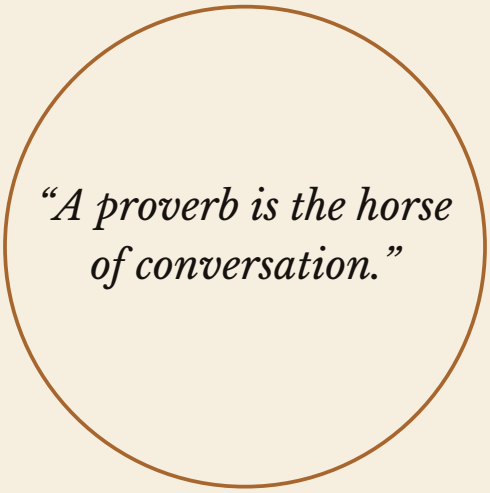
A YEAR OF YORUBA PROVERBS

A 52-WEEK REFLECTION JOURNAL



52 sayings recorded in 1894, with notes and questions for every week

FRANCIS ADERMONT

A free companion to Yoruba Mythology



“A proverb is the horse of conversation.
When the conversation droops
a proverb revives it.”

Yoruba proverb, recorded by A. B. Ellis (1894)

HOW THIS JOURNAL WORKS

Before You Begin



“A proverb is the horse of conversation. When the conversation droops a proverb revives it.” That is how one Yoruba saying describes proverbs themselves, as recorded by A. B. Ellis in 1894. Among the Yoruba, knowing proverbs well has long been a sign of wisdom, and a counsellor who knows them is said to set matters right quickly.

Take one proverb a week. Read it on the first day, and come back to it as the week goes on.

Read the short note under the proverb. It offers one way to read the saying, not the only one. Proverbs are meant to be turned over and argued with.

Answer the two questions in your own words. A sentence is enough; a page is welcome.

The weeks are grouped in seven themes. You can follow them in order, or open the journal wherever your week needs it.

THE SOURCE

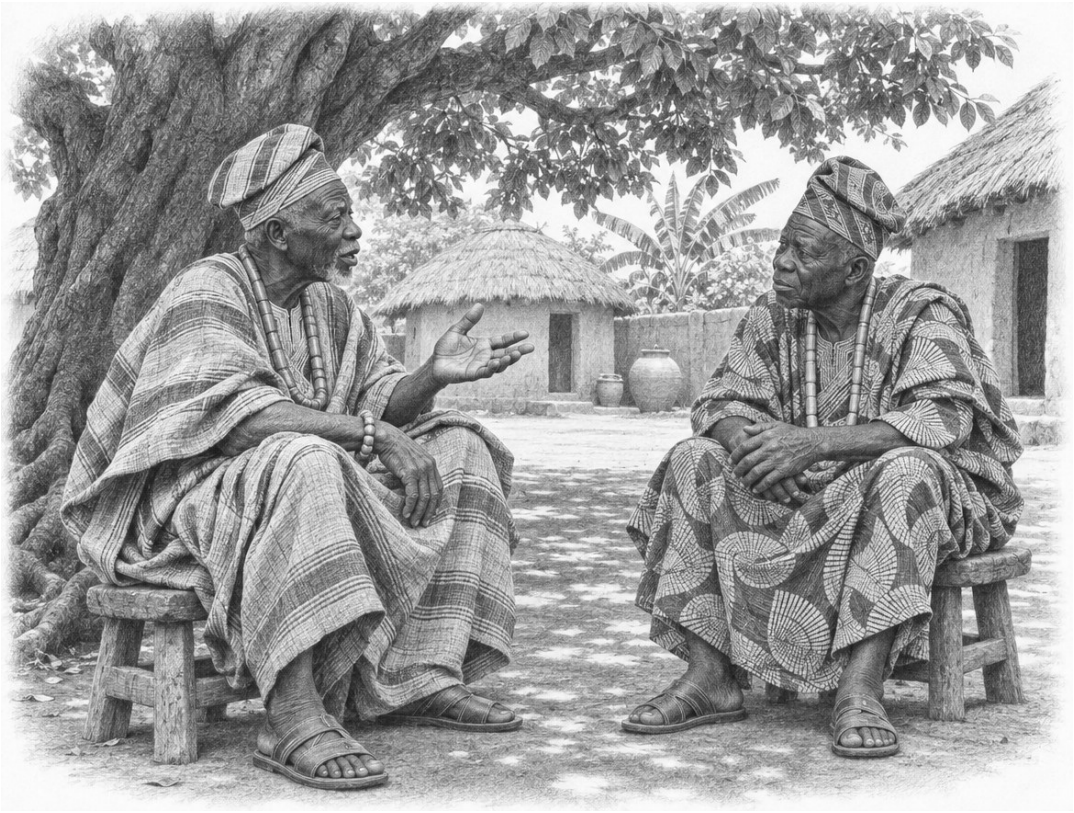
About These Proverbs

Every proverb in this journal comes from Chapter XIII of The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa by A. B. Ellis, published in London in 1894 and now in the public domain. The number beside each proverb is Ellis's own; "Couplet" marks his second list of two-line sayings.

The English wording is Ellis's translation, with obvious printing errors corrected. He rarely gave the original Yoruba, and we have not added it, so these are English renderings of spoken sayings, not the sayings in their own language.

Ellis was a British army officer writing in the colonial era, and his book carries the attitudes of its time. From his 250 proverbs we chose 52 whose meaning is clear and whose wisdom travels well. We left out sayings tied to slavery, sayings shaped by the prejudices of the period, and any whose sense we could not be sure of.

The notes and questions are ours. Where Ellis explained a proverb, the note says so.



THEME 1 OF 7

Words and Silence

What we say, what we keep, and what we hear. Yoruba conversation prizes the well-placed word, and these sayings watch closely how talk can build or break.

“A whisperer looks suspiciously at the forest when he hears a noise, but the forest does not tell tales.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 4

A way to read it. The one who gossips is the one who fears being overheard. The forest simply goes on being a forest. Suspicion often says more about the person who feels it than about the world around them.

1. When have I worried about being talked about? What was I really afraid of?

2. Is there a conversation this week I would be glad to have overheard?

“Boasting is not courage.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 9

A way to read it. Ellis grouped this saying with others meaning “deeds, not words.” Loud claims can stand in for action, and sometimes they are meant to. Courage tends to be quieter than its imitation.

1. Where in my life am I talking about something instead of doing it?

2. Who do I know whose courage is quiet? What do they actually do?

“A sharp word is as tough as a bow-string. A sharp word cannot be cured, but a wound may.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 25

A way to read it. A cut heals; a cruel sentence can stay for years. The saying asks us to weigh words as we would weigh a blow, because their damage is often longer-lasting.

1. Which words said to me years ago do I still remember? Why did they last?

2. Is there a sharp word of mine I would like to repair? How could I begin?

“Ear, hear the other before you decide.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 53

A way to read it. Every dispute has a second voice. Judging after hearing one side is quick, and it is usually wrong. The ear is told to finish its work before the mouth starts.

1. Where am I holding an opinion after hearing only one side?

2. Whose side of a story could I ask for this week?

“Time may be very long but a lie will not go to forgetfulness.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 60

A way to read it. A lie can sleep for years and still wake up. Time does not dissolve it; it waits. The saying is a warning, and also a comfort to anyone who was lied about.

1. Is there something I have avoided saying plainly? What would honesty cost me now?

2. How have old truths come back to the surface in my family or community?

“A mouth not keeping shut, and lips not keeping close, bring trouble to the jaws.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 190

A way to read it. Ellis compared it to “speech is silver, but silence is gold.” The mouth talks, and the whole face pays. Some things are better left unsaid, at least for now.

1. When did saying too much bring me trouble?

2. Is there something I should keep to myself this week, and why?

“The bat hangs with his head down, watching the actions of the birds.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 115

A way to read it. Ellis noted that this saying teaches silent observation. The bat does not join the noise; it watches and learns. Sometimes the wisest place is a little to one side.

1. What could I learn this week by watching instead of speaking?

2. Who in my life notices things others miss? What can I learn from them?

“Gently! gently! still hurts the snail.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 89

A way to read it. Even softly, some actions hurt. Saying “gently” does not change what is being done. Kind words around a hard act are still a hard act for the one who receives it.

1. Have I ever softened my words while still doing something hurtful?

2. Who might be feeling a “gentle” pressure from me right now?



THEME 2 OF 7

Time and Patience

Seasons, waiting, and the right moment. These proverbs know that some things ripen slowly and that a chance, once gone, does not knock twice.

“Time is longer than a rope.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 109

A way to read it. No rope reaches the end of time. What feels urgent today may look small in a year, and what seems lost may still be waiting further along.

1. What feels urgent today that may not matter in a year?

2. What long project in my life needs a longer rope of patience?

“The dawn does not come twice to wake a man.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 110

A way to read it. Each morning is a single chance; a second one is a new day, not the same one. The saying gently pushes us to rise to the opportunity in front of us.

1. What opportunity is in front of me right now?

2. What did I let pass once that I would not let pass again?

“He who waits for a chance will have to wait for a year.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 55

A way to read it. Waiting for the perfect moment is often a way of not starting. Chances are more often made than found.

1. What am I waiting for the “right time” to begin?

2. What is one small step I could take this week instead of waiting?

“The aro does not bear its load for ever; sooner or later it will put it down.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 174

A way to read it. The aro is the three-stone hearth that holds the cooking pot. Ellis gives the meaning plainly: sooner or later matters must mend. Every heavy season ends.

1. What load am I carrying that I hope to set down?

2. Looking back, which hard season did eventually end? What helped?

“If you are not able to build a house at once, you first build a shed.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 144

A way to read it. Ellis read this as “do your best.” Begin with the shelter you can manage; the house can come later. A modest start is still a start.

1. What “house” am I hoping to build? What would the “shed” version look like?

2. Where have I refused to begin because I could not do everything at once?

“He who waits to see a crab wink will tarry long upon the shore.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 235

A way to read it. Some signs will never come. Waiting for proof that cannot arrive keeps us standing on the shore while the tide moves on.

1. Am I waiting for a sign that will never come?

2. What decision could I make with the information I already have?

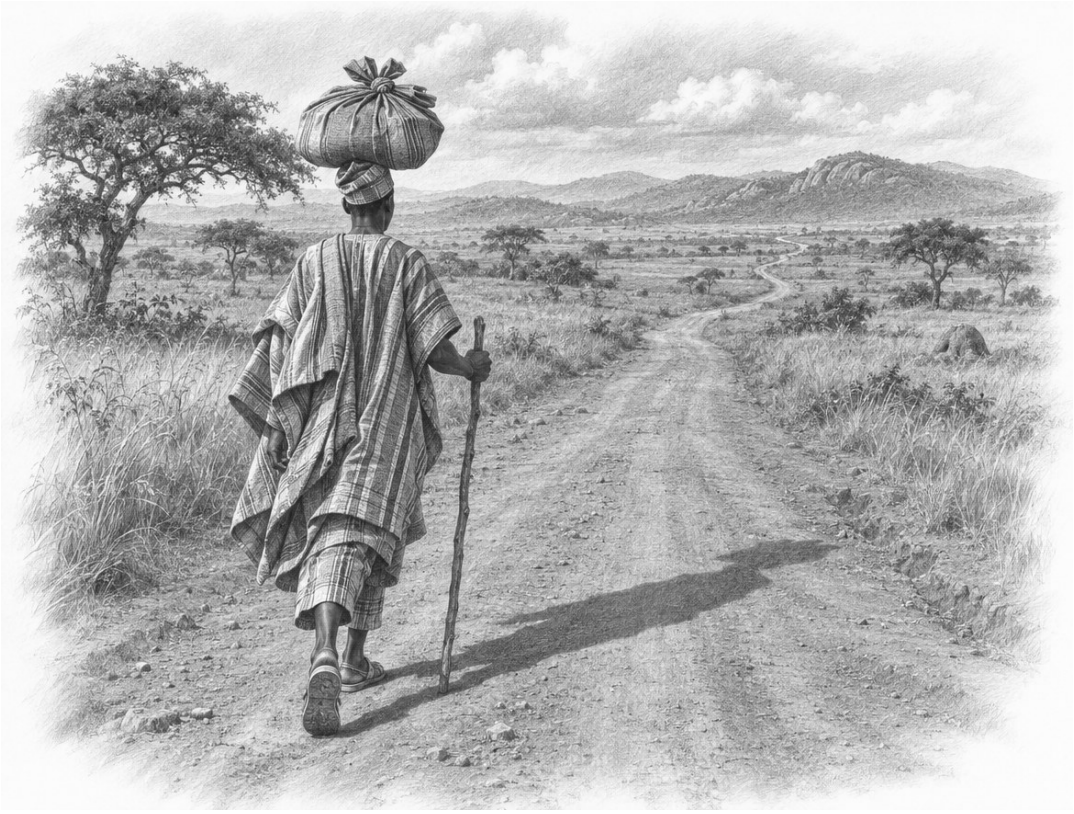
“To-day is the elder brother of to-morrow, and a heavy dew is the elder brother of rain.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), Couplet 14

A way to read it. Today comes first and shapes what follows, as dew comes before rain. What we do now is the older sibling of what we will live later.

1. What am I doing today that tomorrow will inherit?

2. Which small “dew” in my life is announcing a coming rain?



THEME 3 OF 7

Character

The self we carry from place to place. Appearance and substance are not the same, and these sayings keep reminding us to look again.

“Wherever a man goes to dwell, his character goes with him.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 86

A way to read it. A new town, a new job, a new house: we still arrive as ourselves. Changing places does not change the person who moves.

1. What part of my character have I carried into every place I have lived?

2. Is there a change I hoped a move would make that only I can make?

“Every man's character is good in his own eyes.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 85

A way to read it. Ellis compared it to “self-praise is no recommendation.” We all grade ourselves kindly. Other eyes may see what ours skip over.

1. Where might I be grading myself too kindly?

2. Whose honest opinion of me would I trust? Have I asked for it?

“Though the dengi is cold on the top, yet the inside is very hot.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 117

A way to read it. Dengi is a maize gruel: cool on the surface, hot underneath. Ellis gives the meaning: do not judge by appearances. Calm faces can hold a great deal of heat.

1. Who around me may be calm on the surface but struggling inside?

2. What do I hide under my own “cool top”?

“The coloured calico deceives the country-cloth, but it is not really what the country-cloth takes it to be, for the thread is fine.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 201

A way to read it. Home-woven cloth was sometimes dyed to hide coarse thread, so it assumed the bright calico did the same. Ellis gives the lesson: first impressions are often wrong, especially when we judge others by ourselves.

1. When have I assumed others think or act the way I do?

2. Whose “fine thread” did I misjudge at first?

“A white cloth and a stain never agree.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 75

A way to read it. A clean reputation shows every mark. The cleaner the cloth, the more a single stain stands out. Integrity is easier to keep than to restore.

1. What do I want my “white cloth” to stand for?

2. Is there a small stain I could deal with before it spreads?

“Self-conceit deprives the wasp of honey.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 175

A way to read it. The wasp thinks itself grand and still has no honey; the humble bee does. Pride can cost us the very sweetness we were hoping for.

1. Where has pride kept me from asking, learning, or receiving?

2. What “honey” could I gain this week by being humble?

“A knife cannot be so sharp as to sharpen its own handle.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 230

A way to read it. However capable we are, there are things we cannot do for ourselves. Even the sharpest blade needs another hand.

1. What can I not do for myself, however hard I try?

2. Who sharpens my “handle”? Have I thanked them?



THEME 4 OF 7

Wisdom and Learning

Asking, listening, and thinking before acting. Here wisdom is not a gift but a habit, built from questions and from the counsel of others.

“A man may be born to a fortune, but wisdom only comes with length of days.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 45

A way to read it. Wealth can be inherited in a moment; wisdom cannot. It is gathered slowly, one season and one mistake at a time.

1. What do I understand now that I did not understand ten years ago?

2. Which older person's wisdom would I like to ask about this week?

“Consideration is the senior, calculation the junior, and wisdom the third-born.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 66

A way to read it. The saying lines up three siblings: first think things over, then work them out, and only then does wisdom arrive. Skip the elder two and the third never comes.

1. Before my last big decision, did I take time to consider it?

2. What decision in front of me deserves more thought before I calculate?

“Inquiry saves a man from making mistakes. He who makes no inquiry gets himself into trouble.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 69

A way to read it. Asking a question costs a moment of pride. Not asking can cost much more. The saying makes curiosity a form of self-protection.

1. What question have I been too proud or too shy to ask?

2. Where could a little inquiry save me trouble this week?

“If a matter be dark, dive to the bottom.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 83

A way to read it. When something is unclear, go all the way down to understand it. Half-understanding in a dark matter is often worse than none.

1. What situation in my life is still “dark” to me?

2. What would it mean to dive to the bottom of it?

“He who does not understand the cry of the palm-bird (ega) complains of the noise it makes.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 169

A way to read it. Ellis noted that people are quick to despise what they do not understand. What sounds like noise may be a language we have not learned.

1. What have I dismissed because I did not understand it?

2. Whose “cry” could I try to understand instead of judging?

“No one should ask the fish what takes place on the land, nor should the rat be asked what takes place in the water.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 159

A way to read it. Ask people about what they know. Every creature has its own world, and good advice comes from someone who has lived in the place you are asking about.

1. Whose advice am I taking on a subject they have never lived?

2. Who knows the “water” I am about to enter? Could I ask them?

“Three elders cannot all fail to pronounce the word ekulu; one may say ekúlu, another ekulú, but the third will say ekulu.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 98

A way to read it. Ekulu is an antelope, and Yoruba is a tonal language where the tone changes the word. Ellis explains the meaning: there is safety in a number of counsellors.

1. Who are the “three elders” I could consult on a decision?

2. When did a group get something right that one person would have missed?

“It is the path of the needle that the thread is accustomed to follow.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 82

A way to read it. Thread goes where the needle leads. Habits, families, and communities pass on paths that others then follow without thinking.

1. Whose path am I following without having chosen it?

2. Whose thread is following my needle? Where am I leading them?



THEME 5 OF 7

Effort and Work

Small things added together. These proverbs come from farms, markets, and hunting paths, where nothing arrives by being watched.

“Rags make up a pad.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 5

A way to read it. Ellis compared it to “many a mickle makes a muckle.” Scraps of cloth, one by one, become the pad that cushions a load carried on the head. Small things add up.

1. What small habit, repeated, could cushion my life a year from now?

2. What “rags” do I already have that could be gathered into something useful?

“Continual sweepings make a dust-heap.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 6

A way to read it. A little every day becomes a mound. The saying works both ways: small good efforts add up, and so do small neglects.

1. What is quietly piling up in my life, for good or for bad?

2. What daily sweeping am I avoiding?

“You cannot kill game by looking at it.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 139

A way to read it. Watching is not doing. The hunter who only admires the animal goes home hungry.

1. What goal am I watching instead of pursuing?

2. What is the first real action I could take this week?

“By labour comes wealth.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 227

A way to read it. One of the shortest sayings in the collection, and one of the plainest. Not every form of wealth is money, but each comes through some kind of work.

1. What kind of wealth am I working toward?

2. Is the work I do each week aimed at it?

“Working in competition quickens the hands.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 200

A way to read it. Working beside others speeds us up. A good rival or companion can bring out a pace we would not find alone.

1. Who brings out my best effort?

2. Where could I find company for a task I keep putting off?

"When the shin-bone is not hurt, it says it has no flesh to protect it."

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 199

A way to read it. Ellis gives the meaning: you do not know what you can do till you try. We underestimate our own strength until something tests it.

1. When did I surprise myself by managing something I thought I could not?

2. What am I assuming I cannot do without having tried?

“If one is carrying water, and it gets spilt, so long as the calabash is not broken one can still get more.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 146

A way to read it. Ellis noted that it is said to those who think a disaster cannot be repaired. A loss is not the end while the vessel is whole.

1. What have I “spilt” recently? Is the calabash still whole?

2. What can I still fill again?

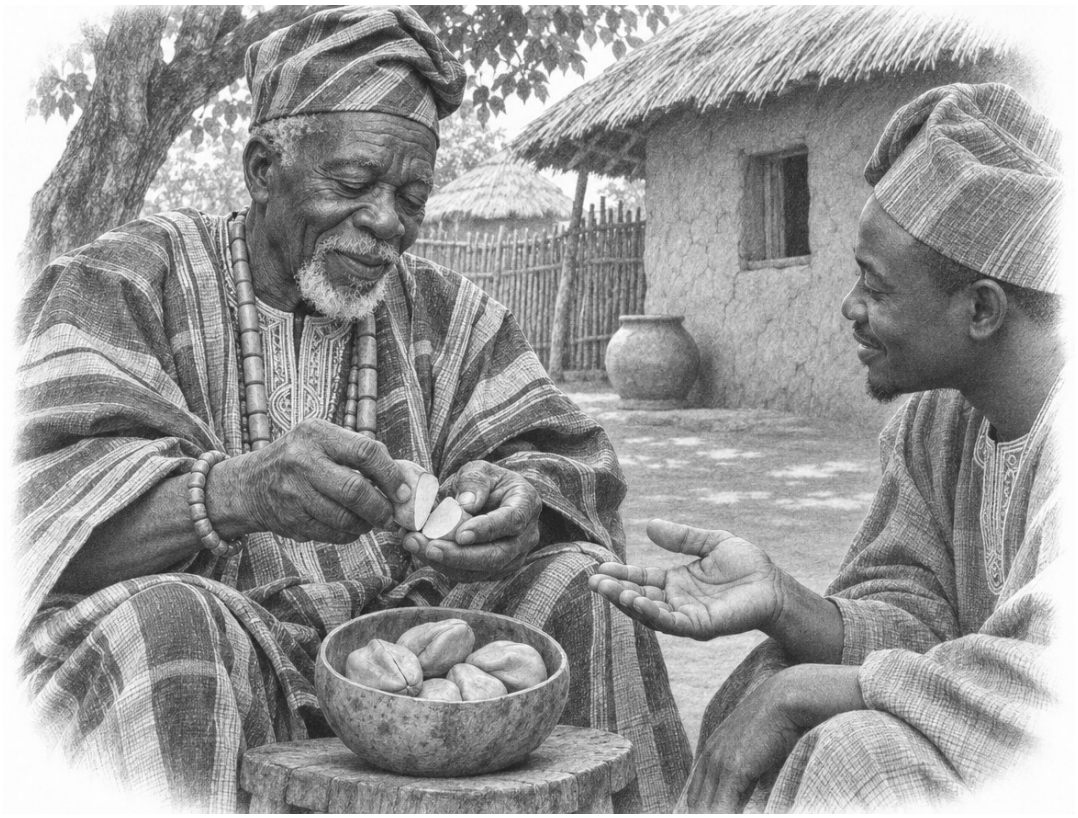
“He who cannot lift an ant, and yet tries to lift an elephant, will find out his folly.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 122

A way to read it. Ellis placed it among sayings that check over-confidence. Strength is built in steps; starting with the elephant only proves the folly.

1. Am I trying to lift an elephant before I can lift an ant?

2. What is the “ant-sized” version of my big goal?



THEME 6 OF 7

Peace and Kindness

Living close to other people. Friendship, forgiveness, and help given at the right time are treated here as the real wealth of a town.

“Peace is the father of friendship.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 22

A way to read it. Friendship is born where there is peace. Quarrels may end, but friendships grow from calm, steady ground.

1. Which of my friendships grew from a peaceful season?

2. Where could I bring a little more peace this week?

“He who forgives ends the quarrel.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 24

A way to read it. A quarrel needs two people to continue and only one to end. The one who forgives is the one who holds the power to close it.

1. Is there a quarrel I could end by forgiving?

2. What would forgiving cost me, and what would it free?

“Not to aid one in distress is to kill him in your heart.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 71

A way to read it. Turning away from someone in trouble is not neutral. The saying treats indifference as a quiet kind of harm.

1. Who around me is in distress right now?

2. What small help could I offer this week?

“He who is pierced with a thorn must limp off to him who has a knife.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 84

A way to read it. To remove a thorn you need someone with the right tool. Asking for help is part of healing, not a failure.

1. What thorn am I carrying that someone else could help remove?

2. Who has the “knife” I need? What stops me from going to them?

“Thanks are due to the shoulders which keep the shirt from slipping off.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 209

A way to read it. The shoulders do their work silently, every day, and are rarely thanked. So do many people in our lives.

1. Whose quiet support keeps my “shirt” from slipping?

2. How could I thank them this week?

“Anger does nobody good, but patience is the father of kindness. Anger draws arrows from the quiver, but good words draw kola-nuts from the bag.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), Couplet 5

A way to read it. Kola nuts are offered to welcome guests and to seal agreements. Anger reaches for weapons; good words bring out hospitality.

1. When did my anger reach for an arrow?

2. What good word could I offer someone this week?

“Although you are about to die, need you split up the mortar for firewood?”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 166

A way to read it. Ellis read this as: have some consideration for others. Even in our worst moment, we should not destroy what others will still need.

1. In a hard moment, have I damaged something others depended on?

2. What can I protect for others, even when I am struggling?



THEME 7 OF 7

Measure and Humility

Knowing the size of things, including ourselves. These sayings check the overconfident and remind the proud where their strength ends.

“He who tries to shake the trunk of a tree only shakes himself.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 123

A way to read it. Some things are too big to move by force. Pushing against them only exhausts the one who pushes.

1. What “tree trunk” am I shaking in vain?

2. Where could my energy go instead?

“The world is the ocean and mankind is the lagoon. However well a man can swim he cannot cross the world.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 124

A way to read it. The lagoon is calm and closed; the ocean is not. However skilled we are, the world is larger than any one swimmer.

1. Where do I need to accept that I cannot do it all?

2. What would “swimming my lagoon well” look like?

“The pond stands aside, as if it were not related to the river.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 177

A way to read it. Ellis noted it is used to reprove pride. The pond forgets that its water came from the river. Pride often begins by forgetting where we came from.

1. Where did my “water” come from? Who are my rivers?

2. Have I stood aside from people who helped make me?

“Ashes fly back in the face of him who throws them.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 81

A way to read it. Ellis compared it to “curses come home to roost.” What we throw at others often blows back on us.

1. When did something I threw at someone come back to me?

2. What am I tempted to throw right now?

“A lame man said the load on his head was not properly balanced, and was told “Its unevenness began from the ground.””

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 171

A way to read it. Ellis gives the meaning: it reproves those who find fault when the fault lies with them. Sometimes the problem is not the load but the way we stand.

1. What am I blaming on the “load” that may begin with me?

2. What would I change if I looked at it from the ground up?

“He runs away from the sword and hides himself in the scabbard.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 150

A way to read it. Ellis compared it to “out of the frying-pan into the fire.” The scabbard is exactly where the sword returns. Some escapes lead straight back to the danger.

1. Have I ever escaped one problem by running into its twin?

2. Is there a “scabbard” I am about to hide in?

“It is easy to cut to pieces a dead elephant.”

Ellis, The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples (1894), No. 12

A way to read it. Ellis grouped it with sayings meaning “deeds, not words.” Anyone is brave once the danger is gone. Real courage is shown while the elephant is still standing.

1. When have I been brave only after the danger had passed?

2. Who was brave while the elephant was still alive? What did I learn from them?

Your Own Proverb



A year of proverbs ends with a question of its own: which saying stayed with you? Write it here, along with the moment it came back to you. Then, if you like, try writing a proverb of your own, a short line that holds something you learned this year.

The proverb that stayed with me:

A proverb of my own:

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