

THE DYNAMIC ROLES OF PROVERBS IN IDOMA LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Proverb is a wise saying that addresses the heart of the discourse in any given context, truthfully and objectively. It is one of the elements of folklore that plays several significant and important role among the Idoma language speakers. The proverb as part of African oral tradition gives Idoma language a creative stamp of uniqueness, authenticity, and identity as it reflects and projects their world-view, culture, tradition, and perceptions. In Africa and Nigerian culture especially, they are considered as the reliable means which convey meanings to the hearts of the listeners. More specifically, the paper examines proverbs, the context of use, and the diverse roles they play in the colouration of Idoma language.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF IDOMA PEOPLE

The Idoma speaking people are predominantly found in Benue State where they constitute a population of about one million. There are also other Idoma speaking people in Nassarawa State in places like Doma, Awe, and Keana Local Government Areas. Other Idoma groups are found in Ogoja (Iyala), Ikom (Iyala) and Obubra Local Government Areas of Cross-River State. The Idoma nationality speaks Idoma language, and the language according to Abraham (1951) and Erim (1991) belongs to kwa group of languages. The Idoma language can be adequately regarded as a proverbial language. Meanwhile, the extent of usage varies from one dialect to the other. It must be understood that, Idoma people are known for their predominant use of proverbs in their day – to-day speech.

Proverbs in comparison to other forms of oral literature occupy a key position among the Idoma people which is used in this paper to refer to opinions, beliefs and customs that have been handed from generations to generations through the words of the mouth; oral tradition stands as an integral part of Idoma culture. As there was no written records in the time of our grandfathers, oral tradition was the only medium of preservation and transmission of cultural cum historical events in form of folktales, legends and myths which have in turn resulted in proverbs, maxims and cryptic anecdotes all appropriately designed to illustrate a particular native experience.

Significantly, Idoma oral tradition has maintained its ground and has compromisingly continued to exist side by side with the encroaching literary traditions. Oral tradition has therefore, survived in Idoma despite the introduction of western writing and the foreign tradition which writing bears. It is on this account that Okonkwo (1975:107) defines proverb as, “the expression and wisdom of several ages gathered and summoned in one’s expression.” It is not an overstatement to say that,

Idoma man's reputation as a good speaker or as a successful oral artist to a large extent depends on his ability to use the proverb judiciously.

Consequently, the roles of proverbs in Idoma tradition are particularly conspicuous and this accounts for the more prominence they are given than any other form of oral tradition. The prominence of proverbs in speech is even worldwide as has been manifested by the views people have about proverbs in different places of the world. However, the intensity of prominence and usage varies from place to place while its basic meanings and functions remain almost the same throughout. Different functions of proverbs are emphasized by the various users and this accounts for the slight differences in the view of proverbs as held by people from diverse parts of the world.

Similarly, Nwadike (1989:31) opines that proverb is "a form of speech which is pregnant with meaning, which is above the knowledge of a fool or an average person." It must be understood from this point that, proverb is not meant for people that are not intellectually, culturally, and linguistically sound. One must have a reasonable input of the local or native quality of one's native language.

It is important to note that, while some ethnic groups quote bible or the works of maxims of wise men, or from a carefully worked out code of law, the Idoma man quotes proverbs to buttress his point and give authority and authenticity to an idea or a disputed fact. Naked is any speech or literary work that is not punctuated with apt proverbial expressions and idiomatic language, but any paper or expression that is clothed with proverbs makes the listeners to nod their heads in approval and admiration of the speakers' linguistics elegance. Proverb is a way of catapulting a bitter truth via the medium of smooth words. It is essentially the first proverbs by and large that are the life in a conversation and as Achebe (1958:5) states, in the act of conversation, proverb is highly regarded among the Igbo as it is the Palm oil with which words are eaten. A careful analysis brings to light the fact that proverb is not just the palm oil alone but equally the salt, pepper, locust bean, etc which give food or words a delicious taste to send aroma to all the nooks and crannies of the community in question.

Proverbs among Idoma people are regarded as the language of diplomacy. It is however used among the people in cases of settling bride price, burial arrangement, trade, short oratory, wrestling, traditional debate competition, to mention but few. Igwe (1986: VII) is not left out in acknowledging the relevance of proverbs in Igbo land when he says, "proverb is a language of exclusion." In short, I so much fall in love with that opinion because, proverbs make one to excommunicate strangers from participating in crucial issues of cultural values. It is very important for communicating ancient cultures and it is on that note that Okafor (1999: vi) maintains that "to speak Igbo language without a proverb is like walking on the road without looking backward." I must acknowledge this here that, Igbo as a major language in Nigeria has Africa's recognition in terms of rich proverbial inventory so also, a deluge of proverbial poll among the Idoma language despite her (Idoma) status as a minority language in Nigeria.

It may be inappropriate to talk about proverbs without considering Obeifuna's view of it. He states that an Igbo proverb seems to have originated from four main sources which are:

- a. A hand-down from time immemorial, hence they have been characterized as the distilled wisdom of the ancestors.

- b. Crisp, mature and witty observations made by the elders to save the young ones.
- c. Social contact, social change and acculturation and Igbo praise name.

In short, we have this strong opinion that boundary has a very great influence on what people do, say, eat, wear, or believe. We came to understand that, Igbo language, precisely the dialect spoken among the Inyi, Amalla, and Obollo-Afor people, all of Udeno Local Government Area of Enugu State has a great influence on the Orokam people of Idoma language in Benue State. There is a great similarity in their names such as “Odoh, Akor, Agbo, Abah”, etc, language, eating habits, dressing code, belief system and other cultural features. Therefore, one should not be surprised seeing similarity in the world views of the two languages.

Egudu (1973) cuts in that, proverbs are employed in communication for the purpose of embellishment and reinforcing the power of argument. Well, it will interest us to note that, the phrasing of some proverbs among the Idoma people have been influenced by their natural environment which in turn influences their cultural attitudes and system of values. Many of our proverbs are connected with vegetations, livestock, wild animals, birds, etc. Thus, the Idoma people are great devotees to God and His intermediaries, and offering sacrifices to the deities; they have many proverbs connected to sacrifices. It is not possible for a people to have proverbs quite unconnected with their environment and ways of life. Therefore, it must be understood that Idoma proverbs are known for the relevant citation to life. The use of proverbs among the people has something to underscore such as caution, praise, encouragement, etc. They are the convenient standards for appreciating behaviour in terms of the approved norms and because they are pungently, sententiously and wittingly stated, they are ideally suited for commenting on and connecting.

Literary Qualities of Idoma Proverbs

The proverb like poetry works through a concentrated expression of images, emotions and ideas. This is done through its profound use of figurative language which constitutes an essential feature of its artistry. It is also one of those qualities that proverb exhibits that qualify it as a work of literature. The dominant figures of thought found in the proverb include metaphor, simile, hyperbole, contrast, euphemism, etc.

Metaphor

This is a condensed verbal relation in which an idea, image or symbol may be the presence of one or more ideas. Images or symbols are enhanced in vividness, complexity, or breathe of implication (Alex 1965). From here, metaphor can be said to mean an implied comparison of two unlike things. Also metaphor works through images and symbols which best represent the idea expressed in the proverb. The importance of metaphor is heightened by Aristotle in his comment quoted in Alex (1965) that, “the greatest thing by far is to be a master of genius; since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilarities.”

Proverbs through images & symbols found in metaphor, renders otherwise abstract ideas immediate and concrete as in:

O wá ányí nyá
He/she is a chameleon.

This implies to the natural protective colouration of a chameleon which enables it to disguise itself in consonance with its environment. This inconsistency of colouration is directly used to illustrate deceitfulness of character. Therefore, proverbs through metaphors help the speaker to pin down what he means without involving himself in generalization. This proverb is used when the Idoma man wants to portray an unreliable character. The metaphorical reference to chameleon enables the listeners to come to grips with what is meant. Similarly,

Akogwu wé óchì okwò óba
Akogwu is a stick that protects the barn

This implies that Akogwu is described as an indispensable person who is very useful in the society. Therefore, when Idoma people use this proverb for any one, such a person is regarded and treated like an earthly messiah.

Simile

Simile is a figure of speech where two fundamentally unlike things are explicitly compared, usually in a phrase introduced by “like” or “as if”. In other words, simile is essentially comparism between two things which differs in kind but are alike in the particular point to which attention is directed. Simile just like proverbs achieves concreteness and vividness as in:

i. *Óbí lótú lé béká otú má*
Wickedness is like darkness/night

This proverb shows that one who is wicked is likened to a darkness or night that is not human friendly or has a lot of unpredicted evil actions or ideas in it. So, when one is been regarded as ‘otu’ (night/darkness) among Idoma people, it means the person has a questionable character as well as been wicked.

ii. *Óbà lo ja ónyaní ta lè bánkà ikìnábó má*
A man who tricks his wife is like a tortoise

The tortoise is the number one trickster in Idoma proverbs. Tortoise can trick anyone including the closest animal or relative. Tortoise is known for its wisdom and anyone described as tortoise is accorded respect.

Imagery

Imagery is painting a mental picture of an object which is not present at the point of discussion. Image used among the Idoma people is to concretize or emphasize on a point or issue.

i. *Ólá gé nyí, é dé wò há hó ní*
If the fire is off, then there is no need of staying with the ash.

This ‘olá’ (fire) here is an image which symbolizes life while ‘éwò’ (ash) stands for something that is not relevant. This is mostly used among the Idoma people when a man dies and the barren wife decides to stay back in the dead man’s house. The implication here is that, if the man who brought the wife home is dead, then the wife does not need to stay back since she does not have a child or children to pull her attention back to that family.

ii. *Òná lo hò má éwù né*
This fufu is a mountain

The mountain (éwú) here is an image used among the Idoma people to depict a reasonable size of something instead of using an everyday language. This choice of proverbs adds colour and quality to the Idoma expression.

Contrast

This is another literary element found in Idoma proverbs. This involves juxtaposition or placing opposite words side by side. It emphasizes meaning and renders a proverb memorable as in:

- i. *Ódànkà ábonìkpò, ìkpò kó nábó dú*
If the hand is washing the leg, the leg also should be washing the hand.

This proverb emphasizes on the need for people to be useful to one another and not to live an egocentric lifestyle.

Euphemism

It is worthy of note to acknowledge the role euphemism plays in the proverbs among Idoma people where unpleasant information or news is passed in a pleasant way to avoid hurting feelings. Examples are:

- Okpíríchí ónyá má kwú iyó lá gbo mé ife éné*
The old woman has slept since yesterday.

This is a wise way of passing a death message to the deceased family among the Idoma people. “Íyólá” means sleep but the context at which it has been used above indicates that the person is dead. There is a cliché among the Idoma people that: ‘a jabi ikwu le ni, a ye mi yo la .That is, if one does not know how death looks like, then such one should go and look at sleep. So, sleep is used to paint pictures about death.

- ii. *Ákór wóchè ótányà lábó*
Ákór is a person that helps women

This expression above is used to depict Akor as a womanizer or someone who likes having sexual relationship with any lady that comes around him. In fact, it is very difficult to see a typical Idoma person who does not make frequent use of Idoma Proverbs.

The capability of proverbs to expose diverse aspects of the Idoma man’s philosophy of life stands out among the functions of proverbs in oral tradition. This makes the proverbs to be didactic as they tend to teach while projecting these philosophies of life. It is on this note that Adrain (1971) alludes to the function of proverb as:

By their sheer ignominy and aptness these proverbs bear witness to remarkable gifts of observation and a consciousness of moral duty. I believe that a study of these sayings is indispensable for those who wish to understand the sound of African people.

The best way to understand any tribal or ethnic group is to grasp her philosophies of life. This is best achieved via proverbs since they reflect as a rule, the basic details of rural African life and frequently built around a central image of striking beauty, charm from the people’s long acquaintance with the forest and its taming animal life. The traditionally accepted patterns of

life are unconsciously instilled into people through their proverbs. There are several patterns of life that are reflected through proverbs, such as:

i. Sincerity or Truthfulness

Sincerity or truthfulness is one of the iconic features that brings undisputed honour to an individual in Idoma society. On the contrary, deceit/lie brings about disgrace and dishonour. Truth or deceit builds or mars one's reputation in the society.

The importance of truth is manifested in the saying:

Ojojé wé o hèyí má
Truth is life

This epigrammatic proverb is saying that, it is truth that makes life what it is. This proverb shows that liars are characterized by misery, misfortunes, and calamity.

ii. Co-operation

In every society today, no individual lives alone, except there is harmony among neighbours if not the question of peace will be out of place. Proverbs are coined to direct the minds of people. Co-operation is a philosophy of life that makes for a perfect peace and tranquility in the society to be enhanced. Mutual help and co-operation are vital for social and economic progress of any community or people. Therefore, this proverb:

á gwú tà chún, n gwú tà chó, wó hè yí má you lie on me, I lie on you and that is life

This is to say that, give and take are the basis for mutual understanding. Therefore, this proverb enjoins us to live a symbiotic life in every part of our human society.

iii. Patriotism

This is the act of loving and being ready to stand out and defend one's fatherland against external aggression. It operates on various levels ranging from families, villages, towns, divisions, states, countries, etc. Once the love is there, selfless sacrifices will be made in the interest of one's fatherland. It is on this account that the Idoma people use the proverb:

á ché kófú ó lada ko gbólèwo no
don't allow the road to your father's house to be turned into dog faeces or excreta.

This ordinarily means that, if one plies the road to one's father's house regularly, it will be impossible for dogs to turn that road to a place where it will defecate. This proverb implies that, everyone should stand out firmly to represent or defend one's race actively so that such society will not be thrown into moribund.

iv. Attitude towards Justice

Fair dispensation of justice is advocated with the same vigour evil doing is condemned in the society. Bias or preferential treatments are strongly kicked against among the Idoma people. They clamour for equality and fairness and this is epitomized in several of Idoma proverbs such as:

Sáta tra ché ka mé mu ná lo hoo gbenu ta
When you have a load on your head, take your hands off it to see where its heaviness lies.

This proverb implies that, when one is in position of making or taking judgement, he or she must not take side with either of the parties, therefore, he should blame the wrong person and praise the right person as well encourage the parties on how they can live peacefully in the society devoid of squabbles. This proverb and many others capitalize on the fact and advocate justice to all if peace has to prevail.

In fact, the transmitting functions of Idoma proverbs are prominent and can promptly be identified in proverbs. Most of the proverbs are offshoots of unique experiences and activities of our predecessors who have coined them in such a way that they can easily be memorable. The dynamism of proverbs prompts Ogbalu (1965) in his School certificate Igbo to say that:

A good understanding of Igbo Proverbs would automatically lead one to an understanding of the Igbo man, his philosophy of life, tradition, culture and mode of living because it is in them that the accumulated wisdom, religious belief and experience of the Igbo man throughout his history have been embedded and preserved.

In short, the role and importance an Idoma man attaches to Idoma proverbs are not far from that of an Igbo man. The proverbs act as custodians of the Idoma man's past, his essence and cosmology. In them, the accumulated wisdom, beliefs, cultural experiences, traditions, values, etc are immortalized and transmitted from one generation to the other. It may interest us to know that transmission of cultural ethics and values play significant roles among the Idoma indigenes.

Custom:

There are proverbs that their direct constructions reflect the custom of our people, as in:

Wá ká búma ta, o lochi du lo jó ówé lo yé wà ni n

Come and see me off, there is no one who cannot retrace one's footsteps back home.

This proverb reflects on the Idoma custom on the practice of seeing one's visitor off as a sign of respect and appreciation so that the person (visitor) can repay his visit when necessary. It is on this note that the Idoma man always says that: Ojíròchè ànú pí okwú óché mà. Meaning, the one who visits the neighbour will be the one to discover the dead body of that person, if such person dies. Therefore, Idoma culture demands that one should accompany a visitor from one's house even though, one does not go far but to show that one values such a visit.

In a related development, Idoma custom also places a high value on the use of Kola nut (emn). This is captured in the Idoma proverb that says:

Obí emn wa, bíohèyí wá díúú

He who brings kola-nut, brings life

Kola-nut is very precious to Idomas. It is not taken for its food value but for its significance to the Idoma man. The presentation of Kola to visitors is a clear-cut manifestation of goodwill. This kola is cut into pieces and given to all around at that time irrespective of age and sex. The sharing is usually done with finger nails with which the kola can be reduced to as many pieces as possible. The proverb does not only show the belief system of the people but as well elucidates the importance of kola in our traditional society.

Artifacts

There are so many items in our society which we have come to accept and use as ours today. This is because their names and the way they are used have been made available from generation to generation through proverbs as in:

Ókpáká ànú lá nó lé tícho ári mà

It is through the strap that one can climb the palm tree.

Ókpáká which is a strongly coiled rope used for climbing palm trees, is as old as Idoma herself. Its name has been preserved and handed to us through proverbs as above. The proverb does not only transmit its name but also tells us how the instrument is used. The instrument is used to demonstrate that one must always put effort in what one is doing in order to succeed.

Transmission of History

There are several events that happened many centuries back which still enjoy prominence in our society today. This has been made possible by the transmitting nature of Idoma proverbs. Our great grandfathers in their characteristic wisdom and in the absence of writing facilitated and contrived these events into proverbs- the form in which they are used and remembered today. Events which otherwise would have been forgotten are perpetuated and handed from generation to generation.

Recommendations

- a. Traditional Africa oral literature should be encouraged and institutionalized at all levels of education in order to bring out the local colours of our ancestral and cultural world view.
- b. Cultural activities should be organized frequently where the children will actively participate to show their potentials and command in the use of Idoma proverbs.
- c. Greater air space should be made available to incorporate programmes such as proverbs, dance, craft, debate on cultural issues, etc, on televisions or in the radio stations within Idoma areas.
- d. Idoma indigenes and elites should write text-books on Idoma proverbs in order to fast-track the learning and understanding of Idoma cultural values.
- e. At this ICT age, the Idoma proverbs and cultural beliefs should be made available on the internet so that Idoma children both home and abroad will be abreast with their cultural tradition.

Conclusion

The origins of some of these proverbs in Idoma language turn out to be quite colourful and revealing, expanding then the view of a culture. Despite proverbs being the backbone of a lot of societies by helping to identify and dignify a culture, their potential value for modern thought and life is still to be recognized. Even in Africa, proverbs are a vanishing heritage associated mostly with the rural world. They seem never to have found a home in the modern world, especially in the imported system of education because schools do not bring out the great importance of proverbs in the lessons being taught. Africa's proven to be a rich source of proverbs and sayings, encapsulating in a few words profound principles that bespeak wisdom. Many philosophers in the western world could learn from the simplicity and brevity of African proverbs that are unclouded by too many words. The meaning of proverbs is easily understood because so much can be said with fewer words; and wisdom does not have to involve countless vocabulary. Proverbs add colour to our lives and give us valuable lessons we can all apply to our benefit. It is apparent that pithiness and

economy of words are inherent in proverbs. Therefore, the effectiveness of proverbs among the Idoma people lies on the aptness of their usage in a particular context.

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