INTERPRETING THE UNSAID: PROVERBS, PRAISE POETRY, AND THE ETHICS OF TRANSLATION IN YORUBA LITERARY THOUGHTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethics of translating Yoruba poetic forms, *òwe* (proverbs), and *oríkì* (praise poetry), within the broader field of cultural and literary studies. In Yoruba philosophy, meaning often resides in the unsaid: the metaphor, ellipsis, or performative silence through which speech acquires depth. Translating such texts therefore requires more than lexical equivalence; it demands ethical attentiveness to cultural epistemologies and the implicit knowledge structures they carry. Drawing on Ricoeur's concept of *linguistic hospitality* and Gadamer's hermeneutics of dialogue, the study develops a framework for understanding translation as an ethical relation that mediates between worlds without erasing difference. The Yoruba conception of *ọrọ̀* as event and bearer of *àṣẹ* is contrasted with Western traditions of *logos*, highlighting distinct philosophies of language that shape translation choices. Through case studies of proverb collections and *oríkì* performances, the study demonstrates how different translation strategies (literalism, domestication, creative equivalence) can either illuminate or flatten the philosophical force of Yoruba poetics. It argues that the ethical task of the translator lies not in complete transfer but in enabling cross-cultural resonance while respecting the integrity of Yoruba thought. The paper concludes by proposing guidelines for "philosophical translation" that can inform education, intercultural dialogue, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. In doing so, it underscores the transformative potential of translation as both an academic and civic practice.

Keywords: Yoruba poetics; ethics of translation; hermeneutics; philosophy of language

Introduction

Translation between languages is not merely a technical conversion of words but an *ethical encounter* between cultures. This paper examines the dilemma of translating Yorùbá literary forms—specifically ***òwe*** (*proverbs*) and ***oríkì*** (*praise poetry*) into Western languages. In Yorùbá literary thought, meaning often resides in what is left unsaid: layered metaphors, elliptical references, and the performative power of speech. Traditional Western models of translation, which prioritize explicit clarity or direct equivalence, struggle to accommodate these nuances. The goal of this study is to explore how translators might ethically bridge the "ontological dissonance" between Yorùbá and Western philosophies of language without erasing the distinctiveness of each. The discussion is anchored in Paul Ricoeur's concept of *linguistic hospitality* and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theory, applying their insights to the challenges of translating Yorùbá proverbs and praise poetry. Case analyses of actual texts illustrate how different strategies literal word-for-word rendering, domestication into familiar idioms, and more creative or *philosophical* approaches lead to very different outcomes in translation. By proposing a model of "philosophical translation" grounded in ethics, the paper suggests ways to honor the Yorùbá ***ọ̀rọ̀*** (word/speech) and its **àṣẹ** (potent force) in translation. The implications extend to language pedagogy, cultural preservation, and fostering cross-cultural understanding through translated literature.

Yoruba Philosophy of Language: *Ọ̀rọ̀, Àṣẹ,* and the Power of the Unsaid

Yorùbá culture has a rich philosophy of language in which words are not neutral vehicles of meaning but dynamic forces in their own right. In Yorùbá, ***ọ̀rọ̀*** (the "word" or utterance) is conceived as an event-something that *happens* rather than merely a static sign. A spoken word can actualize reality, especially when imbued with ***àṣẹ*** (spiritual command or authority). ***Àṣẹ*** in Yorùbá refers to the inherent power that makes words, names, and chants efficacious: it is often translated as "power, command, or vital force". According to Rowland Abiodun, in Yorùbá usage àṣẹ signifies an "enigmatic and affective phenomenon" the *creative force* in verbal and visual expression. A Yorùbá maxim says *"Ọ̀rọ̀ tán láyé, àṣẹ kù lọ́run*," meaning "Once a word is spoken on earth, its ***àṣẹ*** rests in heaven," reflecting the belief that an uttered word carries spiritual momentum. Words, once released, are thought to set events in motion; they cannot be unspoken. This contrasts with Western *logos*-centric views of language that often treat words as abstract symbols detachable from action. In Yorùbá ontology, by contrast, speech and action

are deeply intertwined a philosophy akin to J. L. Austin's performativity, but grounded in indigenous concepts of spiritual efficacy.

One key aspect of Yorùbá discourse is the heavy reliance on indirection and implication – the *unsaid* that complements the said. Yorùbá rhetorical style prizes wit and subtlety; speakers frequently employ proverbs, idioms, and elliptical allusions to convey meaning in a nuanced way. This is captured in a famous Yorùbá saying: *"Òwe l'ẹṣin ọrọ̀; bí ọrọ̀ bá sọnù, òwe la fi n wáa."* Translated: *"Proverb is the pathfinder of speech; if speech is lost, we use proverb to find it."*. In other words, proverbs are the vehicle by which elusive or difficult meaning is recovered in conversation. Among the Yorùbá, proverbs are considered the **"spirit and soul"** of language. Olatunji (1984) notes that a person unskilled in proverb usage is often deemed unwise, underscoring how deeply embedded these metaphorical, allusive expressions are in Yorùbá communication. Instead of stating a message directly, a speaker might choose an apt proverb or poetic reference, trusting the listener to infer the intended significance. This culturally preferred ellipsis saying something without spelling it out is not a sign of vagueness but a deliberate strategy that engages shared knowledge and cultural context. It also reflects a Yorùbá ethic of politeness and pedagogy: difficult truths or criticisms are often conveyed obliquely through proverbial wisdom, allowing the listener to "discover" the meaning and save face in the process.

Yorùbá proverbs (***òwe***) are typically short, vivid statements whose full meanings unfold only through interpretation. They draw on imagery from nature, everyday life, and myth. For example, a proverb like *"Kókóró tó ń jẹ fó₃, inú fó₃ ló wà."* literally means "The insect that eats the vegetable is inside the vegetable." On the surface this refers to pests and plants, but its deeper import is metaphorical: a problem often comes from within. The proverb leaves the conclusion elliptically unstated (it never explicitly says "therefore, beware of internal threats"), yet any Yorùbá listener in context would grasp that lesson. The meaning resides in the unsaid connection between the image and the lesson, which the audience must supply. This kind of ellipsis gives proverbs a richly layered quality; as one analysis observes, a single proverb can generate a potentially endless chain of interpretations in different contexts. Indeed, Yorùbá scholars remark that proverbs possess an "intrinsic power to elucidate and elaborate upon ideas" with remarkable economy. A witty proverb encapsulates an insight so elegantly that it can be cited and re-cited in new situations, each time yielding fresh understanding. The *inexhaustibility* of proverb meaning is a point of pride "through the use of a single proverb, an idea can be reproduced in a manifold of exegetical works

without being exhausted". This speaks to a fundamental Yorùbá belief: truth often emerges indirectly, through metaphor and analogy, rather than blunt exposition.

Another dimension of Yorùbá language philosophy is the value placed on aesthetics and performance in speech. The *beauty* of an expression is not superficial decoration; it is intertwined with truth and effectiveness. "The Yorùbá value beauty of thought and this can only be expressed by witty sayings couched in the best language combinations," notes a study of Yorùbá proverbs. Verbal artfulness whether in a cleverly turned phrase, a poetic image, or rhythmic delivery is seen as a sign of intellectual acuity (*ọgbọ́n*) and cultural refinement. Among the Yorùbá, skilled orators who command a rich repertoire of proverbs and oríkì enjoy significant social esteem. An elegant indirect saying can carry more weight than a direct statement, precisely because it engages the listener's imagination and cultural knowledge. Furthermore, many Yorùbá expressions carry implicit *àṣẹ*: a curse, blessing, or praise delivered with poetic and ritual language is believed to have real impact. For example, traditional Yorùbá incantations (**òfò** and **ẹbọ**) use stylized, archaic diction and metaphor not just for artistry but to channel spiritual force; the line between poetic speech and enchantment is thin. Even in everyday contexts, a joke or a proverb can "work" performatively by shaming, advising, or inspiring someone in a way plain language might not. In short, *Yorùbá words do things*. This contrasts with the typical Western expectation that language ideally should *describe* or *represent* reality. In Yorùbá thought, language *participates* in reality, naming can be an act of creation, praise can confer honor, and a well-placed proverb can resolve a dispute or impart wisdom in a manner that sinks deeper than literal discourse.

This Yorùbá philosophy of language characterized by performativity, ellipsis, and the unity of aesthetic form with meaning creates a unique challenge for translators. How can a translator carry over not just the lexical content of Yorùbá speech, but its unsaid implications, its culturally specific metaphors, and its performative impact? The risk is that a naive translation might strip away the very elements that give the original its power: its **òrò** (spoken artistry) and **àṣẹ** (force). This is where an ethical approach to translation becomes crucial. Rather than viewing translation as a mechanical transcoding, we must see it as a hermeneutic act of understanding one worldview through the lens of another. The theories of Ricoeur and Gadamer provide useful frameworks for conceptualizing this process, as the next section explores.

Theoretical Framework: Ricoeur's Linguistic Hospitality and Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur offers a guiding metaphor for ethical translation: linguistic hospitality. By this he means that the translator should welcome the "foreign" language and culture into their own without annihilating its difference. Just as a generous host makes a guest feel at home while still recognizing them as a guest, an ethical translator strives to make a text intelligible in the target language while preserving the *aura of otherness*. *"To translate,"* writes Ricoeur, *"is to welcome another language into your own, to give it shelter without stripping it of its foreignness."* In practical terms, this means a good translation should *feel* a bit foreign; it should carry echoes of the original language's rhythms, concepts, and imagery even as it reads in the target tongue. Ricoeur frames this hospitality as fundamentally ethical: it is about openness to the Other. He outlines a few key ethical imperatives for translators: *"welcoming without erasing"* the foreignness, *"sharing without owning"* the text (acknowledging that the translation remains, in a sense, the original author's intellectual property), and *"accepting loss"* since no translation can ever be perfectly complete. This ethic entails humility and generosity: the translator accepts that some untranslatable nuances will be sacrificed, yet strives through creative effort to convey the spirit of the original as faithfully as possible. Rather than seeing the inevitable "betrayal" (traduttore, traditore) of translation as a failure, Ricoeur suggests the translator embrace it as *"the very heart of translation"* a dynamic compromise that keeps the text alive across languages.

For Ricoeur, the pleasure of translation comes from this act of hospitality, however fragile: it is *"the pleasure of receiving the foreign word"* and finding in it new resonance in one's own language (Ricoeur, 2006, p.23). When translating Yorùbá proverbs and poetry, practicing linguistic hospitality might mean, for example, retaining certain Yorùbá words that have no easy English equivalent (like **àṣẹ** or **ọ̀rúnmìlà**) and explaining them in a footnote rather than forcing a clumsy substitution. It could also mean allowing the translated text to adopt some of the proverbial or poetic syntax of Yorùbá, even if it feels unusual, so that the target readers *sense* the distinct flavor of Yorùbá discourse. Ultimately, Ricoeur's approach reminds translators to respect the *alterity* of the source text, its different way of seeing the world as a value to be preserved, not a problem to be fixed.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy complements this view by emphasizing translation as understanding. Gadamer famously argued that understanding any text (even in one's own language) is a dialogic process a

"fusion of horizons" between the interpreter's perspective and the text's perspective. In the case of translation, this process is magnified: the translator stands between the horizon of the source culture and that of the target audience. Gadamer describes translating from a foreign language as *"an extreme case that effectively duplicates the hermeneutic process"* of dialogue. The translator must enter into conversation with the source text, seeking to grasp its meaning in context, and then re-express that meaning for new readers. Crucially, Gadamer insists that this is never a neutral or purely objective transfer; it is always shaped by the translator's own historical and cultural horizon. Instead of denying this, Gadamer encourages translators to *leverage* their situated perspective in order to mediate between worlds. In *Truth and Method,* he suggests that when successful understanding occurs, the horizons of reader and text "fuse" into something new a broadened horizon.

In translation, likewise, the outcome should be a creative synthesis: the target text should not be a literal mirror (which is impossible), but rather a *transformation* that allows the original to speak in a new context. Gadamer writes that a translator must empathize with the foreign author, immersing in the text's world, yet also find *"a space for expression that is appropriate to the original"* within the translator's own language and time. This often requires what he calls *"penetrating more profoundly"* into the text's meaning than even a surface reading might demand. Because a simplistic translation tends to *"make the original idea seem flat"*, lacking the depth and nuance of the original, the translator needs to supply a kind of third dimension by recreating context and connotation. Gadamer acknowledges that *every* translation somewhat flattens the original (some loss is inevitable, echoing Ricoeur's "accepting loss"), but he sees the translator's task as mitigating this by infusing the translation with richness and intent. Above all, *"the translator must fuse his/her own horizon with the horizon of the text"* to produce a translation that is truthful to the original's sense, even if not a word-for-word match.

Applying Gadamer's hermeneutics to Yorùbá translations means the translator should not only be bilingual but *bicultural*, striving to understand the Yorùbá worldview, the significance of proverbs, the cultural weight of certain symbols, the oral performance context of oríkì – and then convey those to an audience that may lack that background. It is an interpretive act at every step. For example, if a Yorùbá praise poem for a warrior says *"He ate the viper and used its venom as sauce,"* the translator must recognize this as a metaphor for extreme courage (and perhaps an allusion to a specific myth). A purely literal translation might perplex English readers or seem surreally grotesque. A

Gadamerian translator, however, doesn't stop at the literal level; he or she engages with the text's *intended* meaning and effect on its original audience (a mix of awe and admiration in this case) and seeks an equivalent effect for new readers. This might involve adding a brief gloss that this image signifies fearlessness, or choosing a creative phrasing in English that conveys the hyperbolic bravado (e.g. *"devoured death itself and licked his fingers clean"* not a direct translation of the Yorùbá words, but perhaps closer to their impact). The hermeneutic approach thus blurs the line between translation and interpretation: the translator is unavoidably an interpreter and must take responsibility for the interpretive choices made. In Gadamer's view, this is not a license for arbitrary rewriting, but an ethical commitment to *dialogue*: the translator converses with the text and then with the audience, making sure each can hear the other. Every choice in translation – whether to keep a Yorùbá term, to explain a cultural reference, or to find a metaphor in the target language is part of this dialogic negotiation.

Both Ricoeur and Gadamer, in their own ways, reject the old ideal of the "invisible" translator who produces a perfectly transparent text. Instead, they see translation as a creative, interpretive act that requires acknowledging difference and making understanding possible *through* that difference. This theoretical framing is especially pertinent to translating Yorùbá proverbs and oríkì, because these genres are so culturally bound and rhetorically distinctive. The next sections will delve into concrete examples, analyzing how different translation strategies align (or not) with the ethics of linguistic hospitality and hermeneutic understanding.

Translation Challenges in Yorùbá Proverbs (Òwe)

Yorùbá proverbs encapsulate the wisdom of generations, but they do so in ways that often defy straightforward translation. An òwe is typically concise and highly allusive; it may rhyme or use tonal wordplay in Yorùbá, or draw on an image that resonates locally but not outside the culture. When translating such a proverb, the translator faces a triadic choice: 1. **Literalism** – translating word for word; 2. **Domestication** – converting the proverb into an equivalent saying or plain meaning in the target language; 3. Creative/Philosophical translation–finding a nuanced solution that conveys both meaning and cultural flavor, possibly with explication.

To illustrate these approaches, let us consider a Yorùbá proverb and attempt each in turn. Take the proverb: **"***Bi omodé bá ní aṣọ bí àgbà, kò lè ní akíṣà bí àgbà."* Literally, this says, *"If a child has as many clothes as an elder, he cannot have as many rags as the elder."* The proverb's cultural meaning is

that experience comes with age even if a youth appears equal to an elder in outward things, he lacks the "rags" (i.e. the worn-out clothes symbolizing long experience) that only years can bring.

- **Literal Translation:** "If a child has as many clothes as an elder, he cannot have as many rags as an elder." This is a faithful rendition of each Yorùbá word into English. However, to someone unfamiliar with the proverb, it might sound odd or even nonsensical. The core message about experience is not explicit; the reader might wonder why rags are mentioned at all. The literal English also loses the rhythmic balance of the original Yorùbá phrasing. In short, while nothing is "wrong" word-for-word, the proverb's *point* may not land. The unsaid implication equating rags with life experience is likely to be missed by a foreign audience reading this verbatim translation, unless they pause to interpret it (something a casual reader may not do).
- **Domesticated Translation:** A domestication would replace the proverb with a readily understood equivalent or a plain explanatory sentence. For instance, one might render it as: *"No young person can have the wisdom of an old person."* This directly states the intended meaning in simple English. It achieves clarity and would be immediately understood by virtually any reader. In fact, it echoes the English saying "Wisdom comes with age" (or the concept "experience cannot be bought"). By domesticating, we've eliminated the Yorùbá images of clothes and rags, and given a generalized moral. Ethically, this addresses the *functional* aspect of the proverb imparting a lesson but at a cost: the translation has lost the cultural texture and poetic charm of the original. The proverb's unique metaphor (the comparison of garments and rags) is gone, and with it a connection to Yorùbá ways of expression (Yorùbá elders often speak in concrete, earthy metaphors). The domesticated version might fit seamlessly into an English text, but it provides no hint of its Yorùbá origin. From Ricoeur's perspective, one could argue this erases the foreignness too much (violating "welcoming without erasing"), even though it successfully communicates the basic idea.
- **Creative/Philosophical Translation:** This approach attempts to straddle the two worlds – carrying over some of the Yorùbá imagery or style, while also ensuring the meaning is accessible. One possible translation could be: *"However fine a youth's wardrobe, he lacks the tattered garments of age."* This sentence keeps the clothing metaphor but tweaks it for clarity and elegance. By saying "tattered garments of age," it hints that those rags are symbolic of something that comes with age (experience). The tone is slightly more proverbial or literary in English, echoing how proverbs often sound elevated or sagely. We might also add a footnote or parenthetical for further clarity, e.g., *(i.e. the experience that only an elder has)*. The result is that an English reader gets the metaphor and the message together. The translation *feels* a bit foreign or old-fashioned (English speakers don't normally talk

> about "tattered garments of age" in daily conversation), which is actually a good thing here: it signals that this is a proverb from another culture. While not as transparent as the domesticated version, it preserves the image and invites the reader to ponder it, much as the original invites interpretation. This approach embodies linguistic hospitality by giving the Yorùbá proverb "shelter" in English on its own terms.

It is instructive to consider what is lost and gained in each strategy. Literalism preserves foreign form at the expense of clear function; domestication preserves function at the expense of form and cultural context; the creative approach tries to preserve *both*, but inevitably compromises a bit of each. The ethical translator's task is to decide, for each proverb, where that balance should lie. Some proverbs might have a very close equivalent in the target language, in which case using the local equivalent could be effective. (For example, the Yorùbá proverb *"Ilé la ti n kó ẹ̀sọ́ r'òde"* has a very similar English counterpart: "Charity begins at home." If the context is informal, swapping in the familiar English proverb might successfully convey the point about home upbringing.) However, even when such equivalents exist, something of the cultural spirit is lost.

One major challenge is when a Yorùbá proverb contains a culturally specific reference that has no easy analog. For instance, *"Ó dọ́la ó kú, ùgbé o dun ọ̀la"* –literally "It is sweet in the throat but bitter in the stomach" refers to something (like wrongdoing) that is enjoyable at first but has consequences later. English has a somewhat similar idea in "sweet in the mouth, bitter in the belly" or simply "bitter aftertaste," but the Yorùbá version might be tied to specific foods or herbal knowledge. If translated plainly as "pleasures can turn into pains," we lose the visceral imagery of taste. If translated word-for-word, the reader may take it as a literal statement about food poisoning unless they catch the metaphor. A philosophically minded translator might render it as *"What pleases the palate may plague the belly,"* preserving the sensory metaphor in an English alliterative way, and perhaps footnote that the proverb is used as a moral warning about short-term indulgence. Here again we see the translator operating on two levels linguistic and explanatory to bridge the gap.

Crucially, Yorùbá proverbs often assume a shared cultural context that the original audience would have. When a proverb is quoted in a Yorùbá conversation, the speaker can rely on the listener to *know* the background or parable behind it. In translation, we may have to provide that background explicitly. Consider the proverb cited earlier: *"Òwe l'ẹ̀ṣin ọ̀rọ̀, bí ọ̀rọ̀ bá sọnù, òwe la fi n wáa."* Not only is this a meta-proverb about proverbs, it also contains an image ("horse of speech") that might puzzle readers. A translator

could render it word-for-word and then add a brief explanation: "*Proverb is the horse of speech; when speech is lost, we use proverb to find it*," with a note that this means people use proverbs to drive home meaning in conversation. Such an approach values accuracy with annotation over free adaptation. This is often the preferred method in scholarly or literary translations (where readers expect footnotes or commentary). It aligns with an ethical stance of not diluting the original but rather educating the new audience. The translator here becomes a cultural mediator and teacher, not just a conveyor of messages.

However, an over-reliance on annotation can also disrupt the reading experience. If a slim book of proverbs is half-filled with footnotes explaining each one, the reader might lose the poetic flow and get bogged down in mini-ethnographies. A balance is needed, perhaps by clustering explanations in an introduction or glossary. For instance, one could introduce that "in Yorùbá symbolism, 'rags' often connote life experience (the wear-and-tear of life)" so that individual proverbs referencing rags need not each be footnoted. In practice, a translator of Yorùbá proverbs might mix methods: some proverbs might be translated almost literally and left a bit mysterious (trusting context to clarify), while others might be slightly adapted or explicitly glossed if their point would otherwise be entirely missed.

An excellent example of the tightrope a translator walks is the Yorùbá proverb: *"Àsọ̀rọ̀ yánrọ̀ ló pa Elénpe."* This proverb alludes to a story of a king, Elénpe, who was executed for making an ambiguous statement. He declared, "Calabash is heavier than clay dish," but failed to clarify he meant a *fresh* calabash (which is full of pulp and heavier). His doubters produced a dried calabash (very light) and proved him "wrong," leading to his death. The proverb literally is, "Lack of explicitness killed King Elénpe." It's a warning about speaking clearly. Translating this proverb for a Western reader is tough: it contains a proper name and a cultural tale. One might translate the proverb as, *"Ambiguity killed the proverbial king."* This conveys the moral (ambiguity can be deadly) and hints that there's a proverbial story behind it. A footnote could then relate the tale of King Elénpe in brief. In doing so, the translation not only communicates the proverb's message but also invites the reader into the Yorùbá narrative world. This approach respects the Yorùbá tradition (by preserving the reference to Elénpé rather than omitting it), and yet makes it intelligible through explanation. It exemplifies Gadamer's idea that a translated text might require a "third dimension" of explication to fully carry its original profundity.

In summary, translating Yorùbá proverbs requires sensitivity to multiple layers of meaning. The translator must consider *semantic* meaning (what does it literally say?), *pragmatic* meaning (what does it imply or accomplish in context?), and *cultural* meaning (what associations or stories does it tap into?). An ethically attuned translator will strive to honor all three. Ricoeur's hospitality would encourage keeping the *strangeness* of the imagery when possible, letting the English reader experience a trace of Yorùbá imagination. Gadamer's hermeneutics would encourage providing enough interpretive context that the proverb can be understood and appreciated, not left as an opaque fragment. The ideal outcome is a translation that **illuminates** the proverb's wisdom for new readers without "flattening" the rich texture of the original. This often means the translation might be a bit longer or more elaborate than the original one-liner, but that extra effort is part of the ethical responsibility to convey not just a take-away message, but a glimpse of Yorùbá culture's way of *thinking in images*. As one translator of African proverbs put it, the aim is to let the proverb "speak" in translation in a way that echoes its voice in the original language, even if the accent is different.

Translation Challenges in Yorùbá Oríkì (Praise Poetry)

If translating proverbs is akin to translating distilled wisdom, translating **oríkì** (Yorùbá praise poetry) is like translating distilled emotion and identity. Oríkì are a unique genre: performative, effusive chants that praise (or sometimes playfully critique) the subject which could be a person, a family lineage, a town, or even a deity or an animal. An individual's oríkì is essentially a string of epithets and historical allusions, often calling up the deeds of ancestors, the qualities of the person, or metaphors for their character. Oríkì are typically *performed* orally or with drums, in a rhythmic, call-and-response manner; they are as much music as text. The language of oríkì is highly elevated and intense: *"evocative, exclamatory, laudatory, and hyperbolic,"* as Pamela J. Olúbùnmi Smith describes it. It often uses archaic or esoteric vocabulary and can shift rapidly from one image to the next without explanation – because the performer and the audience share the context or the person being praised is right there, so the connections are understood in the moment.

Translating oríkì poses several dilemmas: Oríkì are rich in culture-specific metaphors and names. They might reference local landmarks, patron gods, or proverbial sayings within the praise. For example, an oríkì for a courageous man might call *him "Ọmọ ogun, ẹnìyàn bí ẹkùn*" ("child of war, a person like a leopard"). If one translates just as "a warrior, a man like a leopard," the literal meaning is there but the flavor comparing a person to the totemic leopard in Yorùbá cosmology might not fully register with someone who

doesn't know the leopard as a symbol of bravery in that culture. Oríkì are often elliptical in narrative. They don't tell a full story from A to Z; they hint at stories. A praise poem might say of a family: *"Descendants of the one who survived the bees of Ìjẹ̀ṣà."* To a Yorùbá audience from that region, this could immediately evoke a historical anecdote (perhaps an ancestor once escaped a swarm of bees sent as a curse). But a foreign reader will find it perplexing without context. Does it literally mean the family is related to bees? Or that they are beekeepers? The translator might need to insert the missing pieces of the story or risk the line sounding like nonsense. The performance element (tone, rhythm, repetition) is largely untranslatable directly. Oríkì often repeat praise-names for dramatic effect and use vocatives with intense emotion. In print, a literal translation can appear redundant or odd. For instance, a line like *"Àjàǹtièlè! Àjàǹtièlè!! Ọmọ oníkọ́ sílẹ̀ bẹ́ẹ̀!!"* (a chant of a praise-name twice, followed by "child of he who left such an inheritance!!") on the page in English, "Àjàǹtièlè! Àjàǹtièlè! Offspring of he who left such an inheritance!" might not communicate the *music* of it. Do you preserve the repetition and risk it looking strange? Or do you reduce it to a single instance, losing the oral aesthetic?

Let's attempt a case analysis using a snippet of oríkì. Suppose we have an oríkì for a person named Adébọ́lá (fictional example for illustration):

Yorùbá (hypothetical):

Adébọ́lá, ọmọ àjànàkú tí n'ígbẹ́rù,
Ọmọ tí ọ́fọ̀ rẹ fì dáná alásọ,
Ìyá rẹ ni oró pẹ́yẹ́,
Ọkọ rẹ ni kíníun ọ̀dọ̀ ilẹ̀ Ọyọ́!
Adébọ́lá ọkín, ẹni tíí jí ṣáájú ẹnikẹ́ni!

A rough gloss of the above might be:

"Adébọ́lá, child of the elephant who intimidates,"

The child whose incantation sets the cloth-wearer on fire,

Whose mother is as graceful as a peacock,

Whose husband is the lion of the Oyo plains!

Adébọ́lá the royal eagle, who awakens before everyone else!"

This oríkì is dense with metaphor and allusion. How might we translate this?

- **Literal approach:** We could try to translate each line straightforwardly:

- "Adébọlá, child of an elephant that instills fear,"
- "The child whose spell burned the cloth-wearer,"
- "Whose mother is a peacock in elegance,"
- "Whose husband is the lion of the Oyo plains,"
- "Adébọlá, eagle, who wakes before everyone else!"

As a literal translation, this is comprehensible in terms of English words, but likely bewildering in meaning. Who is "the cloth-wearer" that was set on fire by a spell? Why is there an elephant? The lines feel disconnected. In the Yorùbá, these are understood as hyperbolic praises: line 1 suggests noble heritage (elephant as metaphor for a mighty ancestor), line 2 suggests the person's words are powerful (their curse or command "burned" someone well-protected), line 3 compliments the mother's beauty, line 4 compares the husband to a lion (strength), line 5 likens Adébọlá to an ọkín (royal eagle), known in Yorùbá lore for its early rising and majesty. None of that context is clear in the raw translation. The English reader might take it literally (is her father actually an elephant?!) or just be confused by the sudden shifts.

- **Domesticating approach:** One might be tempted to *explain* each line in a more straightforward way, or even convert them into more familiar Western tropes. For example:
- "Adébọlá, born of imposing greatness,"
- "Whose very words can strike down her enemies,"
- "Daughter of a mother as graceful as a queen,"
- "Wife to a man mighty as a lion,"
- "Adébọlá, regal one who rises before the dawn."

Here I have replaced the elephant with "imposing greatness" (abstracting the metaphor), made the incantation line explicitly about striking enemies (dropping the confusing "cloth-wearer" detail), changed "peacock" to "queen" (a more universally understood symbol of grace, though arguably a bigger shift in meaning), clarified the lion reference as just "mighty man," and translated ọkín (peacock) imply as "regal one" and "rises before the dawn" to hint at the early rising trait. This certainly reads more smoothly in English and conveys the *intended* praise in each line. However, one can see that a lot of the uniquely Yorùbá imagery got sanded down. The translated lines could fit in a generic fantasy novel or a praise song in many cultures; they've lost some

of the Yorùbá flavor (no elephant, no peacock, no direct mention of Oyo or incantations). In terms of ethics, this domesticating strategy improves immediate intelligibility, but it arguably fails to *teach* the reader anything about Yorùbá poetic style or worldview beyond generic "this person is great." It is *effective but assimilative*. We have essentially rewritten the oríkì in a target-culture idiom, perhaps at the expense of authenticity.

- **Creative/philosophical approach:** We try to keep the integrity of the Yorùbá images, but with just enough guidance that an outsider can follow. For instance:
- *"Adébọlá—child of the Elephant that trumpets fearsomely,"*
- *"child whose mystic curse set even the cloth-clad king ablaze,"*
- *"born of a mother as elegant as the peacock,"*
- *"wife of the Lion of the Oyo plains,"*
- *"Adébọlá, the royal eagle who wakes before all others!"*

In this version, I explicitly added a bit to line 2 ("cloth-clad king") to suggest that the "aláso" (cloth-wearer) might mean a person of status (there is a Yorùbá idiom where calling someone an "olówó aṣọ" – owner of cloth – implies a dignitary; here I interpolated "king" for clarity). This may or may not be accurate to the intended reference, but it provides a concrete target for the curse and heightens the praise: her words are so powerful they could immolate even a king. I kept the elephant, peacock, lion, eagle as is, because these are rich symbols – but I gave the elephant a bit of context ("that trumpets fearsomely") to hint at its might, and the lion I specified "of the Oyo plains" to keep the geographical context (which situates the oríkì in Yorubaland). The result tries to *show* the foreign imagery in an appealing way. An English reader encountering this will grasp that these are symbolic epithets. If they wonder "why elephant?" or "what is Oyo?", hopefully the exoticism piques their interest rather than alienating them. A footnote could accompany "Elephant" to say "Symbol of huge stature or nobility in Yorùbá praise" or note "Oyo plains – heartland of the old Oyo Empire, associated with valor," etc., depending on how much scholarly apparatus is desired. The creative translation here preserves the unique metaphors and some proper nouns (Oyo), banking on the reader's ability to handle a bit of foreignness. It also tries to echo the oríkì's *oral cadence* by the use of em-dashes and exclamation at the end, conveying a sense of oratorical enthusiasm.

The differences between these approaches are stark when seen side by side. A literal translation of oríkì often reads like an incoherent collage to outsiders; a domestic translation risks turning it into generic praise and losing the soul; a middle way can carry much of the original's soul but demands more work from both translator and reader.

It is worth noting that oríkì, perhaps even more than proverbs, depend on performance context. The *same* lines delivered aloud with drum accompaniment and the charisma of a professional praise-singer (or an elder relative at a family gathering) have an effect that print cannot replicate. The person being praised often responds emotionally "their head swells," as the Yorùbá say, meaning they feel pride or motivation – and the audience might respond with cheers or repeating refrains. The translation of oríkì in a written document inevitably loses that interactive dimension. What an ethical translator can do is compensate for performance loss by providing rich descriptive cues in the translation. For example, one might introduce a translated oríkì in an anthology with a few lines describing how it would be performed: *"(Chanted in a lilting tone)* Adébọlá, child of the Elephant…(drums accent each praise-name)…royal eagle who wakes before all others!" This is rarely done in strictly academic translations, but in a popular or pedagogical work it might be appropriate to convey the feel.

We should also consider audience and purpose. If the translation is aimed at scholars or students of African literature, preserving original terms and adding footnotes is more acceptable; the readers expect to learn new terminology (like *oríkì, àjànàkú* etc.) and appreciate the authenticity. If the translation is aimed at a general audience (say, in a world poetry anthology or a performance translation), too much foreignness or footnoting might impede enjoyment, so the translator might lean slightly more toward domestication or poetic license to make it flow. There's an ethical component in not misrepresenting the text's effect: an oríkì is exciting and engaging in Yorùbá, if a translation comes off dry and puzzling, one could argue it betrays the original's intent as much as a too-free translation does.

One notable figure to mention is Adébáyọ̀ Fálétí, a renowned Yorùbá writer and performer who was deeply involved in preserving Yorùbá oral arts. Fálétí, who was also a translator and broadcaster, exemplified how oríkì can be integrated with modern media. In one of his film projects, *Báṣọ̀run Gáà*, Faleti loaded the dialogue with traditional oríkì and proverbs, essentially bringing the oral style to the screen. An English subtitler faced with Faleti's script would have quite the challenge: either simplify the dialogue for viewers or attempt creative subtitling that captures the metaphors. Faleti's work

underscores that oríkì is not a relic but a living art that can adapt yet its essence is tied to Yorùbá language's sonority and cultural nuance. When scholars like Fálétí or Adétóun Ògúndèjì speak on oríkì in documentaries, they emphasize its multi-faceted role: *"Apart from being a piece of poetry that excites and inspires the hearer, it harbors cultural and historical information about the person or community being celebrated."*. This means a translator has a dual job: preserve the excitement/inspiration *and* the information content. The information often includes history and genealogy (for instance, mentioning the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire or a mythic ancestor in a praise line), which a translator must not omit if the goal is cultural integrity.

From an ethical standpoint, translating oríkì may even involve confronting biases or discomfort in the target audience. Some elements of oríkì might be labeled "fetish" or "pagan" by outsiders (e.g. invoking deities, talking about charms or magic). In the documentary *Oríkì* (2010) by Fẹ́mi Odùgbèmí, it is noted that some modern Nigerians shy away from oríkì because they see it as linked to traditional religion, yet the film's commentators (including Fálétí) counter that these are just part of the heritage. A translator facing lines that invoke, say, Ṣàngó (god of thunder) or use Ifá divination references must decide: do I explain these references, soften them, or keep them raw? For example, if an oríkì calls someone *"Ọmọ̀ Yemọja"* (child of the sea-goddess Yemọja), a devoutly Christian or Muslim Yoruba today might bristle at that, but culturally it's a high praise (connoting beauty or majesty of the ocean). An ethical translation should not censor these elements to suit Western or modern sensibilities; rather, it should present them and perhaps elucidate them. This is part of respecting the *integrity* of Yorùbá thought which sees no sharp divide between the poetic, the spiritual, and the everyday. Removing "Yemọja" and replacing with, say, "the ocean" would dilute the lineage and spiritual connection the oríkì is invoking.

In practical terms, a translator of oríkì may need to use paratextual aids more liberally: footnotes, glossaries, or introductions explaining key concepts (such as what it means to call someone "son of Ògún" implying they have Ògún's qualities of metal and war, not that their literal father is the deity Ògún!). As long as these are handled unobtrusively, they serve the ethical aim of educating the reader rather than misleading them or flattening the content.

Finally, one must acknowledge that certain sonic qualities of oríkì cannot be replicated. Yorùbá is a tonal language; many oríkì employ punning or sound repetition that simply vanishes in English. A translator might try to compensate by finding *analogous poetic devices* in English maybe some alliteration or a similar rhythm. For example, if the original has a rapid-fire

alliterative string of names, the translation could attempt something like "mighty and merciful, bold and brash" to at least convey a poetic rhythm, even if the sounds differ. This enters the realm of *poetic translation*, where one prioritizes the effect over the exact content. It's a valid approach as long as one is transparent about it.

In summary, translating oríkì demands a *holistic* approach. One must consider meaning, context, performance, and effect all at once. It tests the translator's creative writing skills as well as cultural knowledge. A purely literal translation is usually inadequate (it would be akin to translating only the libretto of an opera without the music – technically the words are there, but the soul is missing). A purely domesticating translation might be readable as a poem in English but would fail to transmit what is uniquely Yorùbá about the text. The ethical "sweet spot" is a translation that retains the *images and names* that form the backbone of the praise, while guiding the reader to appreciate them, either through subtle clarifications in the verse or through supporting notes. This way, the translated oríkì becomes an encounter with another worldview the reader experiences *linguistic hospitality*, being hosted by the Yorùbá language for a while, instead of the oríkì being completely assimilated into the host language's way of speaking.

Towards an Ethics-Based "Philosophical Translation" Model

Drawing insights from the above analyses, we can outline a model of translation that is *philosophical* in the sense that it is guided by reflection on ethics, language, and meaning, rather than by habitual equivalence. Such a model, applied to Yorùbá proverbs and oríkì, would incorporate the following principles and strategies:

Preserve Conceptual Worldviews: A translation should strive to carry over key concepts of the source language's worldview, even if there is no direct counterpart. For Yorùbá, terms like **àṣẹ**, **ọ̀rọ̀**, **òwe**, **oríkì**, **òrìṣà** (deities), **èṣù** (trickster figure), etc., contain dense cultural-philosophical meanings. A *philosophical translation* might leave these terms untranslated (italicized or in quotes) and provide an explanation, rather than choose a misleading "approximate" word. For instance, rendering **àṣẹ** simply as "power" each time might erase its spiritual dimension; instead, one could write "àṣẹ (spiritual command/power)" the first time and "àṣẹ" thereafter. This respects the Other's terminology and invites the reader to learn it. As Ricoeur suggests, the foreign word can be welcomed into the target text without being stripped of all its nuance.

Embrace Dialogue through Footnotes and Commentary: Rather than seeing footnotes as a failure (needing extra-textual crutches), the philosophical approach

sees them as sites of dialogue. A footnote can speak directly to the reader in an explanatory voice, saying, for example: "The Yorùbá phrase used here refers to a proverb about internal conflict. The 'insect in the vegetable' image is a traditional way to say a problem comes from within." Such notes not only explain the translation but enrich the reader's knowledge, effectively teaching a bit of African philosophy in the process. While one must be careful not to overload the text with academic commentary (which could disrupt aesthetic enjoyment), a judicious use of notes aligns with an ethics of transparency. It acknowledges where a translation might not carry the full freight and compensates by giving the reader the tools to understand. This is an act of trust in the reader's ability to engage with the text actively (much as a Yorùbá listener engages actively with proverbial speech). It resonates with Gadamer's idea that the text "considers its reader and wants to know how they understand it", here the translator plays the facilitator of that understanding.

Strive for Dynamic Equivalence of Effect, Not Just Content: Eugene Nida's term "dynamic equivalence" in translation studies refers to conveying the same effect on the target audience that the original intended for its audience. While Nida applied it to Bible translation, the concept is useful here. For example, if a Yorùbá oríkì was meant to *awe and excite* the listener, the English reader should likewise feel a sense of awe, even if that means slightly rearranging or emphasizing parts of the text. If a proverb was meant to *chide playfully*, the translation might take a playful tone too, instead of a flat literal statement. This might involve using idiomatic expressions or a bit of poetic license in the target language. As long as it does not distort factual content, this creativity is warranted to uphold the *spirit* of the original. We saw this in our proverb example, where *"lack the tattered garments of age"* was a stylistic choice to provoke the reader's imagination similarly to how the Yorùbá original provokes it.

Avoid Ethnocentric Censorship: An ethics-based model cautions against editing out elements that might not sit easily with target-culture prejudices. For instance, if an oríkì references indigenous religion or sexuality or uses coarse imagery, a translator guided by a Victorian or Eurocentric instinct might tone it down. The philosophical translator, however, upholds fidelity to the source culture's voice. That might mean retaining a shocking metaphor (perhaps footnoting that Yorùbá oral poetry often uses earthy humor or erotic symbolism) rather than sanitizing it. It also means preserving things like honorifics or kinship terms that carry weight (translating **Báàmi** as "my father" or "Sir" when addressing an elder, etc., to convey respect levels). Essentially, one should translate with the culture, not *against* it. This reflects Ricoeur's "understanding without domination, dialogue without erasure", the translator should not impose their cultural norms to the point of muting the original.

Use Adaptation only where necessary and signal it: In some cases, a direct translation just will not communicate at all. Then, an adaptive approach might be used, but an ethical translator might signal this shift, perhaps with a brief preface or a textual clue. For example, if a Yorùbá proverb uses a pun or riddle that can't work in English, the translator might replace it with an English analogy but add in an endnote: "The original proverb says X, which is a pun; here I've used Y to convey a similar idea." This honesty maintains the intellectual integrity of the translation. It acknowledges the translator's hand rather than hiding it. As the saying goes, *traduttore, traditore*, every translator is a traitor to something, but here the translator openly confesses where the betrayal lies and why it was deemed necessary.

Interactive consultation with Cultural Bearers: A philosophical translation model isn't a solitary pursuit at a desk; it ideally involves consulting with native speakers, culture-bearers, or existing scholarship to verify interpretations. For instance, if one encounters an obscure line in an oríkì, one should research if there are published explanations or ask Yoruba elders what it means. This ensures the translator's understanding (horizon) truly engages with the source's horizon in depth, rather than imposing a guess. It's a humble approach that aligns with Gadamer's insistence that we must always be open to the text teaching *us*, the translators, something new. The resulting translation can include in commentary something like, "According to Yorùbá oral historians, this phrase alludes to…" which adds credibility and richness.

Pedagogical Framing: Especially when translating for a broad audience, the translator can provide a brief introduction about Yorùbá poetics and language philosophy. Explaining concepts like *ọ̀rọ̀* (word as performative event) and *àṣẹ* up front prepares readers to receive the translations on their own terms. For example, telling readers, "Yorùbá praise poetry often strings together names and metaphors without connectors; the listener is meant to infer the relations. In translation, I have kept this style, so expect a more associative experience than a linear narrative." Such guidance is ethical in that it respects the reader's need for orientation and prevents misjudgment of the text as "nonsensical" if they didn't know the conventions. It also shows respect to the source by not covertly normalizing it, but overtly saying "this is different, and here's how to appreciate it."

This philosophical model of translation is, in essence, an extension of hermeneutic ethics into practice. It treats the act of translation as a *responsibility*: responsibility to the source authors (living or ancestral) to carry their voice faithfully, and responsibility to the new audience to provide them access to that voice in a clear but not condescending way. It tries to overcome the simplistic binary of *fidelity vs. fluency* by aiming for a higher goal: truthfulness. Not truth in a purely factual sense, but truth in the sense of doing justice to the text's meaning and significance. Gadamer noted that a

translation, even at its best, can make the original seem "two-dimensional" unless the translator works to supply the depth. The philosophical approach consciously works to add that third dimension, whether through poetic re-creation, explanatory depth, or contextualization.

In practical terms for Yorùbá literature, a translator following this model might produce a work that looks like a bilingual edition with footnotes, glossaries, and appendices. It might resemble a scholar's annotated translation. Yet, importantly, the writing in the translation itself would not be dry and academic; it would aim to be *literary* and moving, preserving imagery and rhythm to the extent possible. The supplemental material simply ensures that what is evocative is also elucidated. This way, the translated proverbs and oríkì can be read for aesthetic pleasure and anthropological insight simultaneously.

Implications for Pedagogy, Preservation, and Cross-Cultural Understanding

Adopting an ethics-infused, philosophical approach to translating Yorùbá proverbs and praise poetry has several broader implications:

Pedagogy

In the classroom, such translations become powerful tools for teaching not just language but culture and philosophy. Students reading a translated Yorùbá proverb collection that keeps the metaphors and provides cultural notes will learn far more than if they read a list of "African proverbs" translated into generic aphorisms. They will glimpse how Yorùbá people think, argue, and imagine. This aligns with a decolonial pedagogical stance – instead of filtering African wisdom through Western frames entirely, it presents it with authenticity, inviting students to expand their interpretive horizons. Teachers can use these translations to discuss concepts like performativity (showing how words can be actions in Yorùbá context, e.g. how an oríkì can function like a speech act of praise that actually boosts the morale of the subject). It also trains students in hermeneutic patience: they learn to deal with texts that do not immediately yield all meaning without some effort and openness. In a world literature curriculum, this fosters true intercultural literacy rather than superficial consumption of translated texts.

Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge

Many African oral genres are endangered by modernization and language shift. Translating them into widely spoken languages like English (or French, etc.) is double-edged: it can help preserve them by documenting them, but it

can also risk fossilizing or misrepresenting them if done poorly. An ethics-focused translation contributes to preservation by meticulously recording not just the *content* but the *form* and *context* of the oral literature. For example, by annotating a praise poem with details about its performance and the history behind its references, the translator is in effect creating a rich record that future generations (including Yorùbá ones who may lose fluency in the language) can learn from. It treats the source material with the respect one would give to a philosophical text – something to be unpacked and appreciated, not just quickly translated and forgotten.

Moreover, such translations can be published in parallel text editions (Yorùbá alongside English), which can serve as learning material for heritage language learners. Seeing the original and translation together, with guidance, can help young Yorùbá (or any interested learners) improve their grasp of the Yorùbá language and its deeper meanings. In this way, translation aids language preservation rather than undermining it. It is analogous to how Latin or Greek classics have been translated with extensive notes, which has actually helped keep those languages studied. Yorùbá may not need rescuing to that extent (it is still a vibrant language of millions), but its classical oral texts do need careful preservation.

Cross-Cultural Understanding

Perhaps the most significant impact is on readers from outside the Yorùbá culture. A translation that neither exoticizes nor flattens the Yorùbá voice can foster genuine understanding and empathy. Readers encounter ways of thinking that might challenge their assumptions. For instance, a Western reader used to a sharp separation of sacred and secular might be intrigued to see a praise poem where God's name and a clan's ancestor are praised in one breath, or where a single utterance is simultaneously a poem, a prayer, and a piece of history. This can broaden their conception of what language and literature can do. It might also counter stereotypes: instead of seeing African proverbs as simplistic folk sayings or "fortune-cookie" lines (a risk when they are over-domesticated), readers will see their profundity and complexity. Likewise, with oríkì, an appreciation can grow for how an oral society remembers genealogy and valorizes individuals through artful speech – doing what written biographies do in the West, but compressed into potent poetic lines.

There is also an emotional resonance: reading a well-translated oríkì, one might feel the *reverence* and *adoration* it carries. This can create respect for the culture that produced it. If literature is a mirror to a people's soul, then

translation is polishing that mirror for others to see. By refusing to distort the reflection, ethical translation ensures others see the Yorùbá people's love of eloquence, their moral values coded in metaphors, their sense of humor, and their spiritual worldview. This fosters cross-cultural dialogue on an equal footing, where Yorùbá thought can stand as theory in its own right next to, say, Aristotle or Shakespeare. In fact, the title of this paper *"Interpreting the Unsaid"* hints at a universal aspect – all cultures have unsaid elements; by studying the Yorùbá case, one might gain insight into one's own culture's implicit communications.

Enriching the Target Language and Literature

When translations carry over unique expressions and words, they can enrich the target language. English today is peppered with words and idioms from other languages precisely because translators once chose to borrow rather than replace. Terms like "karma," "kowtow," or "tsunami" were once foreign but now naturalized. One could envision Yorùbá concepts like **àṣẹ** or **òwe** gaining some currency among global readers of African literature (much as Chinua Achebe's Igbo words like *chi* or *ogbanje* became familiar to many through glossed usage). This cross-pollination makes the target language more cosmopolitan and flexible.

It also validates the source culture's intellectual contributions; for example, someone might reference the idea of "linguistic àṣẹ" in a discussion of performative language after encountering it in a good translation, thereby acknowledging Yorùbá epistemology. On the artistic side, English-language poetry could be inspired by forms like oríkì; indeed, some contemporary poets have experimented with including praise-chant elements or proverbial cadence in their work after being exposed to them. Such creative influence is only possible if translations present these forms robustly, not as neutered versions.

Ethical Model for Other Translations

The case of Yorùbá proverbs and oríkì can serve as a template for translating other non-Western or oral genres. It demonstrates the value of combining literal and explanatory methods, and of treating translation as cultural scholarship. This could encourage translators of, say, Navajo chants or Sanskrit hymns or Chinese idioms to adopt a similar respect for the original form and context. The ripple effect is a translation practice that resists flattening the world's diverse voices into one mode of speech. In a time of globalization, such practice is crucial to maintain *semantic diversity*, which is as important as biodiversity for our collective heritage.

Academic and Civic Practice

Finally, an ethically translated collection of Yorùbá proverbs or oríkì could be used in civic contexts to promote multicultural awareness. For example, diaspora communities could use it to teach children about their heritage in an accessible way. Outside the community, it could be used in interfaith or intercultural gatherings to share wisdom across cultures. As noted in the abstract, translation has *transformative potential* as both an academic and civic practice. The academic rigor ensures accuracy and depth; the civic orientation ensures the translations are disseminated to where they can do social good, for instance, including African proverbs in global quote collections or educational curricula, but presented with proper attribution and explanation, not as anonymous nuggets. This counters the unfortunate trend of African sayings being exoticized or misquoted in pop culture. With careful translation, a proverb like *"Ọmọ ẹni kò ṣíwájú, kìí sọ́pọ́ lẹ́yìn"* (One's child not leading in front does not mean [he] should be pushed into the ditch behind) can be appreciated as a call to encouragement rather than competition, and recognized as Yorùbá, not just "African." When such understanding permeates, it builds respect.

Conclusion

Translating Yorùbá proverbs and praise poetry is a task that goes beyond linguistic substitution; it is an act of intercultural ethics. In grappling with the *unsaid*, the layers of implication and context in Yorùbá oral art, the translator must become, in Ricoeur's term, a hospitable host, and in Gadamer's term, a dialogic partner. The examples and discussions above show that there is no single formula for a "perfect" translation; rather, what is required is a *philosophical mindset* about translation. This entails humility (acknowledging what one does not know or cannot carry over), creativity (finding new ways to signpost meaning), and fidelity not just to words, but to *worlds*.

The Yorùbá philosophy of language, with its profound recognition of the power of words (ọ̀rọ̀) and the efficacy of performance (àṣẹ), challenges Western translators to expand their own philosophy of translation. It urges us to see a translated text not as a pale copy, but as a space of encounter, where reader, translator, and original text engage in a three-way conversation. In such a conversation, some negotiation of meaning is always happening. The translator's role is not to efface themselves, but to facilitate and mediate ethically. As Gadamer noted, *"the translator as interpreter enriches the text with his/her own experiences, ideas and thoughts"*, which suggests that a translator brings something of themselves (and their culture) into play, but the

goal is a "fusion of horizons" where the original voice still unmistakably comes through.

For Yorùbá literature in translation, this means an English reader should finish the text and feel they have heard a Yorùbá voice, perhaps through a slightly foreign accent, rather than the voice of the translator. If they encounter concepts or imagery that prompt questions, that is a productive discomfort leading to learning. If they feel the rhythm or beauty of the sayings, then the translation has succeeded as poetry as well. The highest compliment to such a translation might be that it inspires the reader to learn more about Yorùbá language and culture, maybe even to seek out the original texts or performances. In that sense, translation becomes a bridge *connecting worlds* rather than a ferry transporting texts into an Anglo-American harbor to be repackaged. It is a bridge where traffic flows both ways, the source culture reaches new audiences, and those audiences walk across to meet the source culture.

In conclusion, the endeavor of interpreting the unsaid in Yorùbá proverbs and oríkì highlights the profound ethical responsibility that translators carry. By adopting principles of linguistic hospitality and hermeneutic dialogue, translators can avoid the twin pitfalls of *betrayal by omission* and *betrayal by assimilation*. Instead, they can aim for what Ricoeur calls *"a happy translation,"* one that, despite its imperfections, succeeds in *"enabling cross-cultural resonance while respecting the integrity of Yoruba thought."* Such translations do not merely inform; they transform. They allow the wisdom and artistry of Yorùbá oral traditions to illuminate the global humanities, even as they preserve the distinct light of that tradition. In a world increasingly attuned to the importance of cultural diversity and equity, this model of ethical translation stands as both a tribute to Yorùbá literary heritage and a testament to the role of translation in fostering genuine understanding among peoples.

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