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**Tummy Talk and the Yorùbá Language:
A Conversation-Analytic Deployment of a Local Element to a Global Topic**

Abstract

The late 2005 incident of Nigeria's First Lady's death resulting from an alleged cosmetic surgery for a reduced abdomen – as well as the desire of the former Governor of Bayelsa State for the same physical appeal – has fostered the popularity of the phrase *tummy tuck* (technically, *Abdominoplasty*) in the Nigerian sociolect of English. This paper looks away from the First Lady's misfortune and the 'diplomatic circumstances' of the governor's alleged misconduct at the time, and considers the cultural, conversational and pragmatic place of the tummy in our national consciousness, using as [representative] data nuggets of reference to the physical belly as encoded in numerous Yorùbá proverbs and idioms. Perhaps on account of its central location in the human physiological make-up and its continual relevance as pep during talk, the belly is imbued with much conversational significance through which it displays a range of values. From the perspective of the Yorùbá philosophical appreciation of the stomach, the paper hopes to achieve a threefold task: 1) to demonstrate that, despite the lack of conceptual correspondence between two or more cultures, any living language can be used to discuss global issues; 2) to display the adequacy and readiness of Yorùbá in accounting for the facts of a global issue even through the application

of one linguistic aspect of the culture; and 3) to advance the conclusion that ‘losing one’s tummy’ is very much like ‘losing one’s head’ – through a juxtaposition of the Yorùbá/Nigerian/African traditional craving for a paunch with the modern/Western trend to ‘fight the flab.’ While the ‘descriptive’ setting of the paper is Nigeria, the language under study is itself an international commodity, as it is spoken in such countries as Benin, Ghana, Togo, Sierra Leone, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Trinidad, the Caribbean and several parts of the United States. Thus, the facts presented in the paper would apply to, and could be attested in, these ‘diasporic’ regions.

Keywords: tummy tuck/abdominoplasty; proverbs; accessorising the anatomy

Preamble: The Yorùbá of South-Western Nigeria

The Yorùbá language is spoken primarily by the Yorùbá people of south-western Nigeria, and has about 50 million users worldwide. Like English and French, the language is a veritable medium of communication outside the region generally considered its roots. As a result of several social and political factors, speakers of the language are found in many parts of the world. In fact, while the majority of the Yorùbá live in south-western Nigeria, there are also substantial indigenous Yorùbá towns and villages in Benin, Ghana and Togo, as well as large diasporic Yorùbá communities in Sierra Leone, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Trinidad, the Caribbean, and the United States. Given this ‘global’ spread of the language, it may be asserted that this paper has practical sociolinguistic implications not only for the Nigerian Yorùbá community but also for every country or region where the language has roots.

2.0 Introduction: The concept of *ikùn*¹ (or *inú*) among the Yorùbá

T'èniyàn bá yó tán, á máa wá bẹ̀kùnbẹ̀kùn.

‘When a person is fully fed, he starts looking for a tummy perforator.’

(A Yorùbá Idiom)

This paper is a pragmatic-relevance analysis of the concept of the human stomach in the blossoming discourses and essays on abdominoplasty in Nigeria. The discussion contained in the paper employs the Yorùbá philosophical worldview to comment on this new search for beauty, through the application of a few pragmatically appropriate proverbs, idioms and adages – especially those containing mentions of the Yorùbá word(s) for *stomach*. On account of its recurrent deployment during much interactive talk among the Yorùbá – and now progressively more among several Nigerians, especially in the discussion of members’ protruded tummy – ‘the stomach’ (Yorùbá: *ikùn* or *inú*) seems to be the cultural repository of various social, psychological and emotional states: gladness and sadness, satisfaction and acquiescence, wisdom and candour and, occasionally, reticence and resignation. For example, aggrieved members of the society are sometimes enjoined to ‘rub [the] stomach with the hand’ (Yorùbá: *fì ọ̀wọ̀ wọ̀ 'nú*) – that is, *to take the situation in one’s stride*. Also, the situation may necessitate that ‘you hide your thoughts in your stomach as the elders do’ (Yorùbá: *f’ọ̀rọ̀ s’ikùn bi àgbà*) – that is, *to be circumspect; not to display one’s thoughts*, etc.) or, sometimes, ‘to be one’s own man’ – *bá ’nú sọ, má b’èniyàn sọ* - literally, *to discuss with one’s stomach, rather than with other people*.

In many African societies, the tummy has its periods of appreciation and castigation. Among the Yorùbá, for instance, a young [male] child’s tummy can endear him to folks around him, and before long, they may nickname him *Arikùnjẹ̀dùndù* (literally, *One-who-has-much-tummy-space-for-fried-yam*). As time goes on, if he does not lose his baby fat, his nickname may change to *Òbéntè* (in English, ‘a fatso’). As an adult, his corpulent frame may begin to embarrass him or

make him an object of ridicule among his friends, relations and associates, and at this point, probably on account of his age, no one would call him *Arikùnjèdùndú* or *Òbéntè* any more. His rotund body now invites critical comments from everyone around him from time to time. One of the ways he might be ridiculed is to liken him to *Bùrèditóbòsómì* (literally, *Bread-that-fell-in-water*). Of these three stages of ‘being fat’, the most crucial is the third. At first, the subject might look very personable especially in traditional clothing but with time, he might look awful in Western clothes, especially in a suit. It is at this time that the ‘victim of obesity’ begins his search for anything that might help him to lose excess fat: the gym, jogging, etc. until, after acquiring wealth, he goes for abdominoplasty.

In the ‘globalized’ Nigerian community, the stomach seems to have acquired some slur, first as a result of the need to keep fit the Western way and, second, because of its association with obesity; thus, it is now commonplace to suggest surgery to anyone that looks overweight – beginning, of course, with the stomach. Thus, what used to be ‘good’ to look at on an individual has now become ‘goods’ that must be shed. The point here is that the potbelly, which was an admirable ‘content’ of the personality of the individual in pre-modern Nigeria, has now become unwanted property.

Yet, it has not been possible to do away with the pragmatic significance of this part of the body in human communication. A look at a lot of Yorùbá proverbs, idioms, adages and aphorisms would reveal an unbroken link between the people’s body parts and their language, to the point that a word like *ikùn* (or *inú*) competently displays a cultural reliance on the stomach being the storeroom of communal values like probity, patience, loyalty, prosperity, exhortation, vitality and unity. Given these invaluable indices of character and conduct, it may be inferred that among the Yorùbá, anyone ‘losing his or her tummy’ to surgery or a socially engendered

misfortune may be regarded, as it were, as losing their cultural bearing. As the Yorùbá would say, such a person *po 'nú* (or, *po inú*) ‘has addled stomach’ or ‘is stupid’.

Thus, from the point of view of language and culture being mutually defining, this paper considers the tummy as an indispensable cultural/linguistic property and it discusses this mutual relationship, first by tracing the ontological worth of the stomach to its socio-linguistic relevance and, second, by examining the pragmatic force achieved by the use of this central part of the body to give talk a bit of zing.

So far in this country, the only public figures known to have gone under the knife for the removal of distressing flab around their midriff are Nigeria’s late First Lady and the former Bayelsa State governor, but of the two, only the governor has had a lot of mention in connection with the surgical procedure called abdominoplasty. As for the First Lady, the gossip has been more about her sense of fashion and flair for vanity.

To accomplish the analysis, this paper examines fragments of real life conversational data, especially that with sufficient reference to, and invocation of, *ikùn* (or *inú*). Wherever necessary, news items about the Governor of Bayelsa may be culled and analysed for a proper perspective in the analysis – since most of the news discourse is on his (and not on the First Lady’s) quest for a trimmer midriff.

Thus, this paper hopes to locate the [re]current discourses on *tummy tuck* within the ethos of a people and to see how the decision to have this vital part ‘modified’ by surgery is accounted for in the people’s idiom. Put another way, the paper tries to see how Yorùbá sayings containing mentions of *tummy* (that is, *ikùn* and/or *inú*) can be used to ground *tummy tuck* discourse.

The fragments presented here are numbered from one, not to reflect their position in the context of occurrence but to make analysis easy to follow.

2.1 Preparatory conditions for Yorùbá proverbs

Culturally, proverbs are conversational objects that are used to hone one's view concerning a current topic. As such, the use of these 'words of wisdom' is considered to be reserved for the culturally mature members of the community. Thus, in some culturally defined circumstances – e.g. assemblies of elders, talk involving and requiring the use of conversational etiquette, etc. – it is mandatory that anyone (especially younger members of society) using proverbs to anchor their contribution to ongoing talk first invoke the elders, whether these are present or not. So expected is this requirement that even the oldest members of the community cannot use a proverb without first acknowledging 'the elders'. This acknowledgement, usually formulaic, is illustrated here:

- | | |
|------------|---|
| Túnjì: | 1. Àwọ̀n àgbà ló máa npáa l'ówe, |
| | 2. wọ̀n ní bí etí kò gbọ̀ yìngìn, inú kíí bàjẹ. |
| | 3. Tótó ó se bí òwe, ẹ̀yin àgbà, ẹ̀ dárí jì mí. |
| Bàbá Àgbà: | 4. Wà á pà mí. |

- | | | |
|----------------|---------------|--|
| <i>Gloss</i> : | Túnjì: | 1. Our elders say |
| | | 2. (that) if the ear does not receive bad news, one remains unperturbed. |
| | | 3. For using a proverb, elders, please pardon me. |
| | Older member: | 4. May you use another one. |

As the fragment shows, Túnjì first invokes/acknowledges the forebears before deploying the proverb at utterance 2. Furthermore, he seeks full approval by quickly adding a request for pardon (*ẹ̀ dárí jì mí*) at utterance 3. With these two primary conditions fulfilled, any older person (e.g. Bàbá Àgbà) taking part in the conversation/discussion – but not just overhearing or listening in on it – is culturally expected to offer the encouragement at utterance 4. In fact, the absence of utterance 4 in such a situation would be an aberrant phenomenon, especially if the conversation is between culturally sentient members.

Thus, among the Yorùbá, the use of proverbs is not as simple as the production of the words that make them up; their deployment generally follows the following iconic or formulaic pattern:

Stage A: Acknowledgement of elders/forebears

Stage B: Production of proverb

Stage C: Request for pardon

Stage D Authorization/Endorsement to employ proverbs

It is not that the current speaker's contribution to the conversation or his use of a proverb would misfire if the first three of these stages are skipped; but such a speaker would only be deliberately disregarding cultural etiquette or would be seen as not possessing sufficient cultural competence. After this initial acknowledgement, production, request and permission, however, the speaker may go on to use at every turn as many proverbs as he finds conversationally relevant, as to implement the four stages at every turn would slow down the pace of the conversation, or even make nonsense of the preparatory conditions altogether.

3.0 **What is Tummy Tuck?**

Tummy tuck (known medically as *Abdominoplasty*) is a major surgical procedure in which excess skin and fat from the middle and lower abdomen is removed and the muscles of the abdominal wall are tightened. The procedure can dramatically reduce the appearance of a protruding abdomen although doctors are always quick to advise the prospective patient that the procedure does produce a permanent scar which, depending on the extent of the original problem and the surgery required to correct it, can extend from hip to hip.

For anyone considering a tummy tuck, a basic understanding of the procedure is necessary. This understanding (or information) is to be obtained through consulting the appropriate

professionals in the field. Among the Yorùbá, consulting is done every time that one decides *to rub one's tummy with somebody else's tummy* (Yorùbá: *fi ikùn lu'kùn*):

- Olóyè: 1. Ikùn rogbodo tí mo kàn ngbé kiri láti gbogbo ojo yi gãn,
 2. kíló dà fún mí?
 3. Ó tó kí nwá nkan se sí.
 4. Èyí t'ólúwa rẹ kàn dàbí màálù t'ó ti l'óyún bí ọdún mẹta yi.
 → 5. Nítórí ẹ ni mo se rò pé kí á jọ fi'kùn lu'kùn,
 6. kí nlè mọ kínni kí nse gangan.
 Oṛẹ: 7. Ìyẹn d́áa.

- Gloss:* Chief: 1. This abnormally large tummy of mine,
 2. how has it been a blessing?
 3. About time I did something about it.
 4. I'm sick and tired of looking like a cow that's about three years' gone.
 → 5. [*That's why I thought you and I should thump tummies**] That's why I thought to seek your counsel –
 6. to know precisely what to do about it.
 Friend: 7. That's a wise decision.

[*Here and elsewhere in the paper, the literal translation of the Yorùbá tummy expression in ongoing talk/fragments is provided in braces to enhance the appreciation of the idiom in interactive discourse.]

Olóyè's use of the idiom (*fi'kùn lu'kùn* 'seek advice; consult' at utterance 5 illustrates the typical deployment of the expression in many Yorùbá conversational contexts. The phrase is mostly used to conduct consultation or to suggest the need for advice, especially when the issue at hand is delicate.

The image thrown up by the idiom, however, is instructive for the present discussion. In a way, *fi'kùn lu'kùn* [literally, *thump tummies*] suggests physical contact between interlocutors' tummies, which they 'hope' to employ in their deliberation, more especially as *ikùn* (or *inú*) is regarded as the repository of wisdom and understanding among the Yorùbá. It would be wide of the mark to say that only obese members use the expression this way; however, as in the majority of instances of idiomatic usage, a different form with the same semantic and pragmatic value

exists: *f'orí k'orí* [literally: *make one's head touch that of another person*] 'to consult someone on an issue (= put our heads together)'.

4.0 The tummy across cultures: English vs. Yorùbá

The theory of linguistic relativity would account for the preponderance of one feature in a language and a dearth of the same feature in another. When compared, for instance, English and Yorùbá would be found to have an unequal distribution of proverbs of particular types, largely on account of the worldview of their speakers. For example, Yorùbá does not have as many colour idioms and proverbs as English; on the other hand, proverbs and similar forms containing overt reference to the stomach (or its informal correlates, e.g. *tummy* and *belly*) are few and far between in English but are so many in Yorùbá. Thus, it may not be easy to do a proper analysis without providing a gloss after every application of Yorùbá proverbs and idioms containing words that may be said to mean *stomach*, *abdomen*, *tummy* or *belly* – as demonstrated above.

The reason for the proliferation of 'stomach' expressions in Yorùbá is probably the alliance that the Yorùbá have established between this part of the body and man's circumstances: peace, satisfaction, anger, joy, wisdom, folly, standoffishness, etc. With so many possible applications of the word (*stomach*, *tummy* or *belly*) several conversational exchanges are enriched and meaning is given more pragmatic force. The point must be made, however, that unless one belongs to the Yorùbá speech community, one may not quite grasp the full communicative value of the occurrence of these words in talk.

5.0 The tummy as a social fact

In many parts of Nigeria, the tummy still stands out as one of the 'signs of well-being' and a lot of the *nouveau riche* take their time to cultivate a paunch, if only to show off their native garments, as these look better on robust people than on excessively muscular folks. So it is

nothing unusual that friends or close acquaintances sometimes tease one another with remarks about the tummy, e.g.:

- Àjàní: 1. Áh-a, Jimoh, ikùn ẹ mà ti nyọ o.
2. Ìgbà wo lo bẹrẹ isẹ ní Guinness t'ó o ti sáré yọ'kùn báyií?
Jimoh: 3. B'ó se wà niyẹn.
Àjàní : 4. Ó dá a náà, ẹ f'olá ràn wá o.

- Gloss:* Àjàní : 1. Ah-a, Jimoh, I see you're growing a paunch.
2. How long have you worked at Guinness to have this largish tummy?
Jimoh : 3. That's life.
Àjàní: 4. In that case, I hope you'll let's share in the goodies.

So much is the tummy an index of comfortable circumstances that detractors of people in power regard it as an indication of a sybarite disposition to wealth and position. As usual, these detractors see the tummy as proof that the subject has been lining his own pockets rather than seeing to the welfare of the people. Thus, any civil servant accused of enriching himself is traditionally referred to as *ajefà*, a freeloader or parasite, leading to one of the most notable *ikùn* proverbs among the Yorùbá, as illustrated in the following conversational snatch:

- Làtí: 1. Ó ga fún gbogbo àwọn òsèlú wa wọnyí o.
2. Gbogbo wọn ló nlo ọkọ ayọkẹlẹ bi mẹta mẹta.
3. Ọpọlọpọ nínú wọn l'ó nfí owó ilú gbé'rasọ
4. tí wọn wá nwú bi bẹmbẹ olókùnrùn.
Àlào: 5. O rí yẹn sọ.
→ 6. Hẹn, awọn àgbà máa npa òwe pé yọkọto ni'kùn ajefà.
7. Láiṣe láìjìnà, gbogbo wọn ló máa bẹ bi fèèrè.

- Gloss:* Làtí: 1. These politicians are indecorous.
2. very one of them has about three cars.
3. any of them even line their pockets habitually
4. and they are all puffed up like blimps.
Àlào: 5. That's a good point.
→ 6. [Literally: Well, the elders say, *corpulent, that's the freeloader's tummy*] Well, the elders say the freeloader's tummy is abominably large.
7. Sooner or later, all of them will burst like balloons.

The general pragmatic import of this proverb may be found in its applicability to the Bayelsa State governor's corpulent frame – on account of which, were he Yorùbá, he would be aptly described as *ajefà*, since he was caught by the [British] Metropolitan Police and charged with laundering money supposedly stolen from the people of Bayelsa, the fact of which case quite convincingly proves that he is (or, was) feeding off the people.

But then, the possession or lack of a fat tummy may reveal the psychological state of the rich and affluent on the one hand, and that of the *hoi polloi* on the other. For instance, the idiomatic usage *Àwon tó yó, wọn npá'nú; àwọn t'ebi npa, àwọn yẹn nran'kùn* (5) is a complete statement about the individual's desire to be like the other person. Look at the following chat:

Bíṓdún:	1. Ọṛọ awọn èyàn ti sù mi. 2. Àwọn tó ti l'ọkọ nlé sì fẹ máa gbádùn ara wọn níta 3. awọn tí kò tíì l'ọkọ ngbà'dúrà k'áwọn tilẹ r'íbi kan f'orí pamo sí.
Àjàó:	4. Bí ọṛọ ayé se rí niyẹn. → 5. Àwon tó yó, wọn npá'nú; àwọn t'ebi npa, àwọn yẹn nran'kùn.
<i>Gloss:</i>	Bíṓdún: 1. How weird! 2. Married people want to have a good time outside marriage 3. while single folks are praying hard to have their own homes. Àjàó: 4. That's life. Bíṓdún: → 5. [<i>Literally</i>] Those who are well-fed pull in their tummy; while the hungry puff up theirs.

The pragmatic value of the witty saying is its representation of social, psychological and physiological discontent among humans – the circumstance of inadvertently coveting the other person's circumstances – sometimes giving rise to the need to seek medical intervention either to 'acquire' more physical weight or to undergo surgery to remove excess fat. What with the underlying reality of the aphorism, anyway, thin or 'weightless' people sometimes wish to look a little fat while overweight folks long for the trim or slim physical appearance of the wispy.

Furthermore, unlike the advanced Western societies where social status is not underscored by a person's physical size, the Yorùbá people sometimes ascribe certain virtues (e.g., probity and accountability) to obese members, for the reason that corpulent people are mostly opulent and therefore cannot be fraudulent. Hence, it is almost a mnemonic in many non-formal Yorùbá circles that we should 'appoint someone with a tummy as treasurer' (Yorùbá: *Eni t'ó bá yọ'kùn ni kí ẹ gbé owó fún* – Literally, *Whoever has a tummy, he is the one you should give the money to keep*) – for the simple [misconceived?] idea that such a person is well-to-do and may not commit fraud.

6.0 Surgery: choice vs. secrecy

Perhaps the most intriguing factor about the subjects' desire to go for this kind of solution is the secrecy shrouding it. In several cases when the public has been informed of a disaster involving any top government official, the question members have generally asked is, *Whom did they tell before going for the operation?* as if making such an event public knowledge would eliminate or mitigate the pain or risk associated with the procedure. However, the only anthropological rationalization of such official cover up is supported by recourse to the Yorùbá belief that suppressing information about one's plans would guarantee greater success, a fact encoded in the Yorùbá saying, *Orúkọ tí a má a sọ ọmọ ẹni, inú ẹni ló ngbé* [literally, *The name one intends to give to a newborn baby is kept in one's tummy*] – that is, 'the name is one's own secret' or *Bá'nú sọ, má b'èniyàn sọ* [Literally: *Discuss issues with your tummy, not with humans.*] 'Let your tummy be your confidant'.

If we look at the subjects in this study – the First Lady and the Governor – we might say, therefore, that they could have used one or two *ikùn* proverbs to spurn anyone's request for information about the medical procedure or its outcome, with the effect that the proverb used

would be seen to have direct pragmatic/sarcastic significance, as in this fabricated snatch:

- Oníròyìn: 1. Gómìnà wa, ẹ̀ ò tilẹ̀ sọ̀ fún ẹ̀nikankan pé ẹ̀ fẹ̀ lọ se isẹ̀ abẹ.
 2. Kí lẹ̀ rí gan an?
 Gómìnà : 3. Ẹ seun.
 4. Ní sókí,
 → 5. àwọn baba wa ló máa npa l’owe pe ọ̀bẹ̀ kì í m̀ n’íkùn àgbà.

- Gloss:* Journalist: 1. Governor, why did you keep your desire to undergo surgery secret?
 2. Any need for secrecy?
 Governor: 3. Thank you.
 4. In a few words,
 → 5. [Literally: Our fathers are fond of saying that *the soup does not move about in an elder’s tummy.*] (English gloss:) as our elders say, one has to be one’s own man.

The proverb at (5) above suggests extreme discretion, especially among Yorùbá elders and/or elder statesmen. As for the patient of a hush-hush surgery, the need for secrecy might have been engendered by the reality of invasive evil; it is believed in this culture that “the more people you inform about a project or desire, the less success you are likely to achieve”. Generally, among Nigerians, the need to have surgery is not regarded as a communal but as a personal/private issue and the public only gets to hear about it *if* the surgery goes awry – as it often happens! In view of the uncertainty and insecurity that may arise, therefore, the Yorùbá usually counsel prospective ‘adventurers’ to ‘keep their plans in themselves’ (Yorùbá: *Bá’nú sọ, má b’èniyàn sọ*).

7.0 Post-op pain

*The quest for self-improvement can lead you down many paths...
 Some of you will be disappointed...
 Joel R. Studin, MD, FACS¹*

One of the numerous accounts of the tummy tuck surgery undergone by the Bayelsa State Governor, Chief Diepreye Alamiyeseigha, is examined in this section to authenticate the analysis. It is found on Page 2 of *The Punch* newspaper of Monday, 6 February 2006 and reads in part as follows:

Tummy tuck: **Alamiyeseigha in pain**

Yusuf Alli

The embattled former Governor of Bayelsa State, Chief Diepreye Alamiyeseigha, is ill. The former governor was said to be in pain around the area where he had his abdominoplasty (tummy tuck), as a result of poor post-surgery attention. A source told our correspondent on Sunday that Alamiyeseigha was due for a post-surgery check up last year. He had gone to Germany last August and was arrested by the Metropolitan Police over charges of laundering about one million pounds...

Seeking medical solution to a physiological problem is perhaps one of the most sensible courses of action available to man. However, getting medical attention at the right place and on account of proper counselling seems to be a more sensible path to tread. It should be expected that anyone negatively obsessed with obesity should 'do something about it', and society expects such people to keep within the ambit of normality.

Apparently, the governor had taken the surgery for granted, judging by his involvement in several healing-unfriendly activities. Perhaps he had seen other patients who seemed to have gone back to normal and he had thought such luck was universal. But, as life dictates on numerous issues, one man's meat is another man's poison, an idiom properly re-expressed by Robert A. Heinlein, *One man's religion is another man's belly laugh*. In other words, what seems to be one man's craze or obsession is another man's aversion, and so humans should learn not to compare themselves with others. The fact that 'everyone is doing it' hardly ever justifies an action and among the Yorùbá, such a practice is totally frowned at, as is expressed below:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Babaláwo: | 1. Kínni idí tí o fi fẹ se òògùn owó? |
| Tálákà: | 2. Gbogbo ayé ló ti d'olówó tán; |
| | 3. sé bí mo se máa máa wò nìyí tí n ó fi wọ'le sùn? |
| | 4. Baba, ẹ bá mi w'ogbọn dá. |
| Babaláwo: | 5. Nítòótọ, kò yẹ kí èniyàn wà bí aláísí, |
| | 6. amọ Olódùmarè ló maa nse gbogbo nkan fún ẹdá. |
| | 7. Àwọn baba nlá wa tún maa npaa l'ówe pé |
| → | 8. bí èniyàn fi inú wé'nú, olúwa ẹ á jẹ èèwọ. |
| | 9. Ìmọràn mi ni wípé kí o ní sùúrù dì'gbà t'Olúwa dá. |

- Gloss:*
- Herbalist: 1. Why do you want to do a money ritual?
 Poor Client: 2. Everyone around me is rich;
 3. I can't afford to be poor all my life.
 4. Please, help me out.
 Herbalist: 5. Agreed, one needs to have a lucky break
 6. but everything in life is at God's say-so.
 7. Moreover, our forefathers say
 → 8. [Literally, *if anyone compares his tummy with someone else's, he would eat poison*] There's harm in keeping up with the Joneses.
 9. So, I'd advise you to wait for God's season.

Thus the governor's painful experience may be invoked by the proverb at utterance 8: *Bí ènìyàn fì inú wé'nú, olúwa rẹ́ á jẹ́ èèwọ́*. Among the Yorùbá, the belief is that every human being is unique – especially in terms of life and living, or in terms of destiny altogether. Thus, an experience that would cause a day's discomfort in someone's life might generate a long period of grief in the life of another. Thus, by thinking of the positive effects of surgery, the governor may be said to have overlooked this vital reminder.

8.0 Accessorising the anatomy²

As the literature on the surgical procedure shows, the healing journey involves accessorising the anatomy. Without a doubt, the patient's desire to have a firmer tummy would leave him a bit jiggered when he is confronted with the observances that make up the post-op period. While the procedure may have been successful, the patient may be traumatised by the pattern of life recommended to him afterwards. Moreover, the period requires a lot of merchandise he would need to acquire in order to 'get back to normal'. While some experts may give the patient some cold comfort by telling him that he might feel like his old self again within two weeks, or sadden him by letting him know that his scars may actually appear to worsen during the first three to six months as they heal (although they also say that this is *normal*), the patient's new look after

abdominoplasty depends on a lot of products that would guarantee sufficient healing. These may include:

- a) *Support & Compression Garments* – meant to improve blood circulation, minimize swelling after the procedure, accelerate the healing process, and allow the patient to return to daily routines sooner. Products under this section include: Women’s Mid Body Compression – Stage One (Mid Thigh) which costs about \$60; Women’s Mid Body Brief Compression Garment – Stage One, \$60; Female Torso Brief Compression Garment – Stage Two, \$100; Female Abdominal Brief Compression Garment – Stage Two \$80; Female Abdominal Girdle Compression Garment – with Zipper – Stage One, \$110; Female 9” Double Panel Binder, about \$8; Women’s Lower Body Compression Garment – Stage One – Below the Knee, \$65); Women’s Brief Compression Garment – Stage Two – without Zipper, \$41; Men’s Mid Body Compression Garment – Stage One, \$95; Male Abdominal Compression Garment – with Zipper – Stage One, \$160; Women’ Mid Body Brief Compression Garment Kit – Stages One & Two, \$110 and Men’s Mid Body Compression Garment Kit – Stages One & Two, \$175. Samples of these products are seen below:



Fig. 1

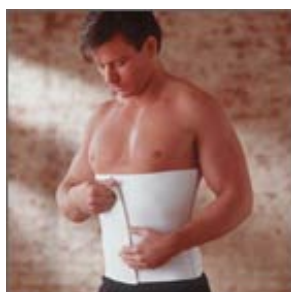


Fig. 2

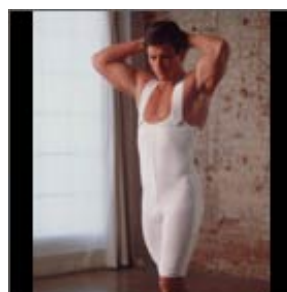


Fig. 3

Somehow, in line with Yorùbá philosophical train of thought, Figures 1, 2, and 3 call attention to the popular comment on folks that are naturally not imbued with a fat tummy despite society’s expectation of the feature – an expectation that runs contrary to the social status indicated by a largish tummy. So, among the Yorùbá, rich people who look like the ones above are usually dubbed with the alias *Inú fẹ̀lẹ̀, t’ebi kọ* (literally: *A flat tummy does not signify hunger*). However, the traditional Yorùbá man is nothing close to any of the people these three

images typify, as the craze to have a trim torso or a muscular, athletic body is largely a modern and, in fact, Western phenomenon. To emphasize this Western trend, the Yorùbá hint at the untoward tactic of the well-fed to look hungry and the corresponding deceptive antics of the hungry to fake obesity, as expressed in this proverb: *Àwọn t'ó yó, wọn nponú; àwon t'ébi npa, àwon yèn nrankùn* (roughly, *Those who are well-fed pull in their tummy; while the hungry puff up theirs*). As a people, anyway, the [traditional] Yorùbá sometimes disparage a person – especially an adult – who sports a flat tummy, an intriguing fact captured in the short *ikùn* aphorism, *Àgbà tí kò yọ'kùn, awun ló ní* (literally: *An elderly person without a paunch is simply a miser*) – a saying that stresses the social significance of a fat tummy among the various Yorùbá elites.

- b) *Cold & Hot Therapy* – designed to reduce post-op swelling and bruising, and soothe traumatized skin. Merchandise required for this includes: Cold & Hot 10" x 8¾" Body Compress, \$15; Tri-Versal Cold Therapy Pack, \$25; Hot Therapy Abdomen, Hips, Back & Shoulders Wrap – with Ties, \$30. See samples below:



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Now, concerning the Figures 4, 5, and 6 above, ordinary members might ask, what would anyone be doing with these odd-looking things? As will be seen in a conversational piece later, such members need to be informed that the task of ‘decorating’ one’s tummy is one’s responsibility; as the Yorùbá would say, *Bó se wun ni làà di erù ikùn* (literally: *One loads one’s tummy as one desires* – a hint at individual differences).

- c) *Elevation & Wedge Pillows* – used to keep swelling down, lower stress on body and promote optimal circulation to healing areas. Articles to purchase include: Convuluted Bed Wedge Pillow, \$35; Memory Foam Bed Wedge Pillow (about \$45); Convuluted Bed Wedge Pillow with Neck Roll, \$50, and Memory Foam Bed Wedge Pillow with Neck Roll, \$65. Here are samples (Fig. 7, 8, and 9):



Fig. 7

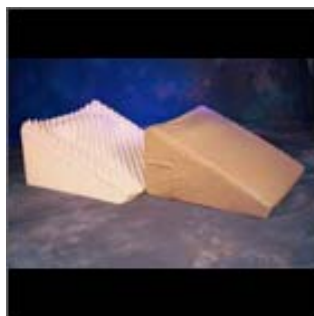


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

- d) *Healing Vitamins, Supplements & Homeopathic Remedies* – all of which accelerate healing, minimize swelling and bruising, and support wound healing, e.g. Make Me Heal Plastic Surgery Healing Multinurient – Post-Op Formula with Bromelain, \$55 and SinEcch (Arnica Montana), \$30. Figure 10 below depicts one such drug:



Fig. 10

Drugs and other medical and paramedical aids – exemplified in Figures 7 to 10 – are a sure source of relief across cultures, although the medication recommended for ailments could be as different as the ailments, or as different as the cultures themselves. Thus, the Yorùbá advise that remedies should be sought whenever possible and health should not be taken for granted – even if people look generally well and fit. One proverb stresses this relationship between physiology and well-being. Look at the fragment below and the deployment of the proverb to home in on this point:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Kúdírátù: | 1. Baálé mi, nje ẹ gbọ pé ogbẹni t’ó ngbé n’ílẹ kejì kú l’óru ànà? |
| | 2. Irú ikú òjìjì wo niyẹn? |
| | 3. Kò tilẹ jọ ẹni t’ònsàisàn rárá. |
| Sẹfù: | → 4. Pàserò mi, gbogobo alángbá ló s’ikùn dé’lẹ, a ò mọ èyí tí’nú nrun. |

- | | | |
|---------------|-----------|--|
| <i>Gloss:</i> | Kúdírátù: | 1. Darling, did you hear that our neighbour died about midnight yesterday? |
| | | 2. That’s disturbing. |
| | | 3. And he didn’t even look sick at all. |
| | Sẹfù: | → 4. Sweetheart, all lizards lie prostrate; no one knows which of them has belly-ache. |

Such a saying as used by Sẹfù at (4) is usually culturally invoked to account for intimidating and mysterious phenomena. The expression has pragmatic use quite beyond the context here but it serves quite well in indicating the tenuous – almost non-existent correspondence – between *looking well* and *being well indeed*. Thus, for the abdominoplasty patient to look well, he needs to have the accompanying drugs (e.g., the one advertised above) which would ensure that medical desire. But then, his culture condemns scarification and so he will ultimately need to apply something (e.g., the gel in figure 12) to eliminate the vestiges of the surgery:

- e) *Scar Healing & Appearance Improvement* – supposed to limit post-op scarring, flatten, soften and smoothen scar, lessen scar size and thickness, and reduce redness and itching. This will require the acquisition of articles such as: Biodermis 1.4”x6” Abdominal/Caesarian-Section Scar Reduction Silicone

Strip (Self-Adhesive), \$14; Scar Fx Silicone Sheet – 1”x12” (with Self Adhesive Side and Scar Tape), \$23; Kelo-cote Scar Gel, \$30; Scar Esthetique Reduction Cream (with Silicaone, Arnica, Antioxidants and Copper Peptides – Co-Q10, \$23. See a sample in Figure 11 below:



Fig. 11

- f) *Recovery and Comfort Pillows* – a wide variety of pillows designed for the healing journey to maximise comfort while resting, reduce muscle tension and body aches owing to the patient’s need to rest and sleep often in an elevated position and having to remain in the same position for long periods of time causing him to experience all kinds of muscle tension and aches in areas such as the neck, shoulders, back, arms, buttocks, knees, and legs. These pillows include: U-shaped Pillows, \$17; Knee Lift Pillow, \$20; Leg Wedge Pillow, \$32; Half Lumbar Roll (with Strap), \$15; Memory Foam Pillow with Built-in Cervical Roll, \$60; and Moulded Lumbar Cushion (with Strap), \$25. The products depicted below are samples:



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

A look at the unfamiliar objects in Figures 7 – 9 and 12 – 14, identified by names for objects with which most people are familiar, would clearly make the observing member suspicious of a critical physiological condition, more especially since these objects are associated with the

blandest human activity: sleeping. Thus, if anyone would be predisposed to using such sleeping aids while not having had a motoring accident or any other physical mishap, the Yorùbá would easily declare that he or she must have done something that ought not to be done and is therefore suffering from an unusual state of health. In a lot of instances, the Yorùbá could use a proverb like *Ìdúró ò sí ìbẹ̀rẹ̀ ò sí fún ẹ̀ni tó gbé ọ̀mọ̀ odó mì* [literally: *There's neither standing nor squatting for anyone that swallows a pestle*] (English gloss: *There is no comfortable state for anyone that has swallowed a pestle* or, as the English say, '[Such a person] must have bitten off more than he could chew'. The U-shaped pillow (Fig. 12), for instance, is advertised as helping to stabilize the neck and head while resting and sleeping during recovery. While it may not be strange to orthopaedic doctors, innocent members of the Yorùbá race would regard it as *àrà meè rírí* – [Literally: *magic that is new to me*] 'a strange sight!'

- g) *Bed Comfort Accessories* – meant to enable the patient to rest in comfort and style during recovery, and also eliminate muscle tension and body aches, e.g., Convoluted Mattress Pad (Full Size), \$40; Convoluted Mattress Pad (Queen Size), \$50; Convoluted Mattress Pad (King Size), \$75. (See Fig. 15 below.)

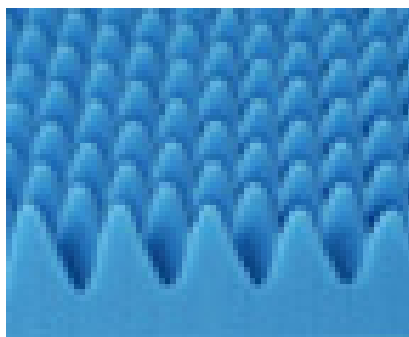


Fig. 15

If the average member of the Yorùbá nation were asked what the object in Figure 15 is, he would call it an egg-crate. In English the same 'mistaken identity' could be used to illustrate the oddity of the product, especially if one applies the idiom *walking as if on eggs* – suggesting delicacy and fragility, an apt description of the post-op state of the abdominoplasty patient.

- h) *Bath Safety Accessories* – which will enable the patient to shower comfortably, effortlessly and safely without risk of slipping or falling. As the marketing personnel of some of these products say, these accessories can make the patient’s showering experience easier and help him prevent making healing-unfriendly movements that may worsen symptoms such as swelling and bruising. They include: Bath Bench (250 lb capacity), \$35 (Fig. 16 below); Rubber Bath Mat (Large) - 15¾” x 40”, \$20.



Fig. 16

As seen in the advert text for the accessory displayed in Figure 16, as a result of the surgery, the patient’s physical stability is called into question and he would therefore require special apparatus to guarantee steadiness. Having one’s bath by oneself is perhaps one of the easiest tasks anyone could undertake, but whereas the patient might not have factored extreme assistance into his post-op, he might be described as having taken certain [Yorùbá] affirmations at face value. In other words, whereas the culture claims that one’s circumstances are directly influenced by one’s thoughts – as in the proverb *Bí’nú se rí ni obì nyàn* [literally, *If one’s tummy is morally clean, the divining kola-nuts will prove it*] ‘One’s circumstances are determined by one’s fate’ - it would be preposterous to think that anyone needing unusual technological support for a task as simple as a bath could have wished it.

However, even from the need to acquire these products – and so many more, skipped here for constraints of space and relevance – the patient would know that there is a lot more to battle than the bulge. For instance, he would need a lot of funds to acquire most of these products but,

more importantly, he would need to be careful with his entire lifestyle in order not to create another condition to fight other than the flab.

Nevertheless, we should be wary in considering the patient's search for a firmer tummy as unnecessary merely on account of the accessories; there are numerous valid cases that require such surgery and there are loans (often between \$500 and \$25,000 – payable within 60 months, without any down payment) provided by some agencies for patients unable to meet the financial commitment of surgery.

But, given the analytical focus of this paper, there is a need to see how the patient's option for surgery adds up within the cultural thought of a people who see the tummy as a social requirement to highlight personal status. The conversational snatch below gives an illustration of such cultural disposition:

- | | | | | | |
|---------------|---|---------|--|-------|--|
| Jẹlìlì: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ó ga, o. 2. Lórií pé ká má yọ'kùn ni wàhàlà tún pọ tó yíí? 3. Kèyàn máa dígbá dirù s'órí s'òrùn bayi- 4. nítorí kíní? 5. Èyàn ò ní lè sun bó se wù ú, 6. kò ní lè jẹun bó se fẹ, 7. àti wẹ gan tún d'orin tuntun. 8. Nítorípé a ò fẹ yọ'kùn yí náà? | | | | |
| Àmọ́: | <p>→ 9. Oṣe mi, ẹnì tó gbé ọmọ odó mi, ìdúró ò sí ibẹṣe ò sí.</p> | | | | |
| <i>Gloss:</i> | <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top; padding-right: 20px;">Jẹlìlì:</td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How odd! 2. To go through all this in order to eliminate a paunch? 3. So much fuss – 4. for what? 5. The patient can't sleep in just any position, 6. nor eat as he likes, 7. and to have his bath is even a scary chore. 8. All because of an unwanted tummy? </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top; padding-right: 20px;">Àmọ́:</td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>→ 9. [Literally: <i>My friend, he who swallows a pestle, there's neither standing nor squatting.</i>] Such a person must have bitten off more than he could chew.</p> </td> </tr> </table> | Jẹlìlì: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How odd! 2. To go through all this in order to eliminate a paunch? 3. So much fuss – 4. for what? 5. The patient can't sleep in just any position, 6. nor eat as he likes, 7. and to have his bath is even a scary chore. 8. All because of an unwanted tummy? | Àmọ́: | <p>→ 9. [Literally: <i>My friend, he who swallows a pestle, there's neither standing nor squatting.</i>] Such a person must have bitten off more than he could chew.</p> |
| Jẹlìlì: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How odd! 2. To go through all this in order to eliminate a paunch? 3. So much fuss – 4. for what? 5. The patient can't sleep in just any position, 6. nor eat as he likes, 7. and to have his bath is even a scary chore. 8. All because of an unwanted tummy? | | | | |
| Àmọ́: | <p>→ 9. [Literally: <i>My friend, he who swallows a pestle, there's neither standing nor squatting.</i>] Such a person must have bitten off more than he could chew.</p> | | | | |

Àmọ́'s contribution at (9) sums up the usual Yorùbá thought concerning situations within the individual's control and comments on the 'unnecessary' desire to lure oneself into such situations. To Àmọ́, the subject decided to swallow the pestle and now cannot find rest or comfort. However, this kind of comment could run aground considering that one may indeed need to undergo surgery for different ailments (including abdominoplasty), and the Yorùbá philosophical acknowledgement of polarity in life and living would justify the patient's recovery encumbrances, as seen in Jinádù's witty comment at (7) below:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Làmídi: | 1. Gbogbo ihámọ̀ra t'áwon ará ibí yi nláti lò o dẹ ti npọ̀ jù? |
| | 2. Ọ̀tọ̀ ni èyí tí wọn maa so mọ̀ ikùn sùn; |
| | 3. ìyẹn ò jọ̀ èyí tí wọn maa lọ̀ mọ̀ ibàdí, |
| | 4. ká má sọ̀ ti èyí tí wọn maa dè mọ̀ igbá àyà. |
| | 5. Gbogbo ẹ̀ kò tilẹ̀ tó awọn òògun ti wọn maa lò. |
| | 6. L'ọ̀rọ̀ ikùn yọ̀ ikùn o yọ̀ yi náà? |
| Jinádù: → | 7. Àwé, bó se wun ni làá dí ẹ̀rù ikùn. |
| Làmídi: | 8. Ọ̀rọ̀ ni yẹn. |
-
- | | | |
|---------------|-----------|---|
| <i>Gloss:</i> | Làmídi: | 1. Don't you think these healing kits are rather too many? |
| | | 2. There are kits for the abdomen at night |
| | | 3. then, there are those for the waist |
| | | 4. not to mention the ones for the torso; |
| | | 5. never mind the drugs – |
| | | 6. all for the removal of tummy fat? |
| | Jinádù: → | 7. [Literally: <i>My friend, one loads one's tummy as one likes.</i>] My friend, we should allow for individual differences. |
| | Làmídi: | 8. You have a point there. |

However, notwithstanding the Yorùbá philosophy especially about members' perception of the patient's predicament, the final judgement of the situation rests with the one going through the pain of surgery, as deftly couched in the proverb *Onikùn ló m'ọ̀kà* [literally: *The owner of a tummy knows when he's being wicked.*] 'Who feels it knows it'. although the cultural and pragmatic ambit of the proverb transcends immediate bodily pain.

feeling of excessive well-being, such that the individual now desires anything to be put to the pleasant state: *T'èniyàn bá yó tán, á máa wá bẹ̀kùnbẹ̀kùn* (literally, *When one is well fed, one looks for a tummy perforator*).

Now, given the sociolinguistic dynamism that languages exhibit vis-à-vis the social realities they are used to encode – especially when spoken in areas rather distant to their roots – the Yorùbá language may have developed, over the years, in ways unattested by the description in this paper. Thus, it would boost the essence of this language if speakers and researchers of its dialects in other regions of the world (e.g. Benin, Ghana, Togo, Sierra Leone, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Trinidad, the Caribbean and several parts of the United States) could present their own findings concerning Yorùbá usage and deployment along the lines examined here. Such discussions would definitely provide a greater understanding of the language and also enhance the use of the details of the local element that has constituted the descriptive focus of the work. In fact, the analyses could also present to the Nigerian-Yorùbá speaker the ‘diasporic’ expansion and, consequently, variations that underscore Yorùbá dialect geography.

In all, the study has not been done to deprecate the subjects’ choice of a medical procedure. As with much other linguistic research, this is a simple investigation of how elements in a people’s socio-cultural and anthropological heritage can be used to account for a current global phenomenon.

Notes

1. Joel R. Studin, M.D., New York http://www.implantinfo.com/plastic_surgeon/studin
2. All the pictures here were retrieved on 20 June 2006 and are available at <http://www.mybodypart.com/tummy-tuck-garment.html>

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