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To Speak, Not to Speak, or How to Speak: Atypical Bodies and the Politics of Language

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Sé dìndìnrìn ni é ni?—"Are you mentally disabled?"[1]—my mother would shout at me and my siblings in Yorùbá when we were still children, a question often provoked by any range of behaviors she deemed unusual. Whether it was bursting into tears when reporting a wrong done by another or responding sluggishly to a question of hers, any difference from expected emotional or behavioral norms prompted this remark. To this day, I can still hear the words, intoned in her Ibadan dialect, echoing through the walls of our one-story home in Lagos, Nigeria.

This is not to suggest that my mother was a terrible person or that she treated Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) poorly. Quite the opposite. I vividly recall a lesson she taught me (at age eleven) and my younger brother (then five) against mocking atypical bodies. It was a Sunday morning like in any typical Christian Nigerian household of the early 2000s: early mornings, no breakfast, quarreling siblings, angry parents, Esther Igbekele's voice crooning out of the CD player in the living room. After the usual Sunday morning drama that day, we got into the car and began the twenty-minute drive to church. My brother and I, sitting in the back seat of the car, noticed a man limping hurriedly towards what I assumed was a church service, his green and yellow patterned Ankara bùbá and sòkòtò with matching fìlà catching the glint of the sun's first rays as they slowly climbed into the sky.

Our reaction was immediate and thoughtless. We laughed at his limp, making jokes about his gait. In hindsight, our reaction might have been because it was not unusual to see comedic reactions to physical disability on television. Also, having no PwDs in my immediate family at that time, we did not realize how dehumanizing our mockery was. My mother, catching sight of the cause of our amusement in her side mirror, erupted with anger. Her voice filled the compact space of her Honda Civic sedan, her fair face flushing red. As she glanced off the road momentarily to deliver brain-resetting slaps to us, her car veered off course and headed straight for a ditch in what seemed like a split second. It was the very man we had mocked, along with other passersby, who helped to lift her front right wheel out of the ditch it had veered into.

[1]Translated by the author.

Whether it was the fear of my mother's wrath or the realization that the situation could have been far more devastating, or the belief that the accident was God's attempt to punish us for mocking an atypical body, I learned that morning never to mock another's disability. Even still, it was not because I had begun to recognize the inherent problem with normalcy and differences as part of the vast human experience. This same woman, who reacted so viscerally to our mockery, used disability as a metaphor for unwanted behavior. Within the cultural framework we navigated, the question *Sé dìndìnrìn ni é ni?* was neither unusual nor perplexing when directed at a child expected to exercise impulse and emotional control. Indeed, her speaking in this manner was part of a broader cultural system entrenched with stigmatizing beliefs about disability. It is a system that disavows overt mockery, yet allows prejudices to fester subtly, such that, in all its forms, disability becomes a disconcerting image of human frailty and impermanence (Falola et al. 59).

Over the years, many African disability scholars have highlighted the systems of subjugation confronting PwDs in Africa, including harmful traditional beliefs and social stigma, inaccessible social infrastructures, economic disadvantages, as well as social exclusion. They have researched how these systems perpetuate discrimination, enable marginalization, and complicate disability discourses, overlapping to create complex understandings of the atypical body. One of these complex understandings is located within the framing of disability epistemes.

In their book, *Disability in Africa*, Toyin Falola and Nic Hamel attest to the plurality of disability ideologies in African culture. They note that these diverse ideologies "contain a range of both positive and negative representations of disabled people," shaped by physical, cultural, spiritual, and social frameworks (8–9). Edwin Etieyibo, another African disability scholar, contends that such representations, though shifting according to context, are often linked to processes of "othering" the atypical bodies of that society (2). He further suggests that, because disability is understood as a corporeal condition as well as a consequence of spiritual forces in many African societies, all types of disabilities may be perceived as a generational weakness or as a form of divine retribution for past transgressions (7).

Within this metaphysical understanding, two dominant perspectives on the "spirituality" of disability emerge: the "positive" and the negative. "Positive" representations of disability position the atypical body as sacred or special. In her essay, "Disability in Africa: A Cultural/Religious Perspective," Mary Nyangweso highlights that, while some communities attribute disabilities to supernatural forces, others view individuals with disabilities as possessing unique spiritual significance (118–119). I had been afraid that the accident on that Sunday morning was a punishment from God for mocking a visibly atypical body; surely, God must have been angry at our actions. Though seemingly benevolent, the assumed positivity behind framing atypical bodies as vessels of special and mystical powers is disguisedly negative. Respecting the atypical body on the premise of its spiritual significance is pretentious and does not protect the dignity of PwDs.

In fact, perceptions of spiritual significance exoticize the atypical body through a supposedly unique relational dynamic, bringing up a plethora of complexities for both

the disabled and enabled bodies,[2] one of which is the struggle with how or how not to, as well as whether to, interpret differences. Thus generating, in Erving Goffman's words, a "special kind of relationship between attributes and stereotypes," a social tension that sustains disability-related stigma (4).

Moreover, the exoticization of atypical bodies fosters dehumanization and renders them acutely vulnerable to violence. Nyangweso recounts several harrowing examples of such violence:

> It is a common belief that albinos are cursed ghosts whose body parts can ward off bad luck and bring wealth and success. […] As Josephat explains, "[It] is more powerful if the victim screams during the amputation." [Gilgoff, "Albino Killings."] […] [M]en who have contracted HIV/AIDS can be healed from this condition if they sleep with albino girls. (121–122)

Some people are even murdered for having angular kyphosis (a condition where the spine curves more outwardly than it should), their protrusions removed for medicinal purposes (122). Within these logics, the atypical body is temporarily revered as sacred or mystical, only to be reduced to an object exploited for the benefit of others. This precarious positioning mirrors broader marginalizing dynamics, akin to the ways Black male bodies are situated within frameworks that oscillate between strength, utility, and criminality, leaving the exoticized body perpetually susceptible to violence.

Questioning the socio-cultural contexts that promote such beliefs, Nyangweso argues, is pivotal for promoting a change in prevailing attitudes toward PwDs (135–136). As scholars worldwide continue to research the portrayal of disability in literature, politics, and media, as well as how disability intersects with race, gender, and class, scholars in Africa contend with the compounded challenges of "indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial stigmas; legacies of armed conflicts; dense urban zones; vast rural areas; epidemiological risks; misplaced governmental and humanitarian priorities; as well as financial exploitation and underdevelopment" (Falola and Hamel 1). The complexities of disability in Africa, therefore, necessitate a nuanced approach distinct from that of the Global North.

Despite these structural challenges, language remains a crucial yet underexamined site of discrimination. Some scholars, such as Benedicte Ingstad, argue that linguistic critiques of disability in the Global North are largely irrelevant to African contexts. Ingstad posits that for a "poor, hearing-impaired woman in a village…it is presently of little interest whether she is called 'deaf,' 'disabled,' or a 'person with a disability'" (qtd. in Falola and Hamel 2–3). While her observation is not incorrect, it is not entirely true. Her observation overlooks the diversity of African socio-economic experiences, which extend beyond rural villages to include urban spaces where language plays a critical role in shaping identity.

[2]Contrary to the commonly used terminology, "able-bodied" which inherently implies that disabled bodies lack able bodies, the term "enabled" allows for inclusivity and aligns with the social model of disability that emphasizes the (in)accessibility of societal structures, rather than an inherent lack of ability in the disabled body.

In this essay, I speak of disability as atypicality existing within the frames of established bodily normativity. My goal here is to shift attention from the "big" stakes in African disability discourse to the subtleties of language. I want to contribute to African disability epistemes through a lens that integrates linguistic and cultural elements to interrogate how atypicality—both as a concept and a lived experience—is framed in everyday cultural discourses. Through narrative scholarship, I interrogate the cultural scripts that shape perceptions about atypical bodies in two social settings—the classroom and the church—as well as within the figurative ideations of selected disability-centered Yoruba proverbs, in order to emphasize that language holds transformative potential for reshaping narratives around disability. Drawing from my experiences and broader social interactions, I examine how language contexts reinforce ableist ideologies and disability-related stigma. The analysis of selected proverbs allows me to situate this discourse within a specific cultural context, so as to reveal hidden layers of ableist ideologies and emphasize that the language of disability does, in fact, matter in an African context. I argue that rethinking and reshaping language is an act of social justice, one that can help foster a more inclusive and dignified society for PwDs.

Silence in the Classroom

At some point in our academic journey, we have all encountered a so-called "problem" classmate. Too "disruptive," too "unintelligent" for the teacher's liking, and perpetually in trouble for failing to stay on task, complete assignments, score well on tests, or behave in a manner regarded as appropriate. In Nigeria, where corporal punishment is permissible as a form of discipline, such differences from the normative student behavior often result in flogging and shaming—a method of chastisement that dehumanizes/ stigmatizes rather than educates. This punitive approach ignores the existence of learning disorders, disabilities, and neurodivergence in the classroom. Teachers rarely adapt their instructional methods to accommodate students' needs. They reinforce the system that rewards "high achievers," leaving the rest to struggle alone. Rather than offering support, they uphold a hierarchy that isolates and stigmatizes those who do not conform to traditional academic expectations.

For these "struggling" students, failure in class is not just a personal struggle; it is a public humiliation, as they may be brought to the front of the class and mocked with the shame song that no child ever desires to be subjected to:

Olódo ràbàtà	*Big, fat dunce*
Ojú eja lo mò je	*You only know how to eat the eyes of a fish*
Òníi lo paper	*You will not use papers*
Silati lo ma lo'	*You will use a slate*
Ògbéni kí lo gbà?	*Mr/Ms., what did you get?*
Òdo bí orí eja	*Zero, like the head of a fish*
Shiki Shiki Shiki shame!	*Shiki, shiki, shiki, shame!*[3]

The shame song is a cruel tradition that further cements the "struggling" students' status as outcasts. To stand before peers while they sing about how one is too academically unintelligent to write on paper—a modern invention—and will instead be relegated to a

[3]Translated by the author.

slate—as used during pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria—is to experience exclusion in its rawest form. This song reinforces the social script of exclusion, wherein only typical bodies and minds deserve access to quality education and resources.

Sometimes, this verbal humiliation is accompanied by strokes of the cane, after which the student walks back to their seat, embarrassed and broken, internalizing the belief that their difficulties are not mere academic struggles but personal failings. Aware of these consequences, students might go to great lengths to avoid behaviors that might label them as different, pushing themselves to keep up, suppressing their struggles, denying their needs, or simply losing interest in school. Inevitably, they blame themselves or are blamed by others instead of the system that fails to recognize individual differences in the classroom. On the other hand, if you are a classmate of a "problem" student, you learn to distance yourself from them. Associating with an ostracized peer risks drawing a similar stigma upon yourself. Some students go as far as engaging in emotional and intellectual bullying to strengthen their own social standing. The proverb "Show me your friend, and I'll tell you who you are" takes on a sinister meaning in this context, reinforcing the idea that failure and difference are contagious and should be avoided at all costs.

One might argue that attitudes toward disability in the classroom have improved over time in Africa. However, these changes are minor when placed side by side with the deeply ingrained, traumatizing norms that continue to exclude students with disabilities. Falola et al. assert that "stigma and social grievances tied to disability still exist," noting that neurotypical and enabled individuals often "separate themselves from those with disabilities and ignore them because of their perceived differences" (50). Within many classrooms, atypical bodies are still denied a supportive and inclusive learning environment. In some cases, parents, anticipating stigma or mistreatment, choose to keep their children with disabilities out of school altogether, with this pattern disproportionately affecting girls. Gendered cultural beliefs that frame girls' education as unnecessary or expendable intersect with disability to further restrict access, particularly in contexts where the female body's value is narrowly defined by domestic roles. At the same time, some families' decisions are shaped less by overt discrimination than by concerns for safety, as girls with disabilities are often viewed as especially vulnerable to physical and sexual violence within and beyond school spaces.

Ebenso et al. note that discourse refers to the creation of knowledge through the representations of language (210). Understanding the way language creates knowledge concerning disability in the classroom is complex because, while it is often overtly hostile, it is also characterized by silence. Disability is like an elephant in the room, a taboo subject that, as Georgina Kleege describes in conversation with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Brenda Brueggemann, is perceived as "so tragic...foreign...and so horrific" (qtd. in Falola et al. 69). I experienced this firsthand while working as a classroom assistant after my first year studying English Education at the University of Ilorin.

Two students stand out in my memory: Student A, a girl with an upper limb amputation, and Student B, a boy who struggled with staying on task, completing assignments, and comprehending lessons. I believed that my attitude toward these

students was generally kind but, in hindsight, I recognize my own biases. I was curious about Student A's amputation (a phenomenon I later learned disability scholars have studied), though I never brought myself to ask about it. More troubling, however, was my internal conflict when grading her work. I often wondered whether I should be more lenient. If she performed poorly on a test, I subconsciously attributed it to her disability rather than considering that the material might have been difficult or that the teaching methods were ineffective. My assumptions equated physical disability with diminished mental ability. I became an unwitting participant in discriminating against her. My reluctance to confront my own biases robbed me of the opportunity to be a better educator.

My response to Student B, however, was quite different. I felt only frustration. I could not understand how anyone could be so disruptive, so resistant to following instructions. Some teachers blamed his mother, arguing that she overindulged him due to the loss of his father. Some even suggested that the mother's own physical disability made her incapable of properly raising a child. I do not recall if I shared these opinions, but I do remember my anger. I only began to understand the root of this anger six years later, after becoming a certified teacher in a different school. While working with students with special learning needs, I saw firsthand the resistance from other teachers when we introduced instructional accommodations. Many viewed these efforts as an attack on their long-established methods. The changes we proposed challenged their deep-seated beliefs about intelligence, behavior, and ability. Rather than re-evaluate their prejudices, they clung to a discriminatory system that had long failed to benefit students with disabilities.

I believe that this resistance, this anger, stems from the language of silence surrounding disability in the classroom; a language that constructs it as something "too difficult; too troubling" to engage, something that must be ignored. We must intentionally rethink the way we (do not) speak about disability, especially the way silence perpetuates stigma. The unwillingness to acknowledge diverse embodied experiences in educational spaces does not erase these differences; instead, it creates strongholds out of biases and stereotypes that could end up causing trauma for the students. Classrooms are, by nature, spaces of diversity, and when they are not, it becomes imperative to question their accessibility and inclusivity.

In many African countries, where education is a crucial pathway out of economic hardship, a traumatic learning environment further disempowers students with disabilities and strips them of their agency. The ableist structures in schools actively work against their well-being and limit their chances of survival in a world constructed to exclude them. We must disrupt these narratives and create educational spaces that recognize and support the needs of all learners rather than perpetuate their exclusion. Through intentional and strategic course design, grading policy, classroom conversations guidelines that promote healthy inquiry, etc., teachers can create an environment that de-normalizes the norm and teaches students that all corporeal conditions are actual lived experiences that must be honored and included.

Problem Body Before the Pulpit

While this section critiques certain religious perspectives on disability, I should acknowledge that these perspectives do not represent the totality of religious life in the religiously pluralist nation of Nigeria. Different faith traditions and denominations engage with disability in vastly diverse ways.

Having said that, I begin here by recalling my first time in an interdenominational church after arriving in the U.S. a few years ago. Standing between the altar and the congregation, to the preacher's right, was an unexpected presence: a sign language interpreter. This was not my first encounter with such accommodation. In Nigeria, large church services attended by people from across the country and even beyond were sometimes televised or live-streamed, and in the bottom right corner of the screen, in an excruciatingly small square, a sign language interpreter would appear. My intrigue, therefore, did not stem from unfamiliarity.

What, then, was it? In hindsight, I realize that before this moment, I had never encountered accessibility and inclusion in smaller religious gatherings, like those of individual branches or parishes, up close. I had only seen sign language interpretation in large, high-profile congregations that functioned as a conglomeration of parishes. This was my first time seeing accessibility in a local church setting. It would be a mistake to compare churches in the U.S. to those in Nigeria. The two exist in distinct cultural, economic, and political contexts, and any such comparison would be complicated by the hierarchical positioning of one over the other. Still, I wonder why my instinctive reaction to the interpreter was "intrigue," despite my prior exposure to sign language in religious spaces.

Additionally, it would also be inaccurate to claim that the Nigerian church actively segregates or excludes PwDs. It would, however, be equally misleading to claim that it does not harbor prejudices against bodily differences. To grow up Pentecostal in Nigeria is to attend churches that often attempt to pray away any difference from the established holistic normativity. A child experiencing difficulties at school, for instance, might be accused of being under the influence of witches determined to plunder their parents' resources. In this environment, the miraculous was always on display as an attempt to right the wrong by healing the atypical body, which implicitly problematizes other ways of being.

Rooted in constructions of normalcy that others nonconforming bodies, the belief that difference necessitates healing reinforces the notion that the disabled body is a "problem" body. Internalized prejudices against disability thus surface through actions presented as care for the "abnormal" body or as exercises of faith aimed at repairing what is perceived as broken. Inevitably, this perception of normalcy transforms disability into a spiritual dilemma to be resolved rather than accepted and seen as one of many expressions of human embodied realities. The "do something" ideology, among many other disability-related ideologies, illustrates the extent to which atypical bodies are abundantly textual, continually producing framings "within ever-shifting and unstable [social] meanings" (Mitchell and Snyder 223). In practice, this often results in interventions that prioritize the emotional reassurance or moral affirmation of onlookers

over the well-being of people with disabilities, reinforcing distorted beliefs about bodies and normalcy.

Far more effort is put into "correcting" the so-called problem body than into ensuring inclusion. Difference is treated as something temporary, something that could disappear with the right amount of faith, with a few efforts to provide resources for believers with disabilities to experience a stress-free worship environment. Prayers frequently target either the removal of existing disabilities or the prevention of future disablement, fostering stigma against PwDs in church settings both because of their disabilities and because of deeply ingrained stereotypes. Here, the spiritual conceptualization of disability in African contexts becomes especially visible through the framing of difference as a "problem" to be solved. Stigmatizing cultural and religious beliefs mark PwDs as subjects in need of fixing, or as cursed, as broken, or as sinful. When healing fails to materialize, these same belief systems often recast them as lacking faith or spiritual commitment. In this way, difference is regarded as a moral and spiritual failing. Such narratives place atypical bodies in a persistent state of scrutiny, fostering cycles of discontent, self-doubt, and fear (Nyangweso 128). Over time, this internalized stigma shapes how they understand their bodies, assess their capacities, and regulate their behaviors, often narrowing their sense of possibility and belonging within both religious and social spaces.

I do not offer this critique as an attack on religion or faith-based practices. Neither am I apologetic for questioning a religion I am a practitioner of. I recognize that I, too, may have my biases, but having this conversation confronts some of these biases. As clear as day, the problematic treatment of atypical bodies in religious spaces distracts from the larger goal of fostering an inclusive environment for worshiping in community. The barriers to accessing faith, resulting from this "problem" body ideology, should be discussed as widely as the barriers to accessing economic, political, and physical spaces are discussed. Talks of inclusivity and accessibility in Nigerian religious spaces should reach beyond ramps, sign language, as well as frugal and futile poverty alleviation schemes. Because, while these are necessary, they are not the only ways to ensure the overall well-being of PwDs in faith-based communities.

Proverbs and the Cultural Construction of Disability

There is language, and then, there is language. The former refers to structured means of communication within shared geographical or historical boundaries, encompassing grammatical rules, syntax, dialects, and accents. Growing up in Lagos, Nigeria, meant being exposed to a variety of (non)indigenous languages: English, the national language; Yorùbá, my tribal language spoken at home; Ibo, often heard from chatting teachers or quarreling neighbors; and Hausa, spoken by shoe cobblers or mobile tailors whose rhythmic clanging of tools signaled their presence in the streets. The latter kind of language extends beyond structured communication. It shapes perceptions of reality, functioning as an inherited state of mind and an unspoken mutual understanding passed through generations. This language manifests in proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and everyday slang that collectively shape as well as reflect a people's mindset and their unexamined truths about the world and each other.

The nature of the Yoruba language within social interactions, particularly its metaphorical ideations evident in its creations and use of proverbs and folklore, offers us a critical site for inquiry about disability. Especially, proverbs are repositories of cultural values and constructed truths about human experiences and social interactions. The Yorubas refer to proverbs as the *esin* "horse" of speech, because when words are lost, proverbs are used to search and find them. This means that through metaphorical and paradoxical expressions, proverbs clarify the intent behind meaning creation. They shape attitudes, stiffen "truths," and, in this case, enforce stereotypes as well as transmit generational beliefs about normalcy and difference.

Proverbs can offer profound insights into implicit ableist constructions of disability. They can reveal how the atypical body becomes a signifier of social meaning (Ebenso et al. 210) and reside in a realm of interpretive inexhaustibility (Mitchell and Snyder 223). In this light, proverbs can reflect how disability occupies the status of a thing too disconcerting: misunderstood as a metaphor for moral failure and a marker of social exclusion, a blemish, contamination, or an aberration of normativity. Thus, as Ebenso et al. note, a "systematic analysis of language use" will expose "cultural knowledge and attitudes" about disability in this context (210).

To this end, I provide three Yoruba proverbs to explore how language can be intrinsically ableist. Firstly, the proverb, *Àbùkù, ni ara ètè l'ówà; eni ti óbá ti ni èté óti l 'ábùkù*, translated as "social blemish is embodied in leprosy; anyone who begets leprosy, begets contempt,"[4] demonstrates how language conveys the social and cultural constructions of disability (Ebenso et al. 212). This proverb exemplifies how a condition like leprosy transcends its medical diagnosis and becomes a form of embodied social blemish that signals the moral or social failure of the person affected. It reveals how "society's intense loathing" of the leprous body constructs a "tainted identity" for the bearer of the disability (212). In its transformation from a biological condition to a social stigma, disability invites rejection and exclusion from spheres of power and social interactions. The proverb, as a linguistic tool, underpins the language of a problem body, while also perpetuating stigma and exclusion as tools for social control. Atypical bodies become embodied signifiers of social contamination and unacceptability.

A second Yoruba proverb, *Aro ònasè kan dí ònà*, translated as "A cripple does not block the road with his legs,"[5] encodes an implicit expectation that people with disabilities should recognize their presumed limitations and refrain from obstructing or challenging the enabled. Though the proverb may appear to function as a neutral observation or a lesson in social decorum, it rests on a reductive and homogenizing view of disability, assuming a singular, visibly impaired body and equating disability with immobility. The underlying presumption is that "cripples" lack legs and are therefore incapable of blocking the road, but this logic forecloses alternative forms of participatory movement and agency. Here, "limitations" are fixed and final; disability is an inherent boundary rather than a condition shaped by social arrangements. In this way, the proverb reinforces ableist hierarchies that legitimize exclusion while discouraging collective

[4]Translation provided in Ebenso et al.'s essay, "Using Indigenous Proverbs to Understand Social Knowledge and Attitudes to Leprosy among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria."
[5]Translation from Oyekan Owomoyela's digital archive of Yoruba Proverbs, "'Part 3: On Cageyness, Caution, Moderation, Patience, and Prudence.' Yoruba Proverbs: The Good Person."

responsibility for accommodation, and also assumes singular ways of being. What is offered as common sense thus operates as a cultural script that disciplines atypical bodies into invisibility, positioning restraint, withdrawal, and self-erasure as proper social conduct.

Here, disciplining refers to the social regulation of disabled bodies through expectations of silence and spatial containment. The proverb does more than describe what a disabled person cannot do; it instructs them on how to occupy space and, more importantly, how not to. By insisting that the disabled body must not "block the road," presence becomes disruption, and agency, impropriety. Disciplining limits PwDs to narrowly defined roles of quiet compliance, making absence or invisibility appear as their most acceptable contribution to social life. Within this framework, exclusion is normalized as etiquette rather than recognized as the outcome of structural inaccessibility. Silence becomes especially desirable, as it allows ableist systems to persist unquestioned, where social barriers are presented as natural rather than as reversible constructs.

Moreover, disciplining the atypical body into subservience contributes to the treatment of PwDs as second-class citizens of humanity, by framing them as burdens rather than individuals with intrinsic worth. Disciplining upholds the ableist belief that success is inherently tied to physical ability, making the accomplishments of disabled individuals seem either extraordinary or, worse, exceptions that prove the rule. This logic feeds into the commodification of disabled success stories, where disabled people who achieve success are transformed into tools for capitalist motivational rhetoric, celebrated as spectacles of resilience who have managed to triumph despite their so-called limitations (Etieyibo 3). In this sense, the proverb's quiet insistence on knowing one's place does more than regulate behavior. Subtly and through the propagation of discipline, it functions as part of an exclusionary social hierarchy that restricts full participation while masking inequality as cultural wisdom.

A third Yoruba proverb, *Á kìí ti ojú oníka mésàán kà*, translated as "One does not count the fingers of a person who only has nine in their presence,"[6] offers an alternative perspective on disability discourse. On the surface, it promotes discretion and sensitivity in addressing someone's impairment, but beneath this "considerate" message lies an ingrained discomfort with openly acknowledging disability. The implied social etiquette of avoiding direct reference to deformity or impairment frames disability as an unsettling anomaly, something to be quietly bypassed rather than integrated into everyday discourse. This avoidance stems from a deep-seated unease with diversity itself.

While this proverb discourages overt mockery, it does little to foster true inclusion or acceptance. It does not honor the disability story as one of many corporeal reminders of the impermanence of our bodies. Instead, it perpetuates a language of silence that encourages the stigma surrounding disability. Silence, in this context, is an act of erasure. It positions disability as something best left unspoken, reinforcing a cultural mindset where disabled individuals must navigate their existence in the shadows.

[6]Translation provided in Ebenso et al.'s essay, "Using Indigenous Proverbs to Understand Social Knowledge and Attitudes to Leprosy among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria."

Though masked as politeness, avoidance sustains ableist ideologies by allowing prejudice to fester unchecked.

Additionally, this silence robs us of teachable moments, of opportunities to challenge harmful assumptions and advocate for true accessibility and inclusion as they affect PwDs. When we refuse to name and discuss disability openly and empathetically, we forfeit the chance to dismantle ableist narratives that have been passed down through generations. Disrupting these silences is essential to rethinking and reevaluating dominant ideologies where ableist and discriminatory ideologies are often cloaked as cultural wisdom and practices (Lalvani).

Breaking this silence, therefore, is a necessary act of resistance. It equips our communities and us with the tools to de-normalize the norm, destigmatize the stigmatized, and de-traumatize traumatic paradigms surrounding disability. It forces us to confront the unconscious ableism we have inherited from our families and traditions, an ableism that continues to shape policies, social interactions, and access to opportunities. Until we make disability a topic of open and empathetic discourse, we will remain complicit in systems that problematize other ways of embodied being and living.

Negative attitudes toward disability are inseparable from the language that sustains them. Proverbs, as linguistic and cultural artifacts, do more than convey moral lessons; they toughen deeply entrenched ideologies about who belongs, who is valued, and who is relegated to the margins. Within the Yoruba context, proverbs about disability construct social realities by rendering disability as a site for metaphorical configurations. Whether it is to admonish decorum or enforce (false) caution, there is no justification for using disability as a site for constructing metaphorical renditions of "truths" about the disabled body.

Because disability is a human experience that comes in diverse forms, to metaphorize the disabled body is to enforce a singular way of being and to limit how disability engages with the corporeal. It is to reduce the human experience of disability to mere signs and symbols for producing controlling narratives of bodies and selves. Encoding disability as a source of shame, a justification for oppressive social hierarchies, or a condition best left unspoken shapes collective perceptions that sustain ableist exclusions across generations.

Yet, because language is a cultural inheritance, it can be a site of transformation. To rethink the language of disability is to challenge the wisdom it carries to disrupt the narratives that justify silence, stigma, and exclusion. If language shapes reality, then reconstructing the way we speak about disability is not just a matter of semantics or naming, but a necessary step toward social justice. By critiquing linguistic expressions that govern social attitudes, we open pathways to a more inclusive cultural consciousness that acknowledges diversity as an integral part of the human experience, thereby fostering societies where PwDs are recognized as full participants in life, rather than as subjects of quiet avoidance or metaphorical caution, or conditional acceptance.

Conclusion

Language is a tool for communication, but it is also a force that shapes how societies construct reality, define normalcy, and assign value to human lives. Within Yoruba

cultural discourse, proverbs serve as a repository of collective wisdom used to ennoble social hierarchies and transmit generational beliefs. In this sense, proverbs can function as mechanisms of exclusion, perpetuating ableist ideologies that relegate PwDs to the periphery of social, political, and economic life. As this essay has demonstrated, linguistic structures encode bias and sustain systems of marginalization.

Nevertheless, if language can construct marginalized realities, it can also be wielded to foster sustainable and transgenerational inclusion. Interrogating the cultural scripts that shape perceptions of disability is a crucial step toward challenging the narratives that justify silence, stigma, and segregation. It is an essential step toward social justice for PwDs. As Irving Zola argues, reflecting on the language of disability requires an awareness of how words "ennoble or condemn, augment or detract, glorify or demean" various forms of embodiment (167). To rethink the language of disability is to attempt to un-name the named and de-normalize the norm, a process that, as Zola acknowledges, is "not without its difficulties or consequences" (167). This transformation necessitates a deliberate effort to challenge oppressive linguistic frameworks and amplify narratives that affirm disabled bodies as integral to the human experience.

Future research into the intersections of language and disability in African societies can extend beyond Yoruba proverbs to examine how other linguistic communities construct disability to shed light on both shared and divergent perspectives. A broader comparative analysis of disability-related proverbs across different African cultures would provide deeper insights into the ways linguistic mechanisms sustain or challenge ableist ideologies. Creative writers can attempt the retelling of folklores, folk songs, and other forms of African oral traditions to subvert implicit ableist ideologies.

Additionally, as African oral traditions continue to evolve alongside modern media, it is equally important to explore the representations of disability in contemporary literature, film, and digital culture. Understanding whether these narratives are shifting in response to disability research or merely upholding traditional ableist ideologies remains a critical area of inquiry. Even as scholars and educators advocate for the preservation and teaching of indigenous languages, there is a need to assess whether literary and cultural institutions are rethinking the framing of linguistic artifacts in ways that promote inclusion rather than perpetuate negative attitudes toward PwDs.

Furthermore, analyzing how language about disability circulates in policy documents, legislative debates, and implementation guidelines can reveal how linguistic attitudes translate into concrete decisions about institutional accessibility, including in schools, healthcare systems, public transportation, and religious institutions. Examining the phrasing of disability rights laws alongside their funding priorities and compliance mechanisms makes visible how assumptions embedded in language shape whose needs are prioritized and which forms of access are treated as optional rather than mandatory. Given the additional layers of marginalization that affect women with disabilities, a feminist framework is especially useful for tracing how cultural narratives about femininity, dependency, and bodily normativity produce distinct forms of stigma that regulate disabled women's access to education, healthcare, sexuality, and public life, with direct consequences for both social perception and policy implementation.

By engaging in these critical inquiries, African disability scholars, activists, and policymakers can contribute to reshaping the linguistic and cultural frameworks that define disability in African societies. Language has long been a vehicle for exclusion, but it also holds the power to dismantle oppressive structures and build more equitable futures. The challenge before us is not only to critique the words that confine but to reclaim language as a tool for liberation to affirm the dignity and agency of all individuals, regardless of embodied differences.

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