



The Euphemistic Role of the Ibibiod Proverb-Riddle

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Abstract

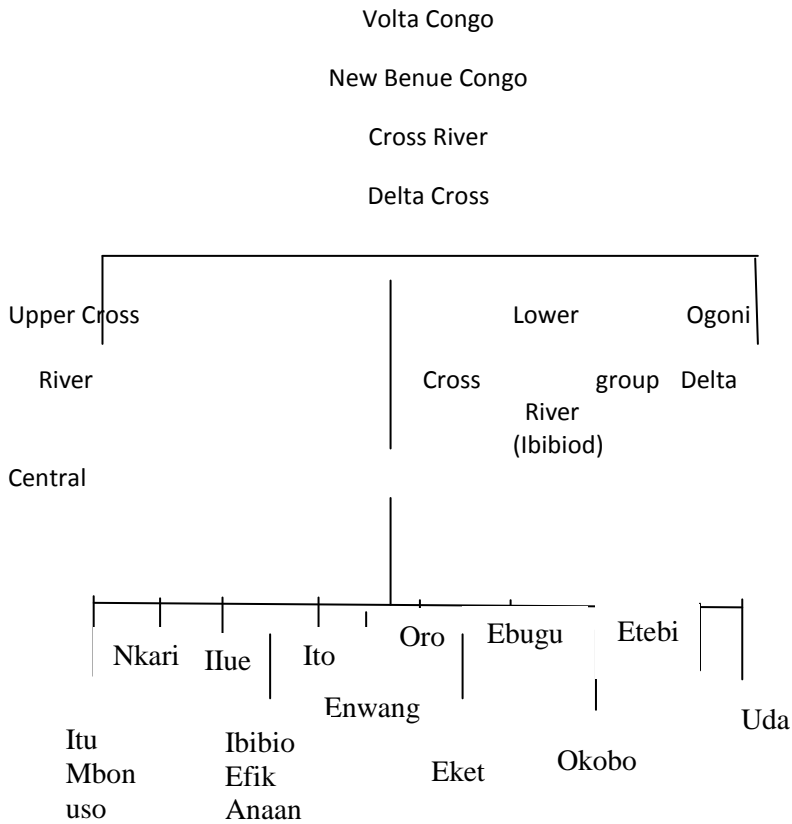
The Ibibiod Proverb-riddle is a major aspect of the Ibibiod communication events. The nomenclature Proverb-riddle is controversial. Some have defined it verbally as a double riddle, a double proverb, a tonal riddle, a rhyming riddle and a two sentence proverb, etc. A Professor of Education, Umoh Susan (2007), proffers a definition which the essay prefers to use in the study. She explains that a proverb-riddle combines the properties of a proverb and a riddle. She describes the components of a Proverb-riddle as a Question (Q), Answer (A), Tone (T), and Rhythm (R). She goes further to justify the riddle component since it poses a question, and the proverb component since it provides the answer. She further explains that the same rising and falling pitch recurrence pattern is used in both Question and Answer components.

Introduction

Ibibiod covers a large linguistic area within the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Ibibiod is an alternative cover term for the lower Cross River languages. These languages share similar phonological, syntactic and semantic characteristics (Essien 1990, Urua 2000). The group constitutes a highly multilingual and densely populated linguistic area as it can be seen illustrated in the sketch below.

Niger Congo

Atlantic Congo



A sketch to locate Ibiboid languages grouped within the Niger Congo relationships (Adapted from Williamson 1989)

Genetically the Ibiboid languages are daughters of Lower Cross, one of the four direct daughters of the Delta Cross furcate of the Cross River Sub family within the New Benue Congo which itself is traceable to the Niger Congo phylum of African languages through Volta Congo and Atlantic Congo.

Data

Data for this presentation is drawn from Ibibio, Efik and Annang. These three constitute a language cluster within Lower Cross and they are mutually

intelligible. The rest of the Ibibiod group are smaller languages, most of them maintain a one way mutuality with Ibibio, Efik and Annang. The proverb-riddle present in Ibibio, Efik and Annang is yet to be attested to in the other Ibibiod languages at the time of this report.

The Proverb-Riddle

Some have defined and described the proverb-riddle as a two sentence proverb, a two sentence riddle, a rhyme, a tonal proverb, etc. Umoh Susan (2007), an Ibibiod speaking Professor of Language Education believes the appropriate name is proverb-riddle. She insists that this communication device is neither just a proverb nor just a riddle. She maintains that it has both the proverb and the riddle aspects. We believe that this nomenclature is the most suitable at least for now. The proverb riddle needs a double interpretation to obtain the sense and obtain the moral value. So it is not justifiable to see it as just a proverb or just a riddle. She goes further to describe the components of the proverb-riddle as comprising a question (Q), an answer (A), a tone (T), and a rhythm (R).

On close examination of the proverb-riddle, the two lines of utterances are sentences. We find it difficult to describe them as question and answer. We prefer to call the first sentence (A) the encoded aspect and the second sentence (B) the decoded. The speaker encodes the first utterance the receiver or audience decodes in the second utterance or B part of the utterance. After decoding, interpretation is still needed to arrive at the basic understanding intended.

The Euphemistic Role of the proverb-riddle

Euphemism refers to the process of providing alternative name or expression to disguise and beautify what otherwise would have been indecent, brash, raw, dirty or embarrassing. World languages have various ways and devices for achieving this. Within the Ibibiod languages the proverb riddle has been discovered to be a significant euphemistic device.

Data Presentation and Discussions

This data is drawn from the three major Ibibiod members - Ibibio, Efik and Annang. The proverb-riddle can serve as an advice, a warning, a rebuke, an encouragement, etc. In the next section we present examples.

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| <p>Sé ákpá ínwáñ sé ákpá nwáñ Look expanse(of) farm look expanse(of) farm sé n̄tè èsò ádádé ókọkọ ọkpọ see how antelope c standing c crossing legs </p> | <p>Look at the expanse of the farm, look at the expanse of the farm. Watch how the antelope stands crossing its legs.</p> |
| <p>Sé úsúñ itọñ sé úsúñ itọñ, sé n̄tè Look road throaṭ see road throaṭ see how usuñ ádádé ébét éféré bolus c standing c waiting soup</p> | <p>Watch the throat, watch the throat, see how food is waiting for the soup.</p> |

Watching the throat as another person is swallowing can be a difficult and unpleasant task. It may even be regarded as unreasonable. It can provoke anger and conflict. The proverb riddle provides a euphemistic covering.

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| <p>Ñtém ntém mbén úsłñ I clear clearing by the road m̄kpì ébód ókpó I(d) cut goat leg </p> | <p>I clear the bush by the road and cut the goat's leg</p> |
| <p>Ñdia ùdiá úfòk ówò (c) I eat food house spmebody ntre útóm ndinám c I stop work to do </p> | <p>I eat food in someone's house and forget to do the work</p> |

The proverb-riddle points out and warns against acts of unfairness, inconsideration or evil retribution. The Ibibio world view believes that if you employ someone for physical labour no matter how minimal, the person labouring must be fed in turn. But where the person eats up the food and does not do the work, it is unfair. In trying to point out, the onlooker in order

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to avoid trouble would rather refer the inconsiderate action to himself. Other onlookers who have competence in this area of Ibibio language would certainly understand.

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| 3A | Étikké ndòòn àssàsà údó Okra estate bush fowl second son | The okra of assasa Udo's plantation |
| B | Obíqñ ónùùk ntè áfiá ikará Hunger (c) me bend like trap round | Hunger caused me to bend as a round snare |

In the Ibibio worldview it is not acceptable that an adult man should lament of hunger especially outside the home to the hearing of outsiders. The belief is that an adult male should be responsible enough to work and provide food not just for himself but his family as well. Therefore if he has to ever utter such, he must disguise the language to avoid shame and mockery.

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| 4A | Áfiá qfñ éfim ké ákai White cloth blows in forest forest | White cloth blows in the forest |
| B | Èyiré òwò éyèm èdiwót Pro trail someone wants to kill | Whoever is after someone, wants to kill him |

The Ibibio world view takes the act of killing or anything that tends to threaten life very seriously; it is the extremity of wickedness. Such acts of supervising or trailing someone with intent to destroy – it is not ordinary hatred. The victim therefore needs to be cautioned in euphemistic manner because if the accused happens to hear, he might promptly deny and decide to sue the person caught doing the cautioning.

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| 5A | Ùkánà ásákká ótó isoñ ásiák Oil bean split hit ground splits | The African oil bean scattered and breaks the ground |
| B | Èbé ékit ádúfá ósió Husband see new (wife) remove me ákáàn odúók old throw away | |

The Ibibio men and women view marriage seriously; for them marriage should be “till death do us part” as the Bible says. A deviation from this norm is seriously frowned upon by the Ibibio society. Therefore where the husband decides to throw out the first wife for the second, the observation can be passed on in a coded euphemistic language and let the onlookers decide for themselves.

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| 6A | Mfàñ íkpõñ ítiàk èyòp oyókkò oyók leaves cocoyam base(of) palm c you finish | The cocoyam leaves warmed and re-warmed. The mouth of the women is the village; if you escape their mouths you can tell the story. |
| B | warm warming c (again) Ínúà íbààn íd^ñ èñi òbòkkó oq^k Mouth women village this c c you escape you testify | |

Like in many other cultures, women are known to be fond of gossiping, and gossip can be very destructive. In referring to the extent of such potential harm a proverb riddle is used to cover the saying cocoyam leaves are harmless where gossiping is concerned they euphemistically personify the gossiping women. If you survive the gossip of such women, then you will tell the story.

7. Kpááñ mbáñ édèèn kúú mbúúñ itõñ
 Díá ñkpò ékè mfo kúú ñkééb ùwót

Talkative man, do not break my neck. Eat your own food do not kill me (with your blinking).

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| 8A | Úkpọtọ́ mbèn inyàñ Cɔwpea side(of) river ọ̀bìòk èfit isòñ ɕ creeps all over ground it | The thicker plant by the river side creeps all over the ground. |
| B | Uyiò áñwààn imà ébjèt voice wife beloved c it like èkééré ékòñ gong war | Voice of the beloved wife is like a war bell. |

The Ibibiod worldview about the new or beloved wife is that she commits no error; she does no harm at least that is how the husband sees her in comparison with the old or hated wife. By implication whatever she does is beautiful before the eyes of the husband. Whatever she says is sweet in the ears of the husband. Onlookers can only refer to it in coded euphemistic language which decodes that the voice of the beloved wife is as sweet as èkééré – the sweet musical instrument can be a harbinger of war or trouble.

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| 9A | M̄biód itàk ùkọd éfit W̄ped base(of) palm w̄ne grows | The weed by the raffia palm grows in a circle. |
| B | ñkáán- ñkáán tree circular-circular Éféré únyọñ ùdùà éṅèṅ Soup returh(of) market sweet mkpá nyíré depth c persist | Soup cooked after the market is wonderfully palatable. |

The Ibibiod people regard the market day as very important. It used to be a day of great expectation, a day of possibilities; day of great sales that would enable the purchase of adequate soup condiments. Children would look

towards it with excitement. The soup would be expected to taste wonderfully palatable. To hide the great excitement that may somehow be embarrassing the speaker encodes using the weed around the palm wine plant. The hearers then decide by interpreting that the soup after the market tastes wonderfully palatable.

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| 10A | Ekpú kwọ̀n - kwọ̀n ọ̀d^k ús^ñ Rat heavily c enter way | The rat runs heavily into the latrine way. |
| B | (idiophonic) to it ń̀tò latrine Ù̀sọ́ émèn ù̀s^ñ Your father swallows fofoo ósió ń̀t^t ényèn he removes ends eyes | Your father swallows fofoo until the ends of his eyes come out. |

A rebuke and abuse against gluttony and indecent eating habit. This is a down-right abuse and a rebuke. The worldview is about an elderly greedy glutton of a man. He makes big balls of fofoo that almost get stuck in his throat. So he needs to stress his eyes until the ends come out. It is an embarrassing act the son cannot take it light if he hears anyone abusing his father that way. The comment which actually is an abuse is covered by the expression èkpú kwọ̀n ọ̀d^k ús^ñ ń̀tò. Those who understand the proverb-riddle decode for themselves.

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| 11A | Íkpọ̀k étò átámmá ọ̀dọ̀k òkòm B̄ark tree c jumps c climbs ọ̀d̄f | The back of a tree jumps on the roof. |
| B | Éyin úwèèné ókwòòk ésién ikpòòñ Child orphan c sweeps yard alone or | The orphan sweeps the yard alone |

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Euphemistically refers to the plight of the orphan and lonely who because he is an orphan and has no brother or sister sweeps the yard alone.

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| 12A | Diáná òkpòt^k ébèn ké mbáñ Remove black pear from jaw Iniéhé n̄tèká ébókó m̄kpá | Remove the black pear from your cheek |
| B | no where you go escape death | Nowhere you go and escape death. |

The universality and inevitability of death is captured in this proverb riddle. The worldview is that whoever you are, death when it comes will meet you. To disguise this fearful expectation the euphemistic coding and decoding is used.

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| 13A | Mbrinyóñ óduó ésiid ùs^ñ Plantain fall block road Ùkà úsó ódùó ékpikké ébá Mother your father she falls she cut breast | The plantain falls and obscures the road. |
| B | | The mother of your father falls cutting her breast |

The news that one's father's mother has fallen and cut her breast is embarrassing and can actually be an abuse. It has to be observed or relayed in coded language using plantain tree to personify the old women.

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| 14A | <p>Ètémme Ékò Ísè Ówò C T \ Someone's Backyard Barn (As) You Clear Pro (Are) Ing</p> | As you are clearing the back of storehouse, have you kept a container of oil? |
| B | <p>Dó, Èmédiòk Òkpóń Ádàn? There c kept container oil You Àmááhá áńwáàn ówó dó, c love T wife someone there you ing èménim òkpó ébód? c have keep he goat </p> | As you are falling in love with another person's wife have you kept a he goat? |

Falling in love with another person's wife; in the Ibibio worldview is an abomination. It is a great offence punishable by the sacrifice of a he goat. The offender is warned by the speaker in coded euphemistic language. Ísè is a storehouse for yams. If you decide to clear another person's backyard yam barn, you may cut some yam tubers, you will need to roast and eat them with oil, because the owner of the barn will force you to own or buy them. in the same way if you are dating another man's wife you will have to pay a price – a he goat once you are caught.

Summary and Conclusion

We set out to examine the euphemistic role of the proverb riddle. In the course of the study we have been able to define the proverb riddle. We have seen that it has its own structure as different from the ordinary proverb and riddle. We have also seen that they are not all sentences; some are noun phrases and that the proverb riddle involves encoding and decoding. We also found that its functions are multifaceted but we have in this paper

highlighted the euphemistic role as we set out to do. The euphemistic utility of the proverb riddle permeates all aspects of the Ibibiod worldview- life, death, love, marriage, moral values, etc. There is much more to say about the Ibibiod proverb riddle that far surpasses the scope of this paper. It is an interesting communicative device that needs to survive on.

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