

Language Study

Language and Socio-Cultural Values: An Analysis of Ibibio Proverbs

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Abstract

Language is an important tool in the human society. Apart from the fact that it makes communication and integration possible, it is an important aspect of the socio-cultural life of a people. To this extent, language is closely knit with culture as it embodies the society's value system and patterned way of life. This paper explores proverb as an embodiment of the socio-cultural values of the Ibibio people. This is done through the analysis of some Ibibio proverbs which reflect the ethical values and philosophy of the people.

Introduction

Language is a very important tool in the human society. It distinguishes man from animals. Hall (quoted in Lyons 2005) sees language as an institution for communication. For him and others, language "exist for the expression of or ideas". As a human institution, language is used in society and is seen as part of the society's culture. Okon (2003:107) sees language as the cultural embodiment of a particular group in that the group's language is used to portray ideas, emotions, desires and the thought pattern of the people. To this end therefore, language, culture and society are interwoven.

Language, Culture and Society

The concept of socio-culture is focused on man in his social environment. It is a concept which deals with specific forms of organized pattern of interaction which occur in society. Charles (2003) has noted that cultures would not exist without language. He views language as a guide to social reality and argues that in every human society, people are very much at the mercy of the particular language which is the medium of expression for the society. He further opine that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built on the language habit of the group. In the same vein, Smeets (2006) asserts that: "as human kind's principal means of communication, language do not merely convey messages, they also express emotions, intentions and values, confirm social relations and transmit cultural and social expressions and practices".

Besides, languages are the vehicles of memories, traditions, knowledge and skills. In essence, language constitutes a determining factor of identity for individuals and groups, and it is a cultural behaviour which enables the people of a speech community to transmit their social values from generation to generation. In support of the assertion above, Okon (2007: 3) has noted that "there is no society without a culture and language must and does

perform its function as a vehicle of cultural transmission". Adesina (2008: 55) sums this up when he asserts that "you cannot have core values if you do not have culture". In this paper therefore, we wish to assert that the Ibibio language culture and society are intricately interwoven. This paper studies Ibibio proverbs from a sociolinguistic perspective because we believe that the study of the Ibibio language in its social and cultural contexts will give insights into the worldview and pattern of thought of the Ibibio. For as Noah (2004: x) has noted, "proverbs reflect local cultural colours and language constitutes the garment of proverbs".

Ibibio Language, Culture and Society

It is asserted that the Ibibio migrated from the Central Benue Valley into the present South-Eastern Nigeria (Inyang 1991: 1). The Ibibio are found predominantly in Akwa Ibom State in the South-South geo-political zone. Ibibio identifies a people and their language. Ibibio is spoken predominantly in Akwa Ibom State and in the neighbouring States where Ibibio people reside. Ibibio language belongs to the Benue-Congo family. A further sub-classification shows Ibibio as belonging to the lower Cross. Ibibio and other genetically related languages have been classed under what Essien (1990) refers to as Ibibiod, a term which in essence, captures the common origin/history of the language and the people (Urua 2000).

As we have noted earlier, language and culture are closely knit. We would want to state that without language there will be no culture and vice-versa. Okon (2007: 3) asserts that culture is the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society. Kottak (2004: 86) on the other hand, views culture as "a set of control mechanism, plans, recipes, rules, instructions for the governing of behaviour". In tandem with this, Wardhaugh (2000: 119) asserts that "language forms a vital aspect of [the] socio-cultural behaviour which in turn forms part of the society's value system and patterned way of life shared by the people". In the Ibibio society, therefore, Ibibio language is tightly knit with Ibibio culture and together, they identify the individual or group as being distinctly Ibibio.

The Ibibio society is an organized society. A number of social institutions are put in place which as Ottong (2004: 109) has noted, are seen as "the principal instruments whereby the essential tasks of social life are organized, directed and executed". These in turn connote "the established ways of behaving and/or pattern of approved (or sanctioned) behaviour". These social institutions which form part of the Ibibio culture are embodied in the Ibibio language as we shall see in the study of Ibibio proverbs which in essence reflect the ethics and norms of the Ibibio people.

Language Culture and Proverbs

Proverbs are short pictorial phrases in which messages are given. Noah (2004:Vi-Vii) is of the opinion that proverbs "proclaim truth that transcends time, space and culture" Among the Ibibio, a proverb is a well known saying which is graphic and generally applies to a situation which is commonly understood and appreciated by the people. Proverbs explore the occupation and philosophy of the people. In agreement with this, Ogbulogo (2002: 112) opines that proverbs in any society that uses them can be classified to deal with different aspects of life such as issues on truth/falsehood, morality/immorality, sincerity/

insincerity, wisdom/foolishness, unity/disunity wealth/poverty, Obedience/disobedience, among others. Issues which touch on the ethical norms and values of the society. In the Ibibio cultural context, proverbs serve as words of wisdom and they give insights into the thought pattern of the Ibibio people. Achebe sees proverbs as “the palm oil with which words are eaten”.

Analysis and Discussion of the Socio-cultural Values of Ibibio Proverbs

The Ibibio society is a closely knit society. People are expected to love and appreciate one another and to live together in peace and harmony. This bond of friendship and togetherness is expressed in such proverbs as “Ubok mvm, Ubok mvm etuud ukpa”. This literally translates as “several hands working together will move the Iroko trunk”. Ukpa (Iroko tree) is a very big tree which if felled the trunk cannot be moved by one person. It will take several people (hands) working together to move the trunk. So in essence, what this proverb portrays is that in ‘unity lies strength’. Another Ibibio proverb which touches on the issue of unity/togetherness is “Ubok otkv edem, edem otkv ubok”. This literally means that the hand is needed to scrub the back clean just as the back equally needs to scrub the hand clean. In essence, its means that help is reciprocal. If you need others to help you, you equally need to help others too.

One vice which the Ibibio people are particularly sensitive about is disloyalty, which finds expression in acts of betrayal/infidelity. This is particularly painful if the persons involved are closely related or associated. Proverbs such as “*owo essien ekpe nsoppo, owo ufok edi nsop*”. This means that “Instead of a stranger giving me trouble, my own kith and kin is”. Another is “*Ekv ufok okood eku anwa ndia*”. This means that “it is the house rat which invites the rat from outside to a feast”. These proverbs show that a man’s misfortune sometimes stems from his close personal relationship or associations. Disloyalty is also reflected in acts of selfishness, jealousy or attempts at preventing the well-being of others. This is reflected in the proverb “*emoemo ebok iyemme emoemo ebok adia oyvko*”. This translates as (“a monkey frowns at a fellow monkey eating to its satisfaction”).

The Ibibio frown at acts of carelessness or insensitivity. In the society, people are expected to be principled in their attitude and behaviour towards others. Where, however, an individual is seen to be unprincipled or reckless in his attitude or behaviour, proverbs exist which seek to warn the offending individual that he may not always get away with his reckless behaviour or attitude. He may sometimes, if he refuses to change be confronted with situations more challenging than those created by him. These proverbs include, “*ubok edatta ekpoppo nsvn, enye ke dat ekpoppo okwook*”, (“the hand which is used to catch the housefly will equally be used to catch the bee”). “*Ema iduokko Ikwood ufiop mmoon, idiidionoke ke uto mmoon iba aba*”, (“If hot water is not poured on a frog, it will not know that two types of water exist”). The contrast between the housefly (Nsvn) and the bee (okwook) on the one hand, and hot water (ufiop mmoon) and the implied cold water are indicative of the contrasting/opposing situations in life as exemplified by antonyms such as peace/war, gentility/aggression, friendliness/ enmity, etc. An individual’s refusal to conform to expected social attitude or behaviour may attract some undesirable social consequences on the individual. Closely related to the proverbs on attitude and behaviour is the proverb “*etem ikpon ekeene edu ikpon*”, (“the nature of the cocoyam will determine the manner in which it will be cooked”). Where manner here refers to such things as the

intensity of the heat to be applied, the length of time it will be exposed to heat and the quantity of water to be used in the cooking. This in essence means that an individual's disposition/temperament will determine how others will react to or relate with him. A disposition/temperament that conforms to societal moral and ethical values and norms will certainly attract positive response from other members of the society as against one that is inclined to rebellion. In line with this is another proverb "akwa lkan ayem akwa ofop", ("a great fire requires a great thing to roast in it"). This equally confirms the fact that one's disposition/temperament in turn allows for the same degree or even greater degree of reaction.

Noah (2004) has observed that proverbs play the roles of counseling warning and moral guidance in as the proverbs discussed above indicate. They seek to counsel the people on the need for peaceful coexistence. If however, any member of the Ibibio society is confronted with difficulties as a result of his not abiding by the ethical norms or values of the society, the Ibibio people also have proverbs to explain such situations. Examples of these include, "nkpo udua ana, udua ana", ("the market wares are ready and so is the market") and "ndere ikidereke, ndere edere". These proverbs emphasise the fact that every action be it positive or negative attracts a reaction.

The traditional Ibibio society was/is a just society. A society where events or situations were/are expected to be assessed objectively before passing judgement. A society where actions are not seen to be absolutely right or wrong. Objectivity, in this instance will demand that in situations of friction or disagreement between individuals or groups in the society, the parties must be made to see where each had gone wrong. This is illustrated in the proverb "Etan eno nyin unen, etan eno ndukpo" ("you talk to the chick, you equally talk to the kite"). This in summary means that as you "talk" the kite away from the chick, you should equally "talk" the chick, into being cautious in order to protect itself.

The desire to be cautious is also extended to situation of hospitality. The Ibibio are naturally very hospitable and they welcome visitors with delight. But where they have reason to be cautious or particularly careful with a particular visitor, the warmth with which others are welcomed will be denied such a visitor. The following proverb illustrates this, "eti esenowo eno nkpoitie, idiok esenowo eno obubok" (a good visitor is welcomed with a seat, but a bad one is made to lean on the pillar"). It is expected that the discomfort he feels will hasten the departure of the unwelcomed/bad guest. This will equally be a relief for the host.

Still on the grounds of hospitality, the host is advised to be careful in receiving visitors/guests. He is expected to remember that the visitor/guest is not a permanent resident while the visitor/guest on the other hand is equally expected to know that sooner or later, he will be expected to go away. Bearing this in mind, both are expected to be moderate in their actions and reactions towards one another. This is illustrated in the proverb "esenowo akama unyon, anie ufok akama ndan". (The visitor/guest will depart but the owner of the house will stay on).

Hospitality, good neighbourliness and respect are reciprocal in the Ibibio culture. The Ibibio is expected to apply the 'golden rule' in his dealings and interactions with others. The proverb "Ibritam ete ino owo, afo udooho owo?" illustrates this, ("If Ibritam, a deity, expects a human sacrifice, the messenger could as well offer himself/herself, afterall, he/she is also human. If however, the messenger is not willing to be sacrificed, why then does

he/she expect anyone else to accept the offer?”).

Parent child relationship is highly regarded in Ibibio culture. The bond between parents and their children also informs aspects of Ibibio proverbs. Proverbs such as “*isan eyin, isan eka*” (the child’s journey is also the mother’s”) and “*ema edionno eka, edionno eyin*” (if the mother is recognized/known, the child will equally be recognized/known”), show the strong bond which exist between mother and child. The Ibibio society like many other Nigerian societies is male-dominated, male-oriented and therefore, biased in relation to women. Even though the child results from the union between father (male) and mother (female) the burden of parenting is weighted in favour of the man. This informs the proverb “*ofonde ofon ete obon, odiokko odiok eka aman*” (a good child is an offspring of the father but a bad one is of the mother). The Ibibio mother/woman therefore is saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that her children turn out to be good members of her community in order to prove her worth as a good wife and homemaker.

Conclusion

This work has shown that language is an integral aspect of the culture of the people. We have shown that Ibibio as a language has the “capacity to formulate proverbs”. As observed by Noah (2004: 147), proverbs in Ibibio culture play a more than ordinary role in the life of the people because of the sacred bond between the phenomenon and the collective consciousness of the group”. The Ibibio proverbs reflect the people’s way of life, their religious practices, philosophy, ideology, wisdom, maturity and worldview.

They deal with all aspects of life, conveying precise moral lessons, revelations, knowing and warnings. The work on Ibibio proverb shows intricacies of the language in which the secrets and values of the society are enshrined as confirmed by Nwabara (1981: 62) among the Igbos.

The Ibibio proverbs encapsulate nourish and fatten the totality of the Ibibio culture and preserve its distinctness as shown in Yoruba, Igbo and use of proverbs (cf. Adesina 2001, Akpan 2004, Okon 2004b, Mensah and Ugot 2003, Ogunpitan 2004, Ogbulogo 2002 and Nwabara 1981). Since Ibibio proverbs are practical and tell the truth about life, living and behaviour – the moment of speaking is relevant for effective communication. In sum, in the words of Wolfgang Mieder “... there is no doubt that much of a nation’s folk-philosophy gets into proverbs, along with the spice of national customs and, above all, the peculiar flavour (sic) of the nation’s language....” This, in our opinion, is equally applicable to the Ibibio as an ethnic nationality.

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