

Conceptualising love in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts

Tayo Adebayo

Osun State University, Osogbo, NIGERIA

Article information

Received: 22 Jun 2026
Revised: 28 Jul 2026
Accepted: 30 Jul 2026
Published: 02 Aug 2026

Abstract - The examination takes a novel approach to how the Yorùbá culture conceptualises love. The rationale for the study is that, while many studies examine proverbs related to love and marriage, none have focused solely on proverbs about love. The scarcity of such studies has left a vital gap in research exploring how love is contextualised in both romantic and non-romantic contexts. The present study, therefore, investigates how the Yoruba tribe contextualises love within its socio-cultural milieu. Guided by Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the study collected data through purposive sampling, gathering Yoruba love proverbs from two Yoruba language tutors. The study's findings demonstrate that Yorùbá love proverbs and expressions comment on love in both romantic and non-romantic contexts. Love in a romantic context depicts love as a feeling and commitment, while love in a non-romantic context presents love as a foundational factor in human relationships and love as a means of negotiating one's needs at the expense of others. This research contributes to African cultural studies by demonstrating how foundational cultural concepts like love are encoded, transmitted, and negotiated through oral traditions, offering necessary insight into Yorùbá worldview and social relationality.

Keywords: love, proverbs, Yorùbá, romantic, non-romantic, Yorùbá culture, cultural studies

1. Introduction

In this paper, we contend that love, a universal phenomenon, has received extensive attention from academics both globally and locally. However, there is a scarcity of studies exploring the depiction of love in proverbs for romantic and non-romantic relationships. This claim is supported by the sparse academic literature on love proverbs in both global and Nigerian contexts. The handful of studies on love have explored socio-cultural aspects of human love such as marriage (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Mieder, 2004/2012, Adeyinka, 2008; Bashir, 2012; Bolaji, 2017; Ndibe, 2017). The present study, therefore, delves into the conceptualisation of love in the Yorùbá context with the aim of unpacking how the group views love in relation to romantic and non-romantic relationships. moreover, the current study is located within the broader trend of African cultural studies, which analyses ways in which cultural productions such as oral literature, language practices, and social discourses articulate and reflect collectives' identities, values, and worldviews. Proverbs stand out as condensed forms of cultural wisdom and thus as privileged sites for examining how emotions and social relations are culturally constructed within particular African societies. Grounding its focus on Yoruba love proverbs, this paper contributes to enhancing insight into the linguistic and cultural mediation of emotional concepts in African contexts.

The Yoruba culture has a strong oral tradition, which presents itself as an important channel for the transmission of culture, moral education, as well as social regulation" (Barber, 1991; Olajubu, 2003). In this oral tradition, proverbs, or *òwé*, have a significant role in the culture as distilled cultural texts that convey communal wisdom, experience, and worldview. Also,



Yoruba proverb *Òwè l'ẹ̀sin ọ̀rọ̀*, which translates as "proverbs are the vehicles whereby words are conveyed," reflects their central position in communication. In this study, love proverbs would be investigated in this social milieu in terms of their positioning in the creation of societal norms in the practice of emotional ideology, both in individual love contexts and in the communal love experience. Based on the definition by Gyekye in 1997 of love in the African philosophical context as communal commitment, this study would examine Yoruba proverbs in their endeavour to position love both in the individual heart and in the communal context.

To foreground the subject of investigation further, the study references Gyekye (1997) definition of love above to demonstrate that love in the African context is a moral act and duty-based, rather than an emotional phenomenon, expressed through actions that bolster mutual support and harmony. Gyekye's view is particularly relevant to the current study because it examines the conceptualisation of love in both romantic and non-romantic contexts in Yoruba society. It illustrates how the Yorùbá people view love in human interactions beyond romantic context, providing vital insight into how love impacts friendship and communal living. This view contrasts with Rubin's (1970) definition of love, which is based in social psychology and holds that "love is an attitude held by one person toward another." It also departs from Hatfield & Walster's (1978) definition of passion, which notes that "passionate love is a state of intense longing for union with another." The path of the current study is essential because it provides a novel examination into how love is expressed and understood in the Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts across generations, demonstrating its role in the romantic and everyday life of the people.

To relate love to proverbs, it is essential to define what a proverb is. Thus, Taylor (1994) asserts that "a proverb is a saying of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation." The aforementioned definition emphasises tradition, communal transmission, and metaphor. Defining proverbs in local context, Finnegan (1970), drawing from Yorùbá, Hausa, Igbo, and other Nigerian oral traditions, defines them as "succinct and pithy traditional sayings which express familiar truths and practical wisdom and are used to comment on social situations." The definition focuses on contextual use and social function. Additionally, Nwachukwu (1998), albeit an Igbo-centric definition, defines it as "a short, popular and wise saying which embodies the experiences, values and norms of the community and is employed to guide conduct."

To achieve the study's aim, the present study adopts a qualitative sampling method whereby data were purposively collected from Yorùbá tutors in secondary schools and tertiary institutions with their meanings. The elicited data were subjected to pragmatic analysis, drawing on the elements of Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The theories enable the current study to examine how love is expressed, understood, negotiated, and socially regulated in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts through proverbs, poems, and daily expressions. Using these theories, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives: i. to discover how Yorùbá conceptualises love in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts through proverbs and expressions for both romantic and non-romantic contexts. ii. to identify how Yorùbá love proverbs shape societal norms in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts.

Concerning the literature review relevant to the present enquiry in both local and global contexts, the studies reviewed here centre on metaphor studies, comparative paremiology, discourse/pragmatic analyses, the pragmatics of proverbs across languages, ethno-pragmatics, literary studies, and marriage proverb studies. By reviewing the studies, the current study foregrounds its scope, demonstrating the imperative need to study how the Yorùbá socio-cultural context conceptualises love and displays a crucial worldview of the Yorubá people on love. In the global literature, Norrick (1985) examines the pragmatics of proverbs across languages, focusing on their use in actual discourse and covering marriage and love proverbs. The findings showcase that love and marriage proverbs mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) through

warnings. It also displays how the pragmatic force of proverbs explains why cultures employ proverbs in sensitive romantic matters. Honeck (1997), which explores the cognitive-semantic theory of proverbs, develops a cognitive-semantic model (the “Proverb Schema Theory”) which explains how people comprehend proverbs, including those that centre on love. The cross-cultural data collected and analysed for the study on English and European love/marriage proverbs also examines their metaphorical structures. The major findings of the study unpack how love proverbs depend on ingrained metaphorical source domains, as captured in expressions such as ‘love is fire,’ ‘madness,’ and ‘sickness.’ It also notes that love proverbs are interpreted depending on relatively universal cognitive schemas. Honeck (1997) further adds that love proverbs are ambivalent, demonstrating that they both celebrate and warn.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003), in conceptual metaphor theory, though an approach which does not focus solely on proverbs, provides the foundational cross-linguistic model employed by different proverbs scholars to classify love metaphors prevalent in proverbs globally. The analysis reveals that love metaphors utilise universal experiential domains, including *love is fire* and *love is a journey*. Additionally, it shows that the distinction in love proverbs between cultures lies in their emphasis rather than in structure. Through a comparative lens on global proverbs, Mieder (2004; 2012) investigates proverb collections from Africa, Europe, Asia, and North America, including proverbs on love, courtship, and marriage. The studies examine culture-specific and universal metaphor patterns. The studies find that love and marriage proverbs worldwide are morally ambivalent, balancing celebration and caution. It also covers prevailing metaphor domains such as madness, fire, sweetness/bitterness, and sickness.

In studies in the Nigerian context, they have explored proverbs on love and marriage in Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. In the Yorùbá context, Adeyinka (2008) explores Yorùbá love and marriage proverbs. The study deals specifically with courtship, spousal relations, and marriage. The findings of the study demonstrate that Yorùbá love and marriage proverbs emphasise the sanctity of marriage and the responsibilities to the spouse and in-laws. It also dwells on proverbs that teach against marital conflict and promiscuity. Bolaji (2017) conducts a sociocultural and thematic analysis of selected Yoruba proverbs across categories such as marital roles and family. The study’s findings demonstrate that proverbs reflect societal expectations, including household roles which preserve and critique social norms. Bolaji (2017), the educational use of proverbs.

In the Igbo context, Ndibe (2017) treats Igbo proverbs on conflict and marriage and examines those deployed in conflict resolution, including relationship negotiations and marital disagreements. The study notes that marriage and love proverbs promote communal responsibility and harmony. According to the study, Proverbs also warns against actions that endanger marriage. For Okeke (2022), the study examines Igbo proverbs focusing on romantic relationships, communal living, and mental health. It shows that proverbs encode norms for interpersonal relationships, including romantic and household relationships. Oiroegbu (2023), on the other hand, traces how Igbo proverbs, including proverbs on love, are used in different contexts and media in modern times. It shows that there is continuity in the use of proverbs in the Igbo context, whereby love proverbs continue to caution, instruct, and mediate. It also emphasises the adaptability of proverb meanings in modern contexts.

Furthermore, this section reviews studies on love and marriage proverbs in the Hausa context. Bashir (2012), in Hausa marriage and love proverbs, conducts a sociolinguistic analysis of Hausa proverbs that centre on marriage, romantic behaviour, and co-wife relations. He asserts that Hausa love and marriage proverbs warn about jealousy, mediate rivalry, and regulate polygamous relationships. The study further shows that proverbs reflect moral expectations in Hausa family life, while women use them for indirect criticism. Zajac (2025) examines the cultural content, meanings, and functions of Hausa proverbs about marriage and related love concepts using an ethnolinguistic framework and displays the cultural model of marriage, including roles, polygamy, kin obligations, and rivalry among co-wives. It also includes strategies for conflict avoidance, socialisation into marital roles, and normative advice. Abdulkarim and Abdullahi

(2015) conducts a thematic analysis of Hausa proverbs, focusing on love, marriage, and social morality. It uncovers that proverbs significantly impact the transmission of cultural morals and shape views on romantic relationships and marriage.

The studies collectively demonstrate that the concepts of love, interpersonal relationships, and Yorùbá cultural practices continue to evolve within both traditional and modern contexts. The analysis of Fagunwa's novels reveals that romantic relationships in Yorùbá literature are not merely portrayed as emotional attachments, but also as instruments of moral education and character formation. Love is therefore understood within a framework strongly shaped by cultural ethics and communal values (Bamidele, 2021).

Comparative research on romantic love in literary texts indicates a gradual shift from collective and normative understandings of love toward more individualistic and emotional expressions. Nevertheless, local cultural values continue to influence how loyalty, sacrifice, and commitment are represented in romantic relationships (Oyewale & Tiamiyu, 2025).

The study on Beautiful Nubia's music offers a critical perspective on the decolonisation of traditional Yorùbá marriage practices. Music functions as a medium for preserving indigenous cultural values while simultaneously adapting them to modern realities. This study highlights that tradition is dynamic and can be renegotiated through artistic and popular cultural expressions (Sofola & Adedeji, 2025).

From a cultural-linguistic perspective, love is conceptualised through metaphors, metonymies, and cultural scripts that vary across societies. The study on Montenegrin culture demonstrates that while love possesses universal dimensions, its conceptual expression is deeply influenced by social and cultural contexts. This perspective is relevant to understanding how the Yorùbá people also construct meanings of love through collectivist values and social relations (Perović & Vuković-Stamatović, 2021).

Research on intercultural romantic relationships shows that couples often face challenges related to communication, identity, and cultural negotiation. At the same time, such relationships create opportunities for intercultural learning and the development of empathy between individuals. The study underlines that love cannot be separated from the broader social and cultural structures surrounding it (Mayer, 2023).

Another study emphasises that love, from transcultural perspectives, changes throughout different stages of life. Romantic relationships are shaped by age, culture, and social experiences that influence how affection, intimacy, and commitment are understood (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2023).

The scoping review on intercultural romantic relationships reveals that existing studies are still largely dominated by psychological and interpersonal communication approaches. The review critically points out the limited attention given to literary, linguistic, and local cultural dimensions in understanding romantic relationships (Yurtaeva & Charura, 2024). The ethnographic study of weddings in Ibadan demonstrates that Yorùbá marriage is not simply the union of two individuals, but also the integration of extended families and communal identities. Rituals, symbols, and customary practices reflect the continuing importance of collectivism in contemporary Yorùbá society (Àkànle et al., 2019).

The linguistic study on the concept of "love" in Russian and Arabic contexts shows that meanings of love are shaped by linguistic systems and cultural experiences. The research reinforces the argument that language plays a significant role in constructing emotional perceptions and interpersonal relationships (Kizi, 2024).

The study on humour and joking relationships among the Yorùbá illustrates that humor functions as a social mechanism for maintaining interpersonal harmony. Joking practices are used to reduce tensions, manage conflicts, and strengthen social solidarity within the community (Gbádégesin, 2024).

Research on Adebayo Faleti's poetry demonstrates that Yorùbá literary works contain strong moral values, cultural symbolism, and linguistic aesthetics. The translation process also

reveals the difficulties of preserving local cultural nuances when literary texts are transferred into another language (Oyewale, 2022). The analysis of interpersonal ethics in Ọbasá's poetry highlights that Yorùbá society places respect, solidarity, and social responsibility at the center of human relationships. The study confirms the close relationship between literature and the construction of social ethics (Oyewale, 2021).

The study on Yorùbá culture and the utilisation of modern dental services demonstrates that local cultural values influence how communities perceive healthcare and medical treatment. Cultural traditions may function both as supporting and limiting factors in the acceptance of modern healthcare services (Foláyan et al., 2025).

Research on changing fatherhood and gender relations in Yorùbá society indicates ongoing negotiations of power and sexuality within modern families. The study critically challenges traditional patriarchal assumptions and shows that gender identities continue to transform within changing social realities (Daniels, 2022; Ofordi & Salisu, 2024; Adams, 2024).

The Yorùbá philosophical conception of a meaningful life emphasises social relationships, moral responsibility, and contributions to the community. A meaningful life is not understood in purely individualistic terms, but through active participation in society and positive engagement with others (Balogun, 2020).

At this juncture, the studies reviewed in this section in both global and Nigerian contexts have apparently established that while there are diverse studies on proverbs, with most of them exploring love in romantic and non-romantic contexts, romantic relationships, and marriage among other themes, there is currently a pivotal gap in academic enquiries that focus on how different Nigerian societies conceptualise love in proverbs. This is the gap the current study aims to fill, providing a unique approach to how the Yorùbá tribe conceptualises love through proverbs and expressions. The examination enables the study to gain insight into how the tribe views and understand love.

The current study's theoretical guide is anchored in Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Speech acts theory, an approach that explains that language is not only used to convey information but to perform activities with words. The activities performed with language include promising, advising, warning, and congratulating (Austin, 1962). The framework's definition is rooted in understanding how expressions perform actions beyond their literal meanings. In the second theoretical guide, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory holds that speakers in discourse adopt strategies to manage face by protecting their own face alongside the faces of other participants. The idea is an expansion of Goffman's (1967) concept of face, which he defines as someone's self-image and desire to be respected. The combination of both approaches enables the current study to examine how love is expressed, understood, negotiated, and socially regulated in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts using proverbs, poems, and daily expressions.

In speech act theory, the present investigation adopts Searle (1969), an approach that builds on Austin's (1962) canonical views, offering a crucial new understanding of how language performs actions. Searle extended Austin's view, categorising speech acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These categorisations are pivotal for classifying Yorùbá love proverbs and expressions according to their functions in discourse. Using speech acts, the study will conduct a systematic analysis of the illocutionary forces of proverbs and Yorùbá expressions to shape romantic conduct while conveying socio-cultural norms. Furthermore, politeness theory contributes to the study's aim by accounting for the social strategies utilised in delivering the proverbs and expressions. The theory contends that speakers are motivated to save face by protecting their and the listener's social image. Proverbs in the Yoruba socio-cultural context serve as indirect means of communicating on sensitive topics such as love, thereby mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs). Brown and Levinson's method provide a vital lens to comprehend how metaphor, indirectness, and cultural norms interact in the expression of romantic values.

Combining speech act theory and politeness theory, the current study adopts a micro-level pragmatic perspective, capturing the face-sensitive strategies and illocutionary functions of Yoruba love proverbs in socio-cultural interactions. The dual method allows the researcher to analyse the nexus between culture, language, and social norms in the conceptualisation and negotiation of love in romantic and non-romantic contexts, including courtship and marriage in the Yoruba context.

2. Method

2.1 Data and analytical procedure

Twenty Yorùbá love proverbs constitute the data for this study. The data were elicited from Yorùbá language tutors in junior and senior secondary schools and tertiary institutions. The data were purposively sampled to obtain relevant data for the study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling whereby the units to be observed are selected based on the researcher's judgment, which centres on which units will be the most representative or useful (Babbie, 2013). The study benefited from the sampling method as it enabled the researchers to utilise their judgment to obtain data relevant to the study. Additionally, some of the Yorùbá romantic and non-romantic love expressions were derived from Yorùbá love songs. Furthermore, the Yorùbá love proverbs and expressions were decoded by the study's participants, providing crucial interpretations to firmly foreground the conceptualisation of love through proverbs and expressions in the Yorùbá context. For thematic classification, the study utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis to classify the proverbs into themes for analysis. The thematic process involves familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

For data analysis, the data were subjected to pragmatic analysis using the elements of Searle's (1969) speech acts theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The analysis connects with the study's aim by uncovering how the Yorùbá community conceptualises love in romantic and non-romantic contexts, and how it negotiates love, courtship, and marriage through Yorùbá love proverbs and expressions. Sequel to the analysis, the study unpacks that the Yorùbá socio-cultural society uses love proverbs and expressions in romantic and non-romantic contexts. It demonstrates that love in a romantic context depicts love as a feeling and commitment, while love in a non-romantic context presents love as a foundational factor in human relationships and love as a means of negotiating one's needs at the expense of others.

2.2 Data analysis

The section presents the present study's analysis, divided into two themes: romantic and non-romantic love proverbs.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1.1 Romantic love proverbs

The first theme presented in the study's analysis section is romantic love proverbs, focusing on love proverbs in the context of a romantic relationship, particularly marriage.

Excerpt 1:

Àmójúkúrò ní mú èmí ìfẹ́ gùn.

The secret to a lasting relationship is overlooking mistakes.

This excerpt explains how the Yoruba community views long-lasting love in romantic relationships. Currently, Nigeria has a rising divorce rate, whereby 2.9% of marriages fail. Studies indicate that first marriages are more prone to dissolution due to shifting social, cultural, and economic pressures that negatively impact long-term marital stability (Ntoimo & Akokuwebe, 2014; Lawracles, 2025). The Yorùbá community provides a solution to the grim situation through its proverb, noting that one of the secrets to a longstanding relationship is overlooking one's partner's mistakes. It presupposes that humans are not perfect, marked with individual character

flaws. Therefore, by focusing on the character flaw of one's partner rather than the areas where they excel character-wise, morally, intellectually, and romantically, one is on a collision course that leads to the inevitable end of the marriage. The study's findings here align with Searle's (1969) speech act theory, whereby the excerpt performs the acts of social regulation and cultural instruction. The proverb performs Searle's directive function of speech acts, which is wrapped in assertive and expressive values calculated to reduce divorce and guide conduct. Also, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory operates in the excerpt to ensure that individuals avoid direct, face-threatening acts in romantic relationships. The connection between Searle's directives and politeness respects the listener's autonomy (negative face) while also appealing to their positive face by appealing to their shared cultural identity and desire for social approval.

The proverb further underscores the importance of perseverance and patience in a romantic relationship, especially in marriage. This view is corroborated with the Yorùbá saying; *ìgì yíí ò dáá, a yó ní'ná, t'òhún ò dáá, a yó ní'ná, ìgbà wo ni óúnjé á tó jíná?* The expression translates as: if we always cut off people because of their limitations, we will fail to accomplish our aim, which is possible only through interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the study uncovers that the Yorùbá socio-cultural context holds that overlooking each partner's faults is key to a long-lasting relationship, teaching married and unmarried individuals the virtue of patience with their partners.

The excerpt's analysis resonates with Adedimeji (2008) and Akinyemi (2015), who demonstrate that Yoruba marital norms prioritise forgiveness, dialogue, and endurance to cushion conflict, sustain unions, and discourage separation. Additionally, Akinyemi (2015) presents tolerance, patience, and overlooking a partner's faults as essential foundations for a lasting relationship and teaching emotional harmony.

Excerpt 2

Ìfẹ́ l'ewúré ní tó fí bá ọkọ rẹ̀ hu irunghò.

Love makes people do what is out of their nature.

This excerpt depicts love as a compelling force that compels people to engage in activities that are not part of their nature. The proverb is rooted in a metaphor in which a female goat that does not grow a beard is said to grow one because its husband, a male goat, has a beard. It suggests that people in romantic relationships often engage in activities that may be acts of service, sacrificing their own comfort and others' to please their partners. The proverb contextualises love as a phenomenon riddled with sacrifices and acts of service calculated to please one's partner.

It promotes a communal belief that love demands sacrifice, leading people to engage in actions that are not in their nature. Through this proverb, the Yoruba socio-cultural context teaches that love is a selfless act, prioritising one's partner's happiness above all else. This demonstrates that love is beyond feeling; it is support, trust, and a bond shared among lovers. The findings here align with existing studies that demonstrate that Yorùbá marital ideals conceive of love as service, duty, and prioritising a partner's wellbeing, a view that sees love through actions rather than emotion alone and extends beyond one's natural tendencies (Olajubu, 2003; Akinyemi, 2015).

Here, the Yorùbá socio-cultural context uses Searle's (1969) directive element of speech acts to define the parameters of love, directing individuals to conform to the model while expressing fundamental communal values. Furthermore, the findings align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, in which the proverb mitigates a profound face threat to the listener's emotions. It masterfully instructs through humour and metaphor ideal love while minimising the threat to the individual's self-image and independence. The two approaches, combined, focus on social regulation of conflict and on the cultural constitution of meaning.

Excerpt 3:



Ìfẹ́ ní ẹ̀'ni lójòjò lálá ì s'áàrẹ̀.

Love makes one sick without having a fever.

The proverb displayed in this excerpt conceptualises the outward effects love has on people. It notes that just as sickness, particularly fever, makes people shiver and run a high temperature, love can put people in a similar position. It describes how individuals in love can experience fever-like symptoms due to unrequited love, heartbreak, and quarrels. This depiction contextualises love as a deep emotional affair capable of influencing people's behaviour. For a theoretical connection to the study, Searle's (1969) speech act theory holds that the primary act performed by the proverb is expressive and assertive, serving as a diagnostic tool and a vehicle for shared empathy. Additionally, following Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, the proverb protects people's positive face, normalising their distress, while protecting their negative face by specifying that their loss of composure is due to an external force: love.

Hatfield and Rapson (1993) support this view, demonstrating that intense romantic love can trigger emotional and physiological responses similar to illness, which include stress, restlessness, and agitation, especially in heartbreak or unrequited love. Ogunyemi (2005) further displays that Yoruba proverbs and oral literature illustrate love as a powerful force capable of causing physical and emotional distress. In all, both studies showcase that love significantly influences well-being and behaviour, a position the proverb in this excerpt advances.

3.1.2 Non-romantic love proverbs

The second theme presented in the study's analysis section is non-romantic love proverbs, focusing on love proverbs outside the context of non-romantic relationships, focusing on interpersonal relationships.

Excerpt 4:

Eni tí a ò bá nífẹ́ ẹ́, n'ílẹ̀ rẹ̀ jìn

We give reasons not to visit a supposed friend who lives far away because we do not like him or her.

Yorùbá proverbs that comment on non-romantic contexts take the centre stage in this excerpt. The Yoruba socio-cultural setting is built on a communal setting in which people from separate families interact with one another (Gbadegesin, 1998). The communal lifestyle impacts friendships, whereby people make friends with one another. It is expected that people in platonic friendships visit one another frequently to maintain a social bond. However, the Yoruba socio-cultural norms state that when an individual fails to visit his or her supposed friend on the grounds that the friend lives far away, the friendship lacks love, demonstrating that they are not friends.

The proverb here presents friendship as a love-driven relationship that requires attention to nurture. This implies that friendships are built intentionally through attention and sacrifice. Additionally, it teaches the community to value friendships and to communicate with one another through constant visitation. It also shows the individual that not receiving reciprocal visits, attention, and care from a supposed friend is a sign that the friendship is not strong. The findings align with Adekoya and Olatunji (2012), who demonstrate that Yoruba proverbs emphasise reciprocal visitation and attention as markers of genuine friendship. It also mirrors Owomoyela (2005), who notes that Yoruba proverbs depict friendship as a relationship nurtured through attention and presence.

This proverb serves Searle's (1969) directive and declarative functions. The directive teaches the importance of making courtesy visits to people's friends, while declaratives reveal what constitutes a real friend. Conversely, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory has, at the first level, a representation of the voice of the community carrying out normative control. It carries out a grave FTA (assessing and placing a burden of judgment) but cleverly downplays it

by incorporating the threat completely within an "objective-sounding system of cultural norms." This turns a potentially judgmental comment into a statement of fact.

Excerpt 5:

Ìfẹ́ a fẹ́ adìẹ ò dé'nú, ibi ká pa je ló mọ
People engage in friendship for selfish interest.

The excerpt illustrates how the Yoruba socio-cultural context conceptualises interpersonal love relationships, including communal life, friendship, and business. The proverb here literally denotes that we do not care for a chicken wholeheartedly; rather, we care for it because it is a source of meat. According to the expression, the Yoruba people believe that there are different interpersonal relationships in which people feign love for others in exchange for what they stand to gain. It suggests that people demonstrate pseudo-love towards others to obtain financial, material, and emotional care and support. At the core of the proverb, it advises people to be vigilant, not to take every act of friendship as genuine. Rather, they should probe the motive of people's association with them in order to determine their interest.

Akinyemi (2007) resonates with the analysis by demonstrating that Yoruba proverbs warn against benefit-driven and deceptive relationships while teaching vigilance in interpersonal dealings. Also, Adekoya and Olatunji (2012) align with the findings, showing how proverbs expose pseudo-friendship, hidden motives, and self-interest in social relationships.

Speech act theory (1969) aligns with the results, as it is a diagnostic and cautionary form of speech. Its main objective is to caution the community about a spreading phenomenon threatening society at large (deceptive relationships) by proclaiming the truth about instrumental intentions. The second theoretical guide, Brown & Levinson's politeness theory (1987), points out that this proverb is actually a face-saving device, since it politely addresses severe FTA in the face-threatening act (FTA) environment in which it survives. To mitigate FTA (a claim that there are deceivers in this community) in this text, it qualifies as a protective truth since it is "impersonal" with "empowering" intentions.

Excerpt 6:

Aìní ìfẹ́ sí ará ilé ní jẹ́ kí òtá wọ́lé
Harbouring hatred towards a family member makes them susceptible to external dangers.

The proverb here underscores the significance of love within a family and household. It holds that division due to family feuds in a family birth external crisis. This demonstrates that a family that lacks internal love puts its family members in danger. This line of thought closely mirrors another popular Yorùbá saying that says, *bí ikú ilé ò pa'ni, t'òde ò lè pa'ni*. The expression conveys that no one can harm an individual if his or her family members do not betray him or her. It emphasises love within the family, where people love one another and protect their family members rather than external enemies.

Furthermore, the proverb teaches intra-family cooperation, in which family members protect one another without betraying one another. The proverb holds that when an external enemy prevails over an individual, the individual's family members are complicit, implying that they betrayed him or her.

The findings here align with those of Adebowale (2013) and Akinyemi (2015). Adebowale notes that Yorùbá proverbs emphasise family loyalty, unity, and the dangers of internal division. It posits that intra-household betrayal enables external harm. Akinyemi demonstrates that proverbs serve as moral tools that enhance intra-family cooperation, protection, and collective responsibility. Also, the analysis in the excerpt resonates with Searle's speech act theory (1969). The proverb is a constitutive and binding speech act. It actively reserves a non-negotiable

directive for intra-family behaviour while also stipulating the essential founding maxim of "Family-as-Fortress" as a whole. The social contract for the primary unit of Yorùbá society resides in this proverb. The application of politeness theory by Brown & Levinson (1987) to the above argues that the proverb employs minimal classic politeness because it is a constitutive rule of an in-group. This proverb derives its potency from its bald, unambiguous assertion of a survival maxim.

3.2 Discussion

The present study sought to examine how the Yoruba tribe contextualises love in romantic and non-romantic contexts. The study's aim was informed by the significant gap in academic enquiry into the phenomenon in pragmatics and discourse analysis. Prior studies have investigated love in proverbs through socio-cultural aspects of human love such as marriage (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Mieder, 2004 & 2012, Adeyinka, 2008; Bashir, 2012), & Bolaji, 2017; & Ndibe, 2017). The current study took a unique approach to the concept of love in proverbs and expressions to comprehend how the Yorùbá contextualise love in its socio-cultural contexts. To achieve the study's aim, the study was guided by two research objectives alongside the elements of Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, to examine how love is expressed, understood, negotiated, and socially regulated in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts using proverbs and expressions.

The study, therefore, unpacks the first research objective: to discover how Yorùbá conceptualises love in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts through proverbs and expressions in both romantic and non-romantic contexts. The analysis demonstrates that, in a romantic context, love is depicted as both a feeling and a commitment. The second research objective focuses on identifying how Yorùbá love proverbs shape societal norms in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts. The study shows that love in a non-romantic context is seen as a foundational factor in human relationships and as a means of negotiating one's needs at others' expense.

Furthermore, the study's findings depart from existing studies on Yoruba love proverbs, which have portrayed love within the context of courtship, spousal relations, and marriage, and have conducted thematic analyses of selected Yoruba proverbs across categories such as marital roles and family (Adeyinka, 2008; Bolaji, 2017). Although previous studies on Yoruba love proverbs mirror the current study's findings, they differ significantly in the thematic classification of the proverbs and expressions into romantic and non-romantic categories. It also departs in how the study uses proverbs to showcase how the Yoruba view love across different socio-cultural contexts.

In relation to the study of culture, these results reveal the ways in which the Yoruba oral traditions are actively working to constitute emotions as well as the power relations inherent in emotional life. The proverbial messages constitute more than a descriptive statement on the subject of love; they are tools of the culture for the expression of those subjectivities, as well as tools of empowerment in relation to the interpretation of emotional life. This is in keeping with the findings of Barber (2007) when referring to the oral traditions of the African context: 'Africans are actively constitutive of their social reality, not merely reflective of it.' The demarcation between romantic love and non-romantic love messages shows the level of sophistication within the culture on the subject of love and the notion that it exists and functions in more than one type of social arena.

4. Conclusion

The current study investigated how the Yorùbá people contextualise love in the Yorùbá socio-cultural context through Yorùbá love proverbs and expressions. The study's focus is justified because, despite the myriad studies on proverbs and love, none have examined how different societies contextualise love in romantic and non-romantic contexts, a crucial research gap the present study addresses. The novel approach, conducted within the scope of Searle's (1969)

speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, enabled the study to explore how love is expressed, understood, negotiated, and socially regulated in Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts through proverbs and expressions.

The analysis demonstrates that Yoruba love proverbs and expressions that comment on love in both romantic and non-romantic contexts. It shows that love in a romantic context is a feeling and a commitment, while love in a non-romantic context is seen as an essential factor in human relationships and as a means of negotiating one's needs at others' expense. Additionally, the study contributes to existing literature by extending the frontiers of research on proverbs and love while creating novel research areas. The current study serves as a pilot, paving the way for subsequent studies on how different societies conceptualise love in romantic and non-romantic contexts through proverbs and expressions.

The present research makes a contribution to African cultural studies by showing how language and oral tradition are significant sites within culture for the constitution of emotion. It will become apparent that in Yoruba culture, love proverbs are more than representations of emotional experiences, but rather are themselves engaged in the constitution of emotional cultures. By bringing a pragmatic as well as cultural perspective to the study of these proverbs, one can better understand how emotion as a concept has been encoded in language in this cultural community. Concerning recommendations, the study recommends that similar studies be extended to other tribes in Nigeria, providing crucial insight into how love is contextualised in other Nigerian societies. Also, Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory should be applied in future studies to provide a comprehensive empirical examination of their elements in the contextualisation of love in love proverbs and expressions across romantic and non-romantic contexts.

References

- Abdulkarim, Z., & Abdullahi, H. (2015). Thematic analysis of some selected Hausa proverbs. *Arts and Design Studies*, 27, 27–30.
- Adams, E. J. (2024). Amplifying voices, shaping culture: A critical examination of social media's influence on socio-cultural issues in Nigeria. *Journal of Language, Literature, Social and Cultural Studies*, 2(3), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.58881/jllscs.v2i3.216>
- Adebowale, O. O. (2013). Yoruba proverbs and the negotiation of family values. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 25(2), 159–170.
- Adedimeji, A. A. (2008). Communication, conflict, and the Yoruba marriage system. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2(9), 92–109.
- Adekoya, O. A., & Olatunji, O. (2012). Proverbs and social relationships among the Yoruba. *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies*, 4(1), 45–58.
- Adeyinka, A. A. (2008). *Proverbs and marriage in Yorubaland* (Unpublished scholarly paper). University of Ibadan.
- Àkànle, O., Ademuson, A., Adegoke, O., & Oguntoyinbo, K. (2019). This is who we are and why!: Ethnography of weddings in Ibadan, Nigeria. *African Population Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.11564/33-1-1358>.
- Akinyemi, A. (2007). Oral literature and moral education among the Yoruba. *Africana Studies*, 6(2), 117–138.
- Apter, A. (1992). *Black critics and kings: The hermeneutics of power in Yoruba society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Balogun, O. (2020). The traditional Yorùbá conception of a meaningful life. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 39, 166–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2020.1774978>.
- Bamidele, A. (2021). A Yorùbá Novelist's Perception of Courtship: An Examination of Fagunwa's Novels. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 10, 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.18533/jah.v10i2.1557>.
- Barber, K. (1991). *I could speak until tomorrow: Oriki, women, and the past in a Yoruba town*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Barber, K. (2007). *The anthropology of texts, persons and publics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bashir, A. A., & Amali, H. O. I. (2012). Women against women: The sociolinguistics of Hausa proverbs. *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, 29(1), 13–24.

- Bolaji, E. T., & Kehinde, T. A. (2017). *An analysis of the proverbs the Yorubans live by* (Unpublished paper).
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Daniels, O. (2022). Shifting Fatherhood and Gender: Negotiating Power and Sexuality in Yoruba. *Yoruba Studies Review*. <https://doi.org/10.32473/ysr.v6i2.130282>.
- Finnegan, R. (1970). *Oral literature in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
- Foláyan, M., Bernard, O., Oduwale, E., Babalola, E., Balogun, B., Olojo, F., Adegbite, N., Ogunfolakan, B., Oyelakin, J., Adesida, A., Akintayo, A., Okunmakinde, O., Johnson, A., Akande, I., Fasiku, G., Olowoniyi, M., & Titus, O. (2025). A qualitative study of Yorùbá culture and the utilisation of modern dental services for oral health. *BMC Health Services Research*, 25. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-025-13586-9>.
- Gbádégesin, E. (2024). Joking relationships and humor among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria in the twenty-first century. *Environment and Public Health Research*. <https://doi.org/10.59400/ephr.v2i1.1525>.
- Gbadegesin, S. (1998). Yoruba culture and the meaning of identity. In K. Wiredu & K. Gyekye (Eds.), *Person and community: Ghanaian philosophical studies* (pp. 123-138). Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.
- Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L. (1993). *Love, sex, and intimacy: Their psychology, biology, and history*. HarperCollins.
- Hatfield, E., & Walster, G. W. (1978). *A new look at love*. Addison-Wesley.
- Honeck, R. P. (1997). *A proverb in mind: The cognitive science of proverbial wit and wisdom*. Erlbaum.
- Kizi, A. (2024). Linguistic Features Of The Concept Of "Love" In Russian And Arabic Contexts. *Current Research Journal of Philological Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.37547/philological-crjps-05-07-03>.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1980)
- Lawracles, L. P. (2025). Revolutionizing matrimonial proceedings in Nigeria: A modern approach. *Mondaq*. Retrieved December 22, 2025, from <https://www.mondaq.com/nigeria/divorce/1706302/revolutionizing-matrimonial-proceedings-in-nigeria-a-modern-approach>
- Mayer, C. (2023). Challenges and coping of couples in intercultural romantic love relationships. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 35, 4 - 15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2023.2173000>.
- Mayer, C., & Vanderheiden, E. (2023). Love across the life span in cultural and transcultural perspectives. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 35, 1 - 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2023.2178192>.
- Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs: A handbook*. Greenwood Press.
- Mieder, W. (2012). *"Think before you marry": Love and marriage in international proverbs*. University of Vermont Press.
- Ndibe, P. N. (2017). Analyses of selected Igbo proverbs: The implications on conflict resolution in marriage. *IgboScholars International Journal*, 4(1), 32-40.
- Newell, S. (2013). *The power to name: A history of anonymity in colonial West Africa*. Ohio University Press.
- Norrick, N. R. (1985). *How proverbs mean: Semantic studies in English proverbs*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ntoimo, L. F. C., & Akokuwebe, M. E. (2014). Prevalence and patterns of marital dissolution in Nigeria. *NASA Journal of Social Affairs*, 12(2). https://www.nasajournal.com.ng/journal_articles/vol_12/issue_2/paper_1.pdf
- Nwachukwu, U. (1998). *The Igbo proverb: Form, functions and meanings*. University of Nigeria Press.
- Oforidi, J. A., & Salisu, A. (2024). Gender violence in media: A study of Kaduna state media corporation (ksmc). *Journal of Language, Literature, Social and Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 31-45. <https://doi.org/10.58881/jllscs.v2i1.131> (Original work published February 2, 2024)
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (2005). Love and suffering in Yoruba oral literature. *African Cultural Studies*, 18(2), 45-60.
- Oiroegbu, O. (2023). *Igbo proverbs in context: Modern usage and situated knowledge* (Working paper). Oke's Musings: Poetry, People and Places.
- Okeke, C. W. (2022). The wisdom of Igbo proverbs: A literary analysis of the positive impact of communal living on mental health. *IGIRIGI: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal of African Studies*, 2(1), 104-114.

- Olajubu, O. (2003). *Women in the Yoruba religious sphere*. Africa World Press.
- Owomoyela, O. (2005). *Yoruba proverbs*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Oyewale, A. (2021). Yorubá Ethics of Interpersonal Relations in Qbasá's Poetry. *Yoruba Studies Review*.
<https://doi.org/10.32473/ysr.v5i1.130064>.
- Oyewale, A. (2022). A Translation and Literary Analysis of Adebayo Faleti's Poem: Ojo Ilayefun". *Yoruba Studies Review*. <https://doi.org/10.32473/ysr.v7i1.131451>.
- Oyewale, A., & Tiamiyu, A. (2025). A Comparative Study of Romantic Love in Three Literary Texts. *Yoruba Studies Review*. <https://doi.org/10.32473/ysr.10.1.139150>.
- Perović, S., & Vuković-Stamatović, M. (2021). Universality and cultural variation in the conceptualisation of love via metaphors, metonymies and cultural scripts: The case of Montenegrin. *Círculo de Lingüística Aplicada a la Comunicación*. <https://doi.org/10.5209/clac.73538>.
- Rubin, Z. (1970). Measurement of romantic love. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 16(2), 265–273.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sofola, K., & Adedeji, A. (2025). From Admonition to Bridal Serenade: Decolonising Yoruba Traditional Marriage Practices through the Music of Beautiful Nubia. *Yoruba Studies Review*.
<https://doi.org/10.32473/ysr.10.2.140196>.
- Taylor, A. (1994). *The proverb*. Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1931)
- Yurtaeva, E., & Charura, D. (2024). Comprehensive scoping review of research on intercultural love and romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 41, 1654 - 1676.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241228791>.
- Zajac, P. (2025). Hausa proverbs about marriage: Cultural content, meanings and functions. *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy Języka i Kultury*, 37, 291–312.