

# A Critical Analysis of the Use of Symbolism and Imagination in Yoruba Idiomatic Expressions

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## Abstract

*This study examines symbolism and imagination in Yoruba idiomatic expressions through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. It explores how idioms reflect cultural cognition and meaning construction in the Yoruba worldview. Twenty Yoruba idioms were purposively selected from oral and written sources and categorised into traditional (agrarian, ritual, and spiritual-based) and contemporary (urban and socio-political) forms based on thematic and cultural domains. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to analyse each idiom through its metaphorical source domains, symbolic imagery, and conceptual mappings to abstract meanings. Findings show that Yoruba idioms draw on nature, animals, the human body, social practices, and spirituality to express moral, emotional, and philosophical ideas. Imagination enables the projection of familiar experiences onto abstract concepts, reinforcing shared cultural understanding. The study concludes that Yoruba idioms reflect collective cognition rather than decorative language and recommends integrating metaphorical analysis into Yoruba language pedagogy to enhance cultural and interpretive competence.*

**Keywords:** *Conceptual metaphor; cultural cognition; imagination; symbolism; Yoruba idioms*

## Introduction

Language does not only serve as a medium of communication; it also serves as a cognitive tool employed by individuals and communities to create mental images and actions in the world around them. According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003), human thought is fundamentally metaphorical, and language shows how we understand abstract experiences through more concrete objects. This theory offered critical insights into how figurative language such as metaphors and idiomatic expressions encodes culture-specific knowledge, social experience, and worldviews. In the context of the Yoruba language, in particular, idiomatic expressions serve as a pragmatic tool for investigating the interaction between symbolism, imagination, and conceptual metaphor in all kinds of discourse.

Yoruba idiomatic expressions can be categorised into old and new groups. They are stylistically effective in revealing the cognitive, mental, and social state of the speaker. These expressions serve as symbolic instruments to reveal the Yoruba people's worldviews, cultural heritage, and imaginative consciousness. The expressions often explore familiar and tangible source domains such as the human body, as in *onikun lomo'ka*, "the owner of the stomach knows the secret hidden within", which means self-knowledge. Reference to animals in *okete ti boru*, "the bush rat has shed the foreskin of its tail", points to the fact that an opportunity has eluded someone.

The use of natural elements in *ina njo ogiri o sa*, “the fire burns fiercely but the earthen wall flinches not”, indicates a show of bravery. The tangible domains of stomach, bush-rat and tail, fire and wall are mapped onto abstract target domains to express the idea of self-knowledge, opportunity, bravery, or morality. From the explanations above, idiomatic expressions function as linguistic representations of the metaphoric principle that works on “understanding one thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:5).

The development of Yoruba idioms has gone through dynamic socio-cultural periods and modifications over the years. Traditional idioms find their basis in farming, traditional knowledge, and oral traditions. Meanwhile, new idiomatic expressions reflect modern socio-political processes, the power of the media, and new technologies. For instance, a contemporary expression such as *awon omo isin ti ko sakolo yàhúyàùù*, “youths of nowadays are now in the dragnet of internet fraud”, signifies how idiomatic expressions adapt to new realities while maintaining their imaginative and symbolic core. The ability of idioms to perform the dual function highlighted above shows that idioms still maintain their relevance as tools for expressing both traditional cultural values and contemporary socio-political realities (Olateju, 2005; Osisanwo, 2003).

From the Conceptual Metaphor Theory perspective, symbolism in Yoruba idioms is not merely decorative but a systematic and cognitive means of presenting and situating human experience. Symbolic references to *etí ikún*, *bẹ̀bojé*, *Ègúnjẹ*, *Géranmáwọ*, *Ganu sí*, *Yàhúyàùù*, and *Gbóríwọlé* are not random references; they serve as metaphoric vehicles that give shape to abstract concepts such as stubbornness, betrayal, bribery, cheating, covetousness, fraud, and consent (Akanmu, 2014; Owomoyela, 2005). These images are filtered through the Yoruba speaker’s worldview and imagination, which enables the concretisation of complex meanings into short and colourful idiomatic forms.

While previous research has done extensive work on the aesthetic and communicative functions of Yoruba idioms (Ayeomoni, 2004; Salami, 2010; Olateju, 2005), fewer studies have examined Yoruba idioms from a cognitive-linguistic perspective that highlights their metaphorical and symbolic structures. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by exploring how the selected twenty idiomatic expressions, drawn from both old and contemporary idiom sources, encode symbolic meaning and imaginative projection through metaphorical mapping. The study applied the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as a framework to conduct a critical analysis of how Yoruba idioms reflect cultural models and project the experiences of Yoruba speakers.

## **Literature Review**

Cultural cognition refers to the role of culture in shaping perception and interpretation. Durkheim (1912) emphasises the influence of collective beliefs, while Geertz (1973) conceptualises culture as shared meaning systems. D’Andrade (1995) and Shore (1996) argue that mental models are culturally learned, and these help to explain variation in metaphorical expression across societies. Kövecses (2005) notes that while some metaphors may be widespread, their realisations are culturally specific. Studies by Adegbija (1994) and Kövecses (2005) confirm this in African language contexts.

New Yoruba idioms are, otherwise, the products of modern sociolinguistic creativity and response to modern technology. They often mark urban speech, popular culture, political

discourse, and media content. They also indicate the outcome of globalisation, technological advancement, and societal change (Akanmu, 2019; Akanmu, 2014, 2015). Unlike old idioms that draw from mythological or environmental metaphors, new idioms frequently draw from urban life, digital technology, media references, or political satire, for example, “*ọjọ tí a bá rí ọwọ agbára Facebook ni ọjọ tó ń şẹlẹ*” (the day we see the hand of Facebook is the day it’s happening). This idiom signifies the evolutionary dynamism of Yoruba communication and its sensitivity to present-day experience.

Yoruba idioms function as tools for encoding and decoding meaning in conversation across both traditional and contemporary cognitive content. Yoruba idioms call for shared cultural knowledge for proper interpretation in line with their indirect and figurative nature. In socio-cultural communication, they are often used to speak indirectly, soften tension, or conceal critique. These functions show the Yoruba communicative ethos that is entrenched in the values of tactfulness, nicety, and brainpower (Lawal, 1997; Olateju, 2005). In a political or religious communicative setting, idioms furnish speakers with the tools to maintain authority, disguise direct accusation, or appeal to communal consciousness (Adegoju, 2009). For example, in political rhetoric, idioms like “*ọmọ aráyé ò mò p’adie nlaagun, irun ara re niko je*” - the feathers do not allow people to realise that the hen is sweating - are deployed to comment on power plays in politics or the overwhelming responsibilities of leadership.

Yoruba idioms are stylistically characterised by the use of metaphor, personification, ellipsis, repetition, and hyperbole. Kövecses (2010) and Newmark (1988) point out that metaphors in Yoruba idioms are culturally embedded and thus resist direct translation without cultural loss. Such metaphors utilise the process of concrete-to-abstract mappings. This involves a situation where physical realities like fire, animals, rivers, or body parts are used to create emotional states, moral conditions, or social events. For instance, “*o bese re soro*” (He dialogues with his legs) is not about actually speaking to or with one’s legs but signifies a dangerous situation that warrants taking flight or running away from a danger zone. It evokes urgency and emotional alarm.

The use of personification is common in Yoruba idioms. For example, “*ẹnu o see*” (it is beyond what the mouth can do) is a usage that attributes agency to inanimate or non-human elements. Such usage exemplifies the symbolic imagination central to Yoruba discourse. Idioms are also often elliptical, thereby requiring contextual cues for interpretation and further reinforcing their dialogic and context-sensitive nature (Ojo, 2020).

Many scholars have conducted considerable studies on metaphor, proverb usage, and idiomatic creativity in Yoruba (Ayeomoni, 2004; Akanmu, 2019; Akanmu, 2014). Much of this work has analysed idiomatic usage in film, popular discourse, youth slang, or political speech, which cover the domains where new idioms thrive. Meanwhile, there is a notable gap in the systematic application of CMT to provide cognitive and cultural explanations for the symbolic and imaginative patterns embedded in Yoruba idiomatic expressions.

Moreover, this study addresses these gaps by providing a critical analysis of both traditional and modern Yoruba idioms. It applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory to uncover the metaphorical and symbolic structures of these expressions, as well as highlighting the role of idioms in cultural continuity, identity construction, and socio-political commentary. The study therefore examines idiomatic expression as a cognitive-linguistic phenomenon situated in discourse and performance.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003). The theory posits that metaphor is not merely a stylistic device, but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition through which people understand abstract concepts in terms of more concrete and familiar experiences. According to CMT, meaning is constructed through systematic mappings between a source domain, which consists of concrete and embodied experiences, and a target domain, which represents abstract concepts, emotions, values, or social realities. The relevance of CMT to this study lies in its ability to explain how Yoruba idiomatic expressions employ symbolism and imagination to communicate complex social, moral, emotional, and philosophical ideas. Yoruba idioms frequently draw on bodily experiences, animals, food, rituals, objects, and spatial orientations to structure abstract meanings. Through these metaphorical mappings, speakers conceptualise and communicate notions such as stubbornness, wisdom, betrayal, achievement, corruption, submission, and social identity. For instance, the traditional Yoruba idiom *Gúngì ọ̀rùn* ('stiff neck') illustrates the conceptual metaphor *mental inflexibility is physical rigidity*. In this expression, the source domain is the physical rigidity of the neck, while the target domain is stubbornness or unwillingness to change one's opinion. The bodily experience of a neck that cannot bend is metaphorically projected onto a person whose mind is resistant to advice or correction. The idiom therefore demonstrates how physical experience serves as a cognitive basis for understanding psychological behaviour. Similarly, the contemporary idiom *Ègúnjẹ* ('illicit eating' or bribery) exemplifies the conceptual metaphor *corruption is illegitimate consumption*. The source domain is the act of consuming food in an improper or forbidden manner, while the target domain is bribery and corruption. Within Yoruba cultural understanding, food is associated with sustenance, communal sharing, and legitimate reward. Consequently, consuming what one is not entitled to receive becomes a powerful metaphor for the unlawful acquisition of wealth or benefits. Through this mapping, corruption is conceptualised as a morally unacceptable form of consumption. These examples demonstrate that Yoruba idiomatic expressions are grounded in embodied experience and cultural knowledge. Whether derived from traditional beliefs, bodily experiences, ritual practices, or contemporary social realities, the idioms reveal how speakers employ symbolism and imagination to make sense of the world around them. Conceptual Metaphor Theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for explaining the cognitive, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of Yoruba idioms and for understanding how they reflect Yoruba worldview, values, and patterns of thought.

## **Method of Data Selection and Analysis**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical research design to investigate symbolism and imagination in Yoruba idiomatic expressions. The data consist of twenty Yoruba idioms purposively selected from both oral and written sources to ensure adequate representation of traditional and contemporary Yoruba usage. The idioms were obtained through the researcher's observation of everyday language use in Yoruba-speaking communities and from expressions commonly employed in radio broadcasts, social interactions, and contemporary public discourse. The data were collected primarily from one of the Yoruba-speaking communities in South-Western Nigeria, particularly in Oyo state, where Yoruba remains a dominant medium of communication in both formal and informal domains. The study employed purposive sampling because its objective was not to achieve statistical representation but to select idioms

that clearly demonstrate symbolism, imagination, and conceptual metaphor within Yoruba discourse. An initial pool of idiomatic expressions was compiled from the identified social discourse setting, from which twenty idioms were selected for detailed analysis. The selected idioms were required to be widely recognised among Yoruba speakers, contain clear metaphorical or symbolic elements, demonstrate a relationship between a concrete source domain and an abstract target domain, reflect Yoruba cultural beliefs, values, experiences, or social practices, and provide sufficient linguistic and cultural content for analysis within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. To ensure balanced representation, the idioms were classified into two categories: traditional and contemporary. The traditional idioms comprise expressions rooted in indigenous Yoruba culture, ritual practices, spirituality, folklore, animal symbolism, traditional occupations, and agrarian experiences that have long been transmitted through oral tradition. The contemporary idioms consist of expressions that have emerged from modern social realities, such as urbanisation, political corruption, media influence, technological developments, fraud, drug culture, and changing socio-economic conditions. Ten idioms were selected from each category to facilitate a comparative examination of continuity and change in Yoruba metaphorical expression. The analysis was guided by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003). Each idiom was presented in standard Yoruba orthography, followed by its literal translation and idiomatic interpretation in English. The analytical procedure involved identifying the source domain, that is, the concrete image or experience from which meaning is derived; the target domain, which represents the abstract concept being expressed; and the conceptual metaphor that links both domains. Through metaphorical mapping, elements of the source domain were projected onto the target domain to explain how meaning is constructed and interpreted. The analysis also considered the cultural context of each idiom, emphasising the role of Yoruba beliefs, environmental experiences, social values, and collective imagination in shaping metaphorical understanding. This procedure enabled the study to examine the interaction between symbolism, imagination, and cognition in Yoruba idiomatic expressions while demonstrating how metaphor functions as a cultural and communicative resource within Yoruba society.

### Data Analysis

The analysis utilised Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003), as a framework for investigating the interaction between symbolism, imagination, and conceptual metaphor in the idiomatic expressions presented and analysed in the table below.

**Table 1: Metaphorical Mapping and Analysis of Old Yoruba Idioms**

Yoruba Idiom	Literal Meaning	Idiomatic Meaning	Source Domain	Target Domain	Conceptual Metaphor
Fárí gá	To shave the head cleanly	Firm refusal; stubbornness	Head shaving as public exposure ritual act	Psychological firmness; and resistance	Exposure of the head is assertive resistance

Figbá mumi	ilákò To drink water using a snail shell	Wickedness; selfishness; narrow-mindedness	Snail shell as a small, restricted container for drinking	Self-centredness; moral deficiency	Narrow containers represent selfishness and moral restriction
Kọ etí sẹ̀bọ	To refuse sacrifice or counsel	Rejecting wise wisdom tradition	Ritual sacrifice or and divine obedience	Rejection of guidance cultural norms	Refusal of sacrifice is rejection of wisdom
Kọ etí ikún	To adopt the squirrel's ear	Ignoring warnings advice	Squirrel (culturally viewed as deaf or oblivious)	Wilful ignorance; obstinacy	Animal deafness is human obstinacy
Dáwọ̀ tẹ̀lẹ̀	To stoop with arms supporting the body	To express sensitive unpleasant matters indirectly	Bodily posture associated with defecation	Euphemistic communication taboo actions	Bodily gesture is a euphemism for taboo experience
Gbèkuru jẹ lówó ẹ̀bọ̀ra	To eat bean pudding with spirits	bean with Death	Imagined interaction with spirits in the afterlife	Transition into the ancestral spiritual realm	Communion with spirits is death
Gúngì ọ̀rùn	A stiff neck	Stubbornness	Physical rigidity of the neck	Cognitive rigidity; pride	Physical rigidity is mental inflexibility
Gbégbá oróókè	Carrying a calabash up a hill	Exceptional achievement	A fragile object carried across difficult terrain	Success against odds; prestige	Risky physical balance is extraordinary achievement
Gbèyinbẹ̀ojé	To return and spoil a sacrifice	Betrayal; sabotage	Ritual interference with a sacred offering	Disloyalty; moral failure	Sacred interruption is betrayal
Bè̀sùbẹ̀gbà	Using all means to achieve an end	Desperation; persistence	Extreme effort and boundary-breaking action	Relentless pursuit of goals	Extreme action is desperate pursuit
Fikan dikan	Using one thing to cover another	Poverty; perpetual struggle	Covering a shortage with another inadequate resource	Economic instability; survival struggle	Inadequate resources represent perpetual struggle

### **Cultural and Metaphorical Observations of Old Idioms**

The idioms examined reveal a structured relationship between Yoruba cultural experience and conceptual thought. Meaning is not encoded solely at the lexical level but emerges through shared cultural knowledge and embodied experience. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor, which explains that abstract reasoning is grounded in physical and social experience.

In Yoruba idiomatic usage, listeners are expected to draw upon culturally familiar situations to interpret meaning. This supports the ethnographic observations of William Bascom (1969), who notes that Yoruba oral traditions rely heavily on indirect speech, symbolism, and contextual inference. Similarly, Barber (1991) demonstrates that Yoruba verbal art often encodes social knowledge through metaphor rather than direct statement, requiring cultural competence for effective interpretation.

### **Cultural Symbolism in Daily Human Experience**

Everyday bodily and social activities such as head shaving (*Fáí gá*), eating (*Gbèkuru je lówó ẹbọra*) and defecation (*Dáwó telẹ*) are metaphorically extended to represent abstract concepts such as courage, mortality, and caution. The mapping of these activities onto abstract meanings reflects what Kövecses (2010) describes as the universality of embodiment in metaphorical cognition.

From an ethnographic perspective, Yoruba culture traditionally encodes moral and existential knowledge through ordinary life experiences. **Olatunji (1984) and Owomoyela (2005)** observe that Yoruba expressive culture frequently draws upon domestic and bodily experiences to construct moral commentary. Consequently, concepts such as fearlessness, death, and tactfulness are grounded in lived experience and social observation rather than existing as purely abstract philosophical categories.

#### **5.1.3 Symbols of Ritual and Spirituality as Metaphorical Sources**

Idioms derived from ritual and spirituality demonstrate the deep integration of religion into Yoruba epistemology. Expressions such as *Kọ etí ọgbọn-in sẹbọ* (rejection of wise counsel by refusal to sacrifice), *Gbèyìnbebojé* (societal betrayal symbolised by spoiling sacrifice) and *Gbèkuru je lówó ẹbọra* (death metaphorised by eating bean pudding-sacrificial food- with spirits) reflect a worldview in which the physical and metaphysical realms are closely interconnected.

This corresponds with Geertz's (1973) notion of religion as a system of symbols that shapes reality for its adherents. In Yoruba belief systems, as documented by Idowu (1962) and Abimbola (1976), rituals such as ẹbọ (sacrifice) are not merely religious acts but also moral and social negotiations with spiritual forces.

Idioms referencing sacrifice and spiritual betrayal therefore extend beyond religious practice into ethical reasoning, where obedience, loyalty, and communal harmony are conceptualised as metaphors of proper spiritual alignment.

### **Metaphors of the Body and Animal Imagery**

Body organs and animal attributes are often used to describe human behavior in *Gúngì ọrùn* (stiff necked) which means stubbornness and pride and *Kọ etí ikún* (adopt squirrel's ear) translates to obstinacy and lack of intuition.

This reflects what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identify as embodiment, whereby human cognition employs physical experience to understand mental states. Kövecses (2010) further notes that body-based metaphors are dominant across languages because of their experiential immediacy.

Ethnographic studies by Finnegan (1970) and Barber (1991) show that African oral traditions frequently employ animal imagery to convey moral evaluation. In Yoruba folklore, animals function not merely as descriptive references but as moral exemplars. This pattern is also documented by Bascom (1969), whose analysis of Yoruba folktales demonstrates that animal characters often serve as symbolic carriers of human virtues and shortcomings.

### **Accomplishment and Social Status**

Idioms expressing achievement often rely on spatial and material imagery, such as carrying fragile objects across elevated terrain. *Gbégbá oróókè* *literarily* means carrying a calabash to the hill-top. Meanwhile, its idiomatic portrayal maps the fragility of the calabash and the dangers in climbing steep mountains onto the difficulty encountered in achieving success.

This aligns with Turner's (1967) analysis of symbolic action, in which physical movement and spatial orientation encode social hierarchy and aspiration. Yoruba culture, as reflected in traditional praise poetry (*oríkì*), frequently celebrates achievement through imagery of elevation, endurance, and danger, thereby reinforcing the cultural association between effort and honour.

Success is therefore conceptualised not as an abstract reward but as an embodied struggle within a socially meaningful landscape.

### **Battle for Survival**

Idioms expressing survival and economic struggle reflect a pragmatic awareness of scarcity and adaptive resilience. *Fikan dikan* is an idiom that means using one thing to make up for another. This idiom pictures the pathetic endeavor for survival and the inability to make ends meet.

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, this reflects constraint-based metaphor formation, whereby lived hardship shapes conceptual understandings of survival strategies. Ethnographically, Yoruba proverbs and sayings often encode social realism concerning scarcity, a feature also noted by Abrahams (1968) in African proverbial discourse as "wisdom compressed through lived experience".

Such idioms function as social commentary on economic pressures while reinforcing values of endurance, resilience, and adaptability.

### **Values of Humility, Order, and Obedience**

Idioms associated with desperation or improper conduct symbolically criticise excess, impatience, and lack of restraint. *Bèsùbègbà* is used idiomatically to mean being desperate, and *Figbá ilákò mumi* points to the action of drinking water by using snail shell. The use intones Yoruba cultural displeasure for desperation, selfishness and arrogance.

Mary Douglas (1966) provides a foundational anthropological explanation for this pattern, arguing that food symbolism often encodes cultural boundaries relating to purity, morality, and social order. In Yoruba thought, as supported by Abimbola (1976) and Ogunba (1978), ethical conduct is frequently conveyed through indirect symbolic warnings rather than explicit instruction.

These idioms therefore function as mechanisms of social regulation, reinforcing humility, communal responsibility, self-discipline, and restraint.

## Metaphorical Mapping and Analysis of New Yoruba Idioms

Yoruba Idiom	Literal Meaning (Source Domain)	Idiomatic Meaning (Target Domain)	Source Domain	Target Domain	Conceptual Metaphor
Ègúnjẹ	Pounded food meant to be eaten	Bribery; corruption	Food prepared for consumption	Illicit moral corruption	Food consumption becomes moral corruption when it is illegitimate
Géranmáwọ	To cut meat with the skin	Cheating; deception	Improperly cutting meat while concealing parts	Fraudulent behaviour; dishonesty	Concealed cutting is deceptive action
Ganu sí i	To open the mouth and salivate	Covetousness; greed	Physiological reaction to desirable food	Excessive desire; greed	Physical desire is greed
Yáhúyàúù	Fraudulent identity or behaviour	Impostor; scammer	Performance of a false identity	Deception; counterfeit personality	False identity is social deception
Gbóríwọlẹ	To enter with the head first	Acceptance; participation	Physical posture	Consent; alignment; submission	Physical entry is social acceptance
Jẹun sókè	To eat upward	Corruption-based enrichment	Consumption associated with upward movement	Illicit upward mobility	Eating upward is corrupt social advancement
Oṣòdi òkè	Oshodi upper side	Sexually attractive or busty woman	Spatial reference to an urban landmark	Exaggerated sexual appeal	Spatial elevation is sexual exaggeration
Gbàjú ẹ	To slap the face	Fraud; dispossession	Physical aggression	Exploitation; merciless deceit	Physical violence is economic exploitation
Já wọn sí i	To break into or expose secrets	Betrayal; leaking information	Breach of secrecy or forced exposure	Disloyalty; indiscretion	Breaking secrecy is social betrayal
Àtikè ọlà	Wealth powder	Cocaine	Cosmetic wealth-associated powder	Drug use; addiction; social decay	Substance use is false wealth and social destruction

## Cultural and Metaphorical Observations of New Idioms

The new Yoruba idioms reflect a shift in metaphorical grounding from predominantly ritual and agrarian imagery to urban, political, and socio-economic experiences. Nevertheless, they maintain continuity with traditional Yoruba cognitive patterns in which abstract meanings are constructed through embodied and culturally familiar domains.

This pattern aligns with Kövecses (2010), who argues that metaphorical systems evolve alongside socio-cultural change while retaining their underlying embodied structures. In Yoruba contexts, as Barber (1991) observes, verbal creativity adapts to emerging realities

without abandoning inherited interpretive frameworks. Modern idioms therefore represent cultural continuity expressed through contemporary experiential domains such as urban life, crime economies, and changing social behaviour.

### **Moral Decay and Corruption as Food Metaphors**

Idioms such as Ègúnjẹ (bribery in form of forbidden food substance), Jẹun sókè (eating upward by cutting corners or through undue benefits) and Gèranmáwọ (cutting meat with the skin by cheating) exemplify the Yoruba tradition of using food and consumption imagination to conceptualise morality and immorality. When recontextualised in modern idioms, distorted patterns of consumption become critiques of corruption and exploitation.

This aligns closely with Douglas (1966), who argues that food symbolism encodes social order and moral boundaries. In Yoruba usage, as observed by Abimbola (1976), food-related metaphors frequently distinguish between legitimate communal sharing and illegitimate accumulation.

The extension of food metaphors to bribery, fraud, and economic manipulation reflects contemporary Nigerian socio-political realities. Scholars such as Smith (2007), in his work on political corruption in Nigeria, note that everyday language often expresses widespread distrust of governance. These idioms therefore function as culturally grounded forms of moral critique, transforming economic misconduct into vivid images of improper consumption.

### **Urbanisation and the Language of Social Identity**

*Oṣhòdì òkè* is a new idiom used in referring to a busty chest which is metaphorised as the visible or top side of Oshodi. The use of a well-known Lagos commercial hub as a metaphorical reference point illustrates how urban experiences shape contemporary Yoruba cognition.

Barber (1991) observes that Yoruba expressive culture continually absorbs new social environments, particularly urban Lagos, into its figurative repertoire. Oshodi, as a densely populated and socially complex space, becomes a cognitive model for disorder, visibility, and exaggerated display.

From a linguistic perspective, this reflects what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe as spatial metaphor extension, whereby physical locations are mapped onto social and bodily experiences. Ethnographically, Lagos has been widely documented (e.g., Simone, 2004) as a city where social identity is highly performative and visible. The metaphor therefore reflects how contemporary Yoruba speakers conceptualise sexuality and attention through urban spectacle and public visibility.

### **Information Sharing and Submission**

Idioms associated with communication and submission reflect enduring Yoruba values of social cohesion, hierarchy, and collective responsibility. *Já wọn sí i* (to inform, educate or enlighten) and *Gbóríwọlé* (to enter with the head in full submission) are the idioms which foreground values of Sharing information and loyalty.

This aligns with studies of Yoruba oral tradition by Finnegan (1970), which highlight the didactic role of oral discourse in African societies. Similarly, Bascom (1969) notes that Yoruba social communication is deeply embedded in communal ethics, where the circulation of knowledge strengthens social order.

The metaphor of “entering with the head” reflects culturally embedded notions of respect for hierarchy and deliberate alignment with authority. This corresponds to Geertz’s (1973) interpretation of cultural systems as frameworks that regulate acceptable behaviour through symbolic reinforcement.

### **Fraud and False Identities**

Idioms relating to deception and fraud demonstrate Yoruba society’s heightened awareness of contemporary economic dishonesty and identity manipulation. *Yàhúyàúú* (fraudulent personality) and *Gbàjú è* (swindling by slapping the face) are new idioms that show Yoruba society’s consciousness of shoddy activity, fraud and merciless exploitation of the hapless individuals by the people of the underworld.

Abimbola (1976) and Ogunba (1978) both emphasise that Yoruba verbal art consistently condemns duplicity and moral corruption through indirect expression. In contemporary usage, these idioms reflect what Smith (2007) identifies as the increasing normalisation of fraud discourse in Nigerian urban life, where language evolves to identify and critique emerging social realities.

From a cognitive perspective, deception is conceptualised through violent or invasive imagery, reinforcing Douglas’s (1966) argument that symbolic transgression often manifests as bodily violation or social disorder. Fraud thus becomes not merely economic wrongdoing but also a form of moral disfigurement and social harm.

### **Drug Wealth and Social Disorder**

*Àtikè òlà* (cocaine otherwise referred to as “powder of wealth”) is a new Yoruba idiom that indicate modern-day realities of drug culture, addiction and overnight means of wealth in Nigeria. The reinterpretation of “powder” imagery as a symbol of both wealth and destruction demonstrates semantic inversion, whereby a neutral or cosmetic substance becomes a marker of moral decline.

This aligns with Kövecses (2010), who notes that metaphor adapts to changing socio-cultural pressures, particularly in contexts shaped by globalisation and economic instability. Ethnographic studies of Nigerian urban youth culture (e.g., Apter, 1999) similarly document how illicit economies influence new forms of symbolic expression and identity construction.

The idiom functions as a moral warning, portraying drug-related wealth as simultaneously attractive and destructive. This is consistent with Turner’s (1967) theory of symbolic ambivalence, whereby powerful symbols evoke both attraction and moral condemnation.

A noteworthy finding of this study is the contrast between older and newer Yoruba idioms. Older idioms largely draw from agrarian life, ritual practices, and spirituality to reflect a worldview centred on tradition and communal morality. In contrast, newer idioms reflect urban life, economic pressures, and contemporary social challenges such as corruption, fraud, sexuality, and drug abuse.

This observation supports the sociolinguistic arguments of Fairclough (1995) and Agha (2007), who maintain that language evolves alongside social change. Although the source domains have changed, the underlying cognitive process of metaphorical mapping remains stable. This confirms Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) assertion that conceptual metaphor systems are flexible yet structured.

Overall, the findings show that Yoruba idioms function as cultural mirrors that both preserve traditional values and respond to contemporary realities. Through metaphor, symbolism, and imagination, these idioms encode collective memory, moral judgement, and social experience. This supports Adegbija's (1994) view that African languages are deeply connected to their socio-cultural environments and serve as repositories of communal ideology.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the use of symbolism and imagination in Yoruba idiomatic expressions by highlighting their complex role in shaping meaning and reflecting cultural values. Employing the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the analysis established that Yoruba idioms are not arbitrary linguistic constructs but structured expressions grounded in metaphorical mappings that connect abstract concepts to concrete, culturally familiar domains.

The findings reveal that these idioms draw extensively from nature, human anatomy, animal life, socio-cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs, employing vivid imagery to communicate complex emotions and philosophical ideas in an accessible form. Furthermore, the study notes the centrality of imagination in both the construction and interpretation of Yoruba idioms. This imaginative process enables speakers to conceptualise abstract experiences such as morality, destiny, and social relationships through corresponding concrete phenomena.

In this manner, idiomatic expressions function as cognitive tools that preserve communal wisdom, reinforce shared worldviews, and enhance the dynamism of everyday communication. The study recommends the integration of metaphorical and symbolic analysis into Yoruba language teaching and cultural studies. Such integration would expand learners' cognitive and cultural competence, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the important interaction between language, thought, and culture.

Ultimately, Yoruba idioms go beyond their ornamental function; they are enduring repositories of collective imagination and cognitive representations that offer valuable insights into Yoruba philosophy, identity, and modes of meaning-making.

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