

FOLKLORISTICULTURAL FUNCTIONS OF IGBO PROVERBS

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Abstract

The absence of writing culture greatly enhanced the importance of oral tradition as a valuable means of preserving and transmitting cherished traditional wisdom by the folk.

In this, proverb stands head and shoulder taller than other verbal arts through which the folks exhibit their ideas, values, beliefs and concepts. In the absence of proverb the folks can employ the use of myths, legends, folkstories, riddles, songs, slogans, etc. to transmit their wisdom which otherwise would remain untouched, and with time becomes archaic and autochthonous. It is from the above pool of verbal arts, especially proverbs, that the younger ones draw their knowledge about the society in which they live. The knowledge if well harnessed interests the folk and forms their lore, as lore could be seen as those things which the folk enjoys and derives happiness from. Lore is the totality of what arouses their interest and gives them happiness.

Introduction

This theme simply means the roles proverbs play in the culture of the folk. In this context the folk represents the Igbo people, as folk is defined as a group of people with a community of interest. The Igbo interest chiefly lies on their culture which, at times, is propagated through proverbs. To claim that justice has been done to the above theme, the author will in brief explain what culture and proverb are.

Culture

Is a total way of life of a people. Naswem (1999:180) opines that culture embraces the biological, psychological... and religious facets of all that take place within and around man. The above information is a bit erroneous, as culture does not deal with the biological. Anthropologists and sociologists see culture as all the things which human beings do but which have no biological basis (Adelakun, 1990:5). All non-biological actions and behaviours of man are products of his culture. The functioning of the eye is biologically determined and therefore not cultural. However, the usage of the eyes in winking to communicate appreciation or social disapproval is culturally, and not biologically, determined, and is learned. Culture, thus, refers to any piece or pattern of behaviour, the attitude, norm, values, objects, skills, belief system, and world outlook which human beings learn and adopt as members of a given human group or society.

There are material and non-material cultures. Material culture is the physical object or objects used by a given folk like cutlasses, hoes, brooms, pot, clothes, masks, etc., whereas non-material culture refers to the non-physical phenomena, processes and ideas which are abstract and 'non-visible, but are part of the peoples' ways of life (Adelakun p.7).

Culture is equally used as a reference point to a particular group of people who are identified with a particular set of ideas, pattern of behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and social values. In Igbo culture, therefore, proverbs play a great deal of functions. It is in the proverbs that the wisdom of the ancestors and ethical values of the Igbo people are stored, preserved and transmitted (Anyacho, 1999:221).

Noah (1996:92) averred that the word proverb comes from 'proverbium' which is a combination of two Latin words: "pro" meaning "for" and "verbium" meaning "word". A proverb is therefore a substitute for what is normally expressed in plain words.

Ikenga-Metuh (1992) cites Kelso who very early in the century defined proverb as the wisdom of many and the wit of one: the experiences and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed in one expression (Anyacho, 1999:221). Ikenga Metuh (p.20) in his definition of proverb sees it as a short saying full of sense which has come into common and recognised use. According to Anyacho (p.21). Ikenga-Metuh's collection of descriptions of proverbs by some African societies reveals:

I he Zulu say that without proverbs the language would be but a skeleton without

flesh, a body without a soul. The Ovarnbo have it that a speech garnished with proverbs, parables and wisdom saying is pleasant to hear. To the Yorubas, proverbs are hqrse for chasing missing words. The Igbo say the same thing differently: proverbs are vegetables for eating words.

Achebe (1958) defines proverb as the oil with which words are eaten. Proverb is just like an elephant before a group of blind men. Everyone thus defines proverb as it suits him without any claim to excellence. Noah (1996:92) says that a proverb is a complex, if not elusive element that does not lend itself to a facile definition. Finnegan (1970) opines that exact definition of proverb is no easy matter. It is thus very difficult to pin down all the attributes of a proverb in one single definition, no matter how one tries.

The truth is that proverb is a very striking phenomenon, not only in terms of its strategic role in discourse, but also because of the popularity of the genre especially in African cultures. Proverbs authenticate opinion, heighten interest in stories, abbreviate strands of philosophy, condense the substance of life's experience into portable unforgettable (Noah, 1996:91).

Igbo Proverbs

As aforementioned, proverb has no straight jacket definition because of its abstractness. Chukwuma (1994:27) says that the average Igbo immediately recognises 'inu' (proverb) when used in a discourse, but would find it difficult to define with any precision.

Igbo proverbs are classified into three modes. They are epigrammatic, Wellerism and poetic proverbs. Each of the above modes has a great deal of functions to the Igbo people folkloristiculturally. Chukwuma (1994:27) is in view of the above claim. She says that the proverb in Igbo is part of a living speech tradition, a heightened and compressed form of language based on the metaphor of daily living and experience.

Epigrammatic proverb is always in the form of a simple statement of fact. Literally, it is the truth validated by experience, tested and proven by time. Examples are: "A naghì agwa onye maara ihe puo n'anwu" (A sensible man or woman is never told to come out of the sun). "The e ji n'aka e jighi ugoibe enyo ya" (It does not call for a mirror to see what is in one's hand). "Onye otu anya ji isi ugwo" (one-eyed man has a debt to settle with blindness) etc. Looking at the surface level of the above proverbs we see that they are all statements of fact even though they have embedded or hidden meanings.

Wellerism is a statement of an experience attributed to a fictional character like animal, man spirits or objects. Examples are: "Onye ara si na ebe o ga-eje ebuka tinyere egwu o ga-agba n'ahia (A mad person says he has many places to go including his dances at the market square). "Nkita si onye ya turu oche weghachiri ya ego na ntukwu amarala ya ahu" (dog orders whom he sent to buy chair to return his money because stooping has been his way of sitting) etc.

In the above examples, the fictional character of the first is a human being, while animal forms the fictional character of the second. Okoye and Okoye (1995:17-18) saw wellerism as 'quotable or reporting proverb'. When the name of the person who feigned a proverb is forgotten, such proverb is attributed to a fictional character; and such a character is quoted as being responsible for the wise saying.

Poetic proverb is always said in line in of about two or three. The celebration of the lines are usually marked with rhythm and breath pause. Examples are:

"E were mbu were abo onye nwenu antara"

(If you take one and take two the owner will know)

"Okirikiri ka a na-agba ukwu ose. A naghì ari ukwu ose elu"

(Pepper plant is meant to be ran around as no one climbs the plant).

The above classifications are purely for academic exercises as there is no wall of demarcation in the usage of the three modes. The elders who are skilled in the arts of proverb and rhetorics make floods of speech which are embellished with proverb with total ignorance of their modes. It is very childish for one to speak in plain and simple language. According to Madubuko (1994:27) one is branded the very incarnation of waste if he needs plain and plenty of words to understand. This is because the Igbo achieve economy of language through the use of proverbs.

Indeed, proverbs are for the Igbo not only for rhetorical embellishment but are also instruments of diplomacy for going through difficult situations of human interaction; hence the Igbo saying "A sokata eze

anya, e kpuru nkata wee gwa ya okwu” (for the respect accorded to a king it requires one masking oneself with a basket before telling the king of his wrong doings). In the above context the basket to be used for ‘the masking’ is proverb, filings which are difficult to say in plain language are easily said in proverbs.

Contextual Application of Proverbs

It is the context that gives life to a proverb; and without context proverbs remain lifeless. A context could either be secular or ritual. Secular context are those socio-cultural events like marriage ceremony, children education, judgement of cases, politics, family affairs, public affairs and a host of other socio-cultural affairs deemed as the life style of a given people.

Ritual context involves such things as religious or magical activities like prayer, invocation, divination, sacrifices and a host of others in like manners.

In both secular and ritual contexts proverbs are enacted in the expression of certain concepts and ideals. According to Finnegan (1970:425) proverbs are used on particular occasions by individuals in a particular context, and their wit, their attractiveness, their insight, even their meaning must be seen as arising from that context. When this is done, proverbs release both cognitive and emotive satisfactions to the audience.

Proverbs Associated With Marriage

Marriage is a union between families. Therefore every care is taken to be sure that none of the families brings shame to the other, hence the institution of pre-marriage inquiries in the two families that should be united as one through marriage. Arinze (1978:3) affirms that marriage is not just the affairs of a young man and his fiancée, but a long process between both families. The following Igbo proverbs help one to understand the Igbo concept of marriage:

“Nwanyi olti oma di ya anaghi ajiiru ya nri (A husband does not reject his wife's food if she is of good words). According to Mgbodile (2000:117) in a sweet home a woman learns to keep her husband's commandments, while the husband learns to respect his wife's delicacy. As he (Mgbodile) averred, a couple reaches the heart of each other with sweet words and a gentle behaviour.

“O bu di nwe ulo bu aka ogoli nwanyi na-ehi n'isi” (A husband is the hand which a wife uses as pillow for her head). This means that a wife should always regard her husband as her source of hope and rest. Marriage if well maintained is like a precious flower that is watered and nurtured with constant and uninterrupted love (Mgbodile, 2000:15).

“Kama mmanya ga-esere ogo na ogo okwu, ite mmanya ahu waa n'uzo” (Rather than palm-wine bringing trouble to the in-laws, let its container break on the way). This means that through love in-laws are prepared to do away with anything that will bring them misunderstanding. The love that binds the family together is like a cannon bolt, which when shot into the air never comes back again into the barrel of the gun (Mgbodile, p. 153).

“Ji gwu n'oba nwanyi azaba oku ike” (When yam is exhausted in the barn, a wife learns to answer her husband stubbornly). Most wives married their husbands because of wealth; and in time of down turn in their partners' fortunes the marriage withered. Marriage sustained by love lives forever.

Okoye (1997:55) says “don't love a man only because he has money. Marry him who has 90% of what you desire and put money very below your scale of desire”. Mgbodele affirmed that those who go into marriage with economic consideration as their major motive often end up as business rather than marriage partners. The true test of devotion to marriage comes during period of changing fortunes.

Didactic Proverbs

It is pertinent to say straight away that all the proverbs are didactically oriented. The above sub-theme is meant to bring to focus those proverbs used in teaching the young ones the importance of greeting, respect for elders and the need for hardwork or industry.

Greeting Motif

“O gabara kelee eze o lawa ya keleekwa eze” (if one greets a king while making his journey he is equally required to greet the king on his return). This teaches us to pay homage to the elders. This paying of homage should be consistent, because according to Igbo belief “O bu onye fee eze. eze eruo ya” (if one is in constant obedient to a king, kingship will not elude him).

“Ekele onye nti ike bu elu anughi ala anuru” (Greeting directed to a deaf is meant for either the heaven or the earth). This teaches that we shall not discriminate in our greetings. We must learn to greet both friends and foes. If our foes fail to respond to our greeting, the heaven or the earth will bear us witness.

Respect For Elders

World over the elders deserve a great deal of respect. The need for such respect is seen in the following proverbs: “Nwata bulie nna ya elu, ogo do ayochie ya anya” (if a child lifts up his father, his wrapper seals off his sight). This teaches that a child suffers when he insults his father vis-a-vis elders.

“Nwata anaghi ebu nna ya uzo amuta diokpala (no male child should boast of having a son before his father). Every child should always abide by his parents’ counsel as it is share stupidity and waste of time for the tortoise speeding himself to death in his bid to pursue a hare.

The Motif of Hardwork/Industry

Events and times present opportunities for success which only the ready and determined minds can capture (Mgbodile, p.77). The Igbo are known for their industry, hence the interpretation of ‘IGBO’ means to most people success and are of almost the same paradigm. Children are taught to be hardworking through these proverbs.

“Aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu” (The mouth is painted with oil only if the hands are soiled). Nothing is to be got without pains except poverty and girth, as hares never run into the mouths of sleeping dogs.

“Okuko boo aboo o rie erie” (if a fowl scratches the soil it finds something to eat). The era of manna falling down from heaven is gone, but ‘luck’ as an alibi for the lazy people still prevails. For the Igbo, it is believed that good luck will carry somebody over a ditch if only he jumps well.

Judicial Functions

The wisdom of the rural folks in abdicating justice make manifest in their proverbs, like: “Egbe here ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebele nku kwaa ya” (the kite and eagle shall perch, anyone who says no to the other shall have a broken wing).

“O bughi ka aka ha nna ka o na-eti nwa ya” (a father does not beat his child with all his strength). This means that justice should always be tendered with mercy.

Public Affairs

In the village and town meetings orators excel. One is an orator if he is to pour out flood of speech, manipulates devices that are histrionic and is prepared always to make exuberant supply of figurative language like conundrums and proverbs. All the proverbs previously seen under various contexts are suitable in this very context depending on the theme that is celebrated.

Ritual Context

The absence of writing culture amongst the Igbo has enhanced the importance of oral traditions as a valuable means of preserving and transmitting cherished traditional religious beliefs and practices. Proverbs are one of the most reliable forms of oral tradition, and are the vehicles of the authentic beliefs of the Igbo. Proverbs on prayer, invocation, divination, sacrifices and propitiation belong to the above context.

The Context Of Prayer

“Nwa ehi gbuo ikpere n’ala o iiuo line ya ara” (with arms and knees on the ground does a calf suck milk from its mother’s dam). This expresses humility.

“Ugboguru miara m ya miakwara nwunyeedi m” (if vegetable grows for me, may it also grow for my co-wife). This teaches ‘Live and let live’.

The Context Of Invocation

“A koo akuko di nwanyi ime nima, nwa no n’afu ekwee n’isi” (when a story that calls for the ears of an expectant mother is enacted, the child in her womb nods in affirmation).

“Okenye jide oji n’aka kwachaa eliem umu mniuo egewe nti” (when an elder raises kolanut and clears his throat the spirits pay attention).

The Context Of Sacrifice

“Ochie dibia cliuo aja o di ka o nyere ndi mmuo nri iTonu” (if an experienced diviner offers a sacrifice it appears as if it goes direct into the mouth of the spirits).

“Okenye a na-achu aja o iia-aruliu ura gara igba ama na be ndi minuo” (an elder who sleeps at the time of sacrifice has gone to betray the living to the spirits).

“Ndi mmuo anaghi egbu omelu ka o huru, ha na-egbu oliuru ma o nieglii” (the spirits do not kill those who do not have, they only kill those who have but refuse to give).

The Context Of Propitiation

“Emee nwata ka e mere ibe ya obi adi ya inma” (a child becomes happy if treated as others).

“A mara ka e si mee Nwogwugwu si meekwa Nwanosike” (Do unto Nwanoke as you have done to Nwagwugwu).

The Context Of Divination

The spirits exert tremendous influence over human life and this is why the diviners have very close dealings with them to mediate between them and man. Here are some proverbs connected to it:

“Ebunu siri si gbaara ya afa ndu ma liapu afa uto n’ili 11a onye di ndu ga-eto uto” (a ram requested for a prayer of life and not of growth as one who lives must grow).

“A naghi egbu dibia n’ili 11a onye o na’agwo nwuru” (a diviner is not killed because his patient died).

Summary/Conclusion

The proverbs under every context were just hand-picked for lack of space as there are ‘thousands and one’ proverbs in every of the contexts. Igbo proverb is a vehicle for traditional wisdom and a living vehicle of situational statement (Nwoga 1975:197). No context no proverb, as proverbs are framed out of keen observation of human and natural phenomena. This is why Noah (1996:96) affirms that proverbs are extracted from the pool of life’s experiences. Proverb depends to a large extent on the context or verbal situation where it features and is heretofore lastly defined as a terse statement or speech art which figuratively gives expression to the point of traditional wisdom relevant to an existing situation.

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