful.

And oh! In the last 3 years, I have been working on reducing the quantity of salt in my meals – especially Spaghetti.

“Ijakumo kù rin de ọsan, Eni a bi re ki rin de orù”

(Avoid messy situation)

A child born right does not walk in the night

I love the night – everything about the night including travelling. Mum thinks I took this from Dad. Well, I’ll have to ask Dad if his cases come by deliberate choices or mostly due to circumstances.

In the middle of the night, I think more about the surreal nature, the blessed solitude and quietness. Back in Enugu, some of my most treasured moments were in the middle of the night; back against the floor and head on a stone tiled perfectly to watch the crawling cloud obstruct my counting of the twinkling stars

In Abuja, nearly almost every night I take long walks or cycle through my district, often to new areas and it feels so great. Especially when you run late, take a shower and hit the bed for a deep sleep.

Hey! Here in Nigeria anything can happen and your safety isn’t surefire in the day, so the night can come with any drama – theft, kidnap, accident. I understand this, nonetheless, the night is a blessing which I appreciate greatly.

Till date, I am still not sure I understand why Yoruba elders and custodian of wisdom like my Mum thinks, “If a child is born right, he’ll not walk around in the night.”

Like other proverbs, the message here is clear – *do not deliberately push yourself into messy situations.*

“Tí ólórùn bà n sọ ê, iwó nà mà shó àrà é”

(Take guided steps.)

When God is protecting you; you should also protect yourself

Did I mention earlier that I am risk-taker and sometimes could be extremely carefree? I haste into the airport 10 minutes before take-off (and I am yet to miss a flight, thanks to delayed flights in Nigeria). I drive at 100kmph at 10.00 PM even when I am not hurrying to my destination.

I sometimes embark on long ‘impulse’ travels. I jump into pools and walk to the 6.5 FT level knowing well that my swimming skills sucks. This is just an adventurous me doing ‘foolish’ things and pulling them through thankfully. This is one part of my lifestyle that I do not recommend. Each time I take one of these extreme risks, I am reminded of Mum’s words – “Tí ólórùn bà n sọ ê, iwó nà mà shó àrà é”

Truth be told, I am hoping I will abide by this in many aspects of the rest of my adventurous sojourn through life.

"Bì ómòde ba laśó bì àgbà, kó lé ní akisà bì àgbà

(Respect Elders)

“If a child has many clothes like an adult, he cannot have as much rags (used clothes) like an adult.”

In the Yoruba community, this is perhaps a very popular proverb. I wonder how many millennials understand this proverb the way I do. Working in the communication sector and finding a footing in the development space; it is expected that one is vocal about issues (s)he is knowledgeable about, not giving a hoot about the opinions of elders. Many of such cases for me are in the studio, on an email thread, on Twitter, or around decision making table, as the case may be.

I have been in a situation where I know I should stand up and tell an elderly (wo)man to “Shut Up!” because (s)he is saying rubbish. For my new Russian colleague, Vlad, and a few other European folks within my network, this is a walk in the park. Not so for me! What is most important is **“making my point – clearly, yet respectfully.”**

In many instances, when I am tempted, I'll simply whistle these words by my mother, "Bì ómòde ba laṣó bì àgbà, kó lé ní akìsà bì àgbà" and I am humbled.

“Itì ógédè kín sé nkán tí à ñ yò ádá tí”

(Wisdom and resource control)

A rotten banana stem is not something we cut using a cutlass.

Don't ask me, what you would rather use to cut down a Banana stem? Of course! It is a cutlass. This is just the Yoruba way of conveying some of their many messages in ways that makes no literal sense.

On different occasions, Mum used this proverb; her aim was to convey the need for resource control and application of wisdom, rather than energy, to ‘unpuzzle’ an issue.

In the heat of the moment, we are tempted to find quick fixes rather than taking a step backwards and rethinking the problem. Like many other proverbs Mum speaks with, this is very resourceful and has built up my critical thinking ability, especially on project execution.

"Nkán tí wón bà fí êlèṃṣo shọ lọ n shọ

(Mind your business)

Reading this proverb again, I've got no slight idea about who an "elemoso"

is (I haven't asked Mum too). So, I will just replace "elemoso" in this proverb with my name "Seyi". That would be, **"Nkán tí wón bà fí êlèṃó shọ, lo n shọ**

Now, it is a lot easier to interpret: "It is what we ask Seyi to watch over that he watches over."

No other saying conveys singleness of purpose like this does. Mother still mentioned this two days ago as I shared with her some of my plans on an official trip to the West.

The truth is, I haven't always adhered to this and on few occasions, it brought me luck - Good luck! I am that dude who is booked to attend event A and ends up making a scene at event Z, it is nothing dramatic for my loved ones to be concerned.

However, each time Mum says this, her message is clear and it guides me. **"Son, mind your business."**

Epilogue

I like cakes. Now scratch that, I love cakes, obviously only when they are fresh and partly crispy. Not the ones that have spent a few weeks on the shelf and have lost their value and taste. By 2029, I am not sure I will still place so much value on cakes as I do today.

That's the case for cakes! Not words!

Words are timeless – old, yet fresh; soft, yet crispy; put them on the shelf of your mind and you will come back decades after to find them still apt and useful. Perhaps more valuable than when first spoken, this is what I have done in *Proverbs*.

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I cannot guarantee, I'll stay in touch! Try to – if you can.

