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Body parts in Hausa proverbs

Abstract

The word “proverb” from Latin “pro-verbium” (“pro” meaning “in front of” and “verbium” meaning “word”), suggests that a proverb takes the place of ordinary words. Proverbs have had a great influence on the lifestyles of many people, mainly through means of religion and culture. They are very common and employed in African societies, particularly in Hausa, a language very rich in this field. In this paper 28 Hausa proverbs, related to 14 human body parts, are quoted and some metaphorical usages of them, found in works listed in References, are given.

In traditional societies proverbs have a relevant position in culture, but have begun attracting interest in modern society. In Africa, this phenomenon is more accentuated nowadays with the disappearance of the old institutions, such as initiation, the role of old men and women, etc. Modern society, everywhere, is based on quick communication and has no room anymore for proverbs that represent the fathers’ culture and even a good use of the language. Hausa is not noticed as an exception, even if it has a very rich and long tradition of proverbs usage.

Pre-Islamic Hausa women were largely dedicated to storytelling activities. It was their domain. Every night, within the confines of their homes, or under the dark sky, they retold age-old stories. Proverbs held a very important place. They encapsulated the people’s history and philosophy of life. This was more so because the people could not read and write. Their history and beliefs were stored and coded in some special mental capacities, and then transmitted orally through various literary genres, including proverbs.

The cultural heritage, ethics, mores, beliefs, traditions and wisdom of the Hausa are all embedded in their proverbs. The acceptance of Islam as a state religion did not in any significant way diminish the status of proverbs in Hausaland. Islam only changed the general animistic belief system found in proverbs by shifting the focus to Allah. The laws governing inter-personal relationships as found in proverbs remained the same. Islam confirmed, to a large extent, the virtues of equity and fairness needed in one's dealings with others, as taught in Hausa proverbs. Islam broadened the horizons of Hausa proverbs by making use of them as titles of books, newspaper headings and articles, and in works of fiction. The highly moralistic works of fiction by Muslim authors, writers, and poets relied heavily on the adoption of proverbs for easier transmission (Anthonia Yakubu, 2011).

This enormous linguistic heritage has been proved in Hausa by so many bulky collections of proverbs (Kirk-Greene 1966; Merrick 1905; Whitting 1940; Yunusa 1977). Working on this material I have chosen two of them for each body part, which are related to emotion.

Among all the lexical items making up the Hausa anatomical vocabulary (more or less 70), for 35 of them it has been noted to have a metaphorical employment. I have to say that there are a few of them, I found, related strictly to anatomical lexicon. I concentrated my interest, then, on giving some proverbs and some metaphorical usages.

Below are the items selected:

- Internal : *cikì* 'stomach', *hanjì* 'intestines', *harshè* 'tongue', *zūcìyā* 'heart'.

- External : *bākì* 'mouth', *bāyā* 'back', *fuskā* 'face', *gāshì* 'hair', *hannū* 'hand', *idò* 'eye', *jinì* 'blood', *kūnnē* 'ear', *kafà* 'foot, leg', *wuyà* 'neck'.

1) **cikî** ‘stomach’:

Dūniyà màcè dà cikî cē [RO :54; KG :142]¹ “The world is a pregnant woman (No one knows what will come of the pregnancy [i.e. a boy, a girl, alive, dead, *etc.*]”.

Kōwàcè Jumma’ā ta farin cikî dà àl’amāřintà [WH :2; KG :331] “Every Friday’s rejoicing has its sign (*Coming events cast their shadow before*)”.

The word **cikî** is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘woman spending the last month of pregnancy at home with her parents’ *gōyon cikî* (lit. taking care of stomach) [AH :41]; ‘to make space’ *yi cikî* (lit. to make stomach) [AB :143a]; ‘to share the loss’ *rabà cikî* (lit. to share stomach) [AB :143a]; to pump someone’ *bùgi cikî* (lit. to beat stomach) e.g. *yā bùgi cikìnā* ‘he “pumped” me’ [AB :143a]; ‘to crawl along’ in *jā cikî* (lit. to pull stomach) [AB :142b]; ‘to eat’ *gyārà cikî* (lit. to repair stomach) [AH :42]; ‘advanced pregnancy’ *cikî tsōfō* (lit. stomach of old) e.g. *tanà dà cikî tsōfō* (lit. she is with old stomach) [AB :142b]; ‘glutton’ *bāwàn cikî* (lit. slave of stomach) [AB :142b]; ‘inscrutableness’ *zurfin cikî* (lit. depth of stomach) [AB :142b]; ‘energy’ *wutāř cikî* (lit. fire of stomach) [AB :142b]; ‘happiness’ *farin cikî* (lit. of white stomach) [AB :254a]; ‘unhappiness’ *bakin cikî* (lit. black of stomach) [AB :254a]; ‘protection’ *rufan cikî* (lit. cover of stomach) [AB :517a]; ‘she is recently pregnant’ *sāmi cikî* (lit. to get stomach) [AB :142b].

2) **hanjī** ‘intestines’:

Ānnūřin huskà kaurin hanjī [KM :5; KG :47] “A shining face goes with a full stomach”.

¹ The meaning of the abbreviations is given in References at the end of each work listed in square brackets.

Kadà kàzā tā yi muřnà dõmin tā ga anà jan hanjin
’yaruwā tātà [KG 253] “The hen should not rejoice because
it sees the entrails of its companion being drawn out (*There,*
but for the Grace of God, go I!)”.

The word **hanjī** is also used in some metaphorical expressions
like:

‘lamp wick’ *hanjin fītilā* (lit. intestines of lamp) [AB :370b]; ‘beans
inters own with corn’ *hanjin gōnā* (lit. intestines of farm) [AB :370b];
‘rags lining sword-sling’ *hanjin hāmīlā* (lit. intestines of sword-sling)
[AB :370b]; ‘bobbin-nipple’ *hanjin kōshiyā* (lit. intestines of wooden
ladle) [AB : 370b]; ‘child born late in mother’s life’ *kālan hanjī* (lit.
gleaning of intestines) [AB :370b]; ‘to be miserly’ *nadē hanjī* (lit. to
wrap around intestines) [AB :370a].

3) **harshē** ‘tongue’:

Bà à rabā harshē dà hakōrī [KM :11; KG :56] “You
cannot separate the tongue from the teeth”.

Harshèn mùtùm zākìnsà [RO :124] “A man’s tongue
is his lion [if he lets it get loose it will kill him]”.

The word **harshē** is also used in some metaphorical expres-
sions like:

‘language’ [AB :379a]; ‘fluent speaking’ *kāifin harshē* (lit. sharpness of
tongue) e.g. *kāifin harshē gārē shì* ‘he speaks fluently’ [AB :379a];
‘to speak correctly’ *harshē yā fīta sòsai* e.g.
harshànsà bā yā fīta sòsai (lit. his tongue doesn’t exit well)
[AB :379a]; ‘to rave’ e.g. *harshànsà yā karai* ‘he is in the delirium
which precedes the death’ [AB :479b]; ‘to protract’ *yi harshē* (lit. to
make tongue) e.g. *dāmūnā tā yi harshē* ‘rain season protracted’
[AB :379a]; ‘to speak loudly’ *dāukà harshē* (lit. to carry tongue)
[AB :379a];

4) **zūcìyā** ‘heart’:

Lābāřin zūcìyā à tàmbàyi fuskà [K&KG :33] “[For] the news of the heart one should ask the face (*One’s face shows what is in one’s heart*)”. Proverb stating facts of life.

Zūcìyāř mùtùm biřninsà [KG :497] “The heart of a man is his citadel (*A man’s home is his castle*)”.

The word **zūcìyā** is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘diarrhoea’ **gòbařař zūcìyā** (lit. conflagration of heart) [D&M :40] ;
‘sighing’ **àjìyāř zūcìyā** (lit. storing of heart) [AB :977b] ; ‘to hold a grudge’ **rikè à zūcìyā** (lit. to hold in heart) [N&M :100b] ; ‘to sigh’ **ajiyè zūcìyā** (lit. to store heart) [AB :977b] ;

5) **bàkī** ‘mouth’:

Kō bà à gwadè ba linzāmì yā fi bàkin kàzā [RO :22; K&KG :53] “Even though no measurement is taken [one can see that] a bridle is too big for the mouth of a chicken (*Such-and-such is completely obvious*)”.

Kōwā ya ci àlbasà bàkinsà zây yi wārī [KG :308] “Whoever eats an onion, his mouth will smell (*You can’t touch pitch without being defiled*)”.

The word **bàkī** is also used in some metaphorical expression like:

‘mouth’ **bàkin wutā** (lit. mouth of fire) [B&B :16] ; ‘opening of mortar’ **bàkin turmī** (lit. mouth of mortar) [B&B :15] ; ‘beginning of a seam of a mended calabash’ **bàkin tsāgā** (lit. mouth of incision) [B&B :15] ; ‘bank (of river or ocean)’ [N&M :9] e.g. **yā jē bàkin tèku** ‘he went to the ocean’s bank’ [SU :22] ; ‘lobbying’ **ban-bàkī** (lit. giving of mouth)

[AH :146] ; ‘sweet talk’ *dāḍīn-bākī* (lit. sweetness of mouth) [AH :148] ; ‘sweet talk’ *zākin bākī* (lit. sweetness of mouth) [AH :152] ; ‘false appetite’ *jīn bākī* (lit. feeling of mouth) [AH :149] ; ‘to interfere’ *sā bākī* (lit. to put mouth) [AB :63] ; ‘to interfere’ *tsōmà bākī* (lit. to dip mouth) [TS :13] ; ‘to curse someone’ *yi bākī* (lit. to make mouth) [N&M :9] ; ‘to show surprise’ *rikè bākī* (lit. to keep mouth) [AB :735b ; cf. Dan Goggo and Kano 1969:29] ; ‘to conspire’ *hadà bākī* (lit. to join mouth) [MA :50b ; cf. Daura, 1990:28] ; ‘to conspire’ *gamà bākī* (lit. to combine mouth) [MA :50b] ; ‘to pick a quarrel’ *jā bākī* (lit. to pull mouth) [AB :410b] ; ‘to abstain from eating in deference to a fast’ *kāmà bākī* (lit. to catch mouth) [N&M :61b] ; ‘to speak wheedlingly’ *gyārà bākī* (lit. to repair mouth) [AB :356a] ;

6) **bāyā** ‘back’:

Dà nā sanī kyēyà cē, à bāya a kàn baĩ tà [KG :112]
 “*If only I had known is like the back of the head, you leave it behind (It’s no use crying over spilt milk)*”.

Jā dà bāya gà ràgò bà gudù ba nè [KG :242] “*For a ram to draw back is not running away*”.

The word **bāyā** is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘excrement’ *bāyan gidā* (lit. back of house) [D&M :9] ; ‘toilet’ *bāyan gidā* (lit. back of house) [D&M :9] ; ‘latrine’ *bāyan dākī* (lit. back of room) [D&M :9] ; ‘afterwards’ *dàgà bāyā* e.g. *dàgà bāyā sai sukà kī* ‘later on they refused’ [AB :93a] ; ‘after’ *dàgà bāyā* e.g. *dàgà bāyān nān* ‘after that’ [AB :93a] ; ‘earlier’ e.g. *shèkarùn bāyā* ‘some years ago’ [AB :92b] ;

7) **fuskà** ‘face’:

Ànnūřīn huskà kaurin hanjī [KM :5; KG :47] “*A shining face goes with a full stomach*”.

Lābāřin zūciyā à tàmbàyi fuskà [K&KG :33] “[For] the news of the heart one should ask the face (*One’s face shows what is in one’s heart*)”. Proverb stating facts of life.

The word **fuskà** is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘insult’ *cîn fuskà* (lit. eating of face) [AH :146]; ‘welcoming expression’ *ban-fuskà* (lit. giving of face) [AH :146]; ‘to shave’ *gyāran fuskà* (lit. to repair face) [AH :42]; ‘to solve a problem’ *gyāran fuskà* [AH :42]; ‘to humiliate’ *ci fuskà* (lit. to eat face) [AB :275]; ‘to frown’ *hadà fuskà* (lit. to join face) [Dan Goggo and Kano 1969:9]; ‘to frown’ *gamà fuskà* (lit. to join face) [AB :291]; ‘to look impressive’ *cikà fuskà* (lit. to fill face) [AB :141]; ‘to scowl’ *batà fuskà* (lit. to lose face) [AB :88]; ‘to scowl’ *muřtùkè fuskà* (lit. to stir up dust of the face) [MA :236]; ‘to scowl’ *durbùnà fuskà* (lit. to grimace face) [MA :236]; ‘to show anger’ *daurè fuskà* (lit. to imprison face) [D&M :30]; ‘to face’ *fùskantà* [N&M :38];

8) **gāshī** ‘hair’:

À bař kàzā cikin gāshintà [KG :3; K&KG :1]
“Leave the chicken in its feathers (*Let sleeping dogs lie*)”.
Proverb exhorting to proper conduct.

The word **gāshī** is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘eyelash’ in *gāshìn idò* (lit. hair of eye) [AB :309a]; ‘moustache’ in *gāshìn bākī* (lit. hair of mouth’ [N&M :42]; ‘upper layer of cow hide for making the decoration on hide receptacles’ [B&B :63]; ‘red thread

at the edge of deleb-palm (*Hyphaene Thebaica*)’ (dial. of Katsina)² [B&B :17];

9) ***hannū*** ‘hand’:

Birì à hannun mālāmī ya kàn yi gūdā, à hannun bàmāgujè sai kūkā [KM :7; KG :94] “A monkey in the hands of a Muslim teacher shrieks with joy, in the hands of a Bamaguje he cries with a fear”.

Don hannunkà yā yi dōyī, bā kà yankèwā kà yas [RO :78; K&KG :28] “Because your hand has become foul smelling, you wouldn’t cut it off and discard it (*One cannot but pardon the faults of one’s dependants*)”.

The word ***hannū*** is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘handle of flail’ in *hannun bugū* ‘hand of a flail’ (dial. of Zaria) [B&B :218]; ‘stump of maimed arm’ *mugùn hannū* (lit. bad hand) [AB :681a]; ‘channel’ e.g. *hannun tèku* (lit. hand of sea) [AB :371b]; ‘relatives’ e.g. *hannū gārē shì* (lit. he has hand); ‘applying charm to child to cure it of pilfering’ *daurìn hannū* (lit. imprisonment of hand) [D&M :30]; ‘to help’ *bā dà hannū* (lit. to give hand) [MA :117a]; ‘to help’ *sâ hannū* (lit. to put the hand) e.g. *zò kà sâ manà hannū* ‘came and help us’ [AB :751a]; ‘to pay attention’ *sâ hannū* (lit. to put hand), e.g. *sarkī yā sâ masà hannū* ‘the Emir has turned his attention to him’ [AB :751a]; ‘to interfere’ *tsōmà hannū* (lit. to dip hand) [MA : 117a]; ‘to interfere’ *sâ hannū* (lit. to put the hand) e.g. *kadà kà sâ hannū cikin àl’amāfīnsà* ‘don’t interfere in his affairs’ [AB :751a]; ‘to take part’ *sâ hannū* (lit. to put hand) e.g. *yā sâ masà hannū* ‘he took part in it’ [AB :751a]; ‘to sign’ *sâ hannū* (lit. to put hand) e.g. *yā sâ hannū à takārdā* ‘he signed the letter’ [AB :751a]; ‘to take a hand in x’ *sâ hannū* (lit. to put hand) e.g.

² *bàlīsè* in Standard Hausa.

sun sâ hannū gâ rikon kasaĩ ‘they’ve begun to administer the country’ [AB :751a]; ‘to consume marriage (with virgin-wife) *kāmà hannū* (lit. to catch hand) [AB :371b]; ‘to begin to menstruate’ *ga hannū* (lit. ‘to see hand’), e.g. *tā ga hannuntā* ‘she began to menstruate for first time’ [AB :371b];

10) *idò* ‘eye’:

Idò wā ka rēnā? Wandà na kè ganī yāu dà gòbe
[KG :193] “Eye, whom do you despise? The person I see today and tomorrow (*Familiarity breeds contempt*)”.

Idòn dà ya ga Sarkī bā yà tsòron Gálādīmà [KG :194] “The eye that has seen the Chief will not fear the Galadima”.

The word *idò* is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘ankle’ *idòn kafà* (lit. eye of leg); ‘ankle’ *idòn sàu* (lit. eye of sole) [N&M :54a]; ‘distal end of the ulna’ *idòn hannū* (lit. eye of hand) [AB :397a]; ‘hollow’ e.g. *idòn itācē* (lit. eye of tree) [BA :473]; ‘water spring’ *idòn ruwā* (lit. eye of water) [BA :473]; ‘special dish prepared in Kano (*ba yarime*)’ *idòn mùzūrū* [BA :473]; ‘feminine ornament’ *idòn hazbiyā* [BA :473]; ‘silver coin used as ornament by women’ *idòn mōtā* (lit. eye of car) [BA :473]; ‘to learn fast at school’ *yi idò* (lit. to make eye) [N&M :54a]; ‘the rising or forming of something little’ *yi idò* (lit. to make eye) e.g. *dāwà ta yi idò* ‘grains have formed in head of bulrush-millet’ [AB :396]; ‘to look attentively’ *zubà idò* (lit. to pour into eye) e.g. *sai mukà zubà idò kawàì* ‘then we looked serenely’ [N&M :54a]; ‘to wait expectantly’ *sā idò* (lit. to put eye) [N&M :54a]; ‘to wink’ *kashè idò* (lit. to kill eye) [N&M :54a]; ‘to dazzle’ *dāuki idò* (lit. to overcome eye) [AB :201b]; ‘I don’t sleep, I hear’ *idònā... biyu* (lit. my eye... two) [D&M :49]; ‘guide’ *idòn dājī* (lit. eye of bush) [BA :473]; ‘soldier brave until his army is advancing, but ready to escape when the other part will reply to

attack' *idòn yākī* (lit. eye of war) [BA :474] ; 'ability of itinerant trader' *idòn safarā* (lit. eye of itinerant trader) [BA :474] ; 'slack' e.g. *idò gārē shì* or *yanà dà idò* (lit. he has eye) [AB :395] ; 'sense of propriety' e.g. *bā shi dà idò* (lit. he doesn't have eye) [AB :396] ; 'parsimony' e.g. *yanà idò* (lit. he is eye) [AB :396] ; 'insolence' *tsaurin idò* (lit. hardness of eye) [AB :396b] ; 'power to see things invisible to other people' *wankìn idò* (lit. washing of eye) [BA :396];

11) *jinī* 'blood':

Â nēmi jinī gà fārā [RO :105; K&KG :58]? "Would one seek blood from a locust? (*You can't get blood from a stone*)". A locust is supposed by the Hausas to be bloodless.

Jinī bā yā māgānin kīshin ruwā [RO :10; KM :26; KG :245] "Blood is no cure for thirst (*Blood does not quench thirst*)".

The word *jinī* is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

'popularity' *farin jinī* (lit. white of blood) [N&M :58b] ; 'unpopularity' *bakīn jinī* (lit. black of blood) [N&M :58b] ; 'to be on guard' *shā jinin jīkī* (lit. to drink body blood) [AB :430a] ; 'to become afraid' *shā jinin jīkī* (lit. to drink body blood) [AB :430a] ;

12) *kūnnē* 'ear':

Àkwiyā tā yi wàyō dà yànkakken kūnnē [KG :27] "The goat learns wisdom from a cropped ear (*A burnt child fears the fire*)".

Jikī yā fi kūnnē jī [RO :51; K&KG :51] "The body surpasses the ear in hearing (*If one refuses to listen to advice he will be taught by hard knocks*)".

The word *kûnnē* is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘auricular appendices of the heart’ *kûnnan shaitsan* (lit. ear of Satan) [AB :556b]; ‘handle’ e.g. *kûnnan samfō* ‘handle of bag’ [AB :556b]; ‘each of the prongs of a forked or not forked object’ e.g. *kûnnan kibiyà* (lit. ear of arrow) [AB :556b]; ‘strap to whip’ *kûnnan bûlâlâ* (lit. ear of whip) [AB :556b]; ‘to cheat someone’ *rûdâ kûnnē* (lit. to perplex ear) e.g. *yā rûdâ kunnuwànsù* ‘he cheated them’ [AB :556b]; ‘to pay attention’ *kasà kûnnē* (lit. to arrange ear) e.g. *yā kasà kûnnē* ‘he paid attention’ [AB :556b];

13) *kafā* ‘foot, leg’:

Kafā bā tà zama indà bābù kasā [KG :257] “The foot does not stay where there is no ground (*There’s no smoke without fire*)”.

Zùmuntā à kafā ta kè [RO :52; K&KG :19] “Good relationships [depend upon] feet, [i.e.] (The maintenance of good relationships between people requires frequent visiting). *Blood is thicker than water*)”.

The word *kafā* is also used in some metaphorical expressions like:

‘handle of a mortar placed close to the bottom’ [B&B :119]; ‘handle of the frame to build tubes’ [B&B :119]; ‘edges of a plaited mat’ [B&B :130]; ‘type of a roof beam’ (dial. of Daura) [B&B :205]; ‘completed frame of a roof which has to be thatched’ (dial. of Zaria) [B&B :22]; ‘steps of staircase’ [B&B :156]; ‘first and last plaited row of fencing mat’ (dial. of Bauchi) [B&B :138]; ‘to misrepresent’ *daukaĩ kafā* (lit. to take up foot) [AB :201b]; ‘bad luck’ *faraĩ-kafā* (lit. white of foot) [AH :152];

14) *wuyà* ‘neck’:

In kùnnē yā ji mūgùwaĩ máganà wuyà yā tsērè
[KM :21; KG :217] “If the ear hears bad news, the neck will
escape (*Forewarned is forearmed*)”.

Kōmē tsawon wuyà kái nè bisà [KG :301] “However
long the neck, the head is always on top”.

The word *wuyà* is also used in some metaphorical expressions
like:

‘wrist’ *wuyàn hannū* (lit. neck of hand) [AB :937]; ‘upper edge or neck
of earthenware receptacles’ (dial. of Zaria, Kano, Bauchi) [B&B :15];
‘apex of a round-hut’ e.g. *wuyàn dākī* (lit. neck of hut) [AB :937b];
‘the stitching called *cīn wuyà*’ (lit. eating of neck) [AB :146b]; ‘to
exceed (a little)’ *yi wuyà* (lit. to make neck), e.g. *yā yi musù wuyà*
‘he exceeds them a little’ [AB :937b]; ‘dependence’ *à wuyà* (lit. on
neck), e.g. *yanà dà mùtùm gōmà à wuyànsà* ‘he has ten persons de-
pendent on him’ [AB :938a];

The metaphorical expressions related to other parts of human
body are very frequent in Hausa³ and, going through the large corpus
of proverbs collected in the years by scholars working on this lan-
guage, I find them extremely relevant. Unfortunately no one up to
now, except Dr Batic, as I know, has drawn the attention to study
systematically the usage of the metaphor in Hausa.

³ Dr Batic has given a very good proof on this topics in his Ph.D. disserta-
tion and in one of his article, recently published.

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