

ANALYSES OF SELECTED IGBO PROVERBS: THE IMPLICATIONS ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN MARRIAGE

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Abstract

The Igbo people are very conservative about marriage, in terms of choice of marriage mate, social status of the intended mates' family, financial capability of the mate, and the prospect of procreation. A broken marriage is a disgrace especially to the family of the bride, and the groom is looked at as a failure. Truth be said, no marriage is devoid of conflict and these need to be settled amicably. Peaceful families lead to a peaceful society, however, where the family is engulfed in conflict, the society cannot be found to be free of the effects of such conflict. It has been discovered that proper application of Igbo proverbs to conflict situations will minimize misunderstanding both in the society and in the family. This is because proverbs are wise sayings that address the heart of the discourse in any given context, truthfully and objectively. This paper highlights the meaning of Igbo proverbs, their functions, meaning of conflict and conflict resolution, and some Igbo proverbs that are useful in the resolution of marriage conflicts in the Igbo society. This paper adopts the use theory as its theoretical framework for establishing the connection between conflict and Igbo proverbs. This paper concludes by stating that proverbs are inevitable and that proverbs should be properly integrated in the day to day life of people.

Introduction

Language is meaningfully patterned to serve as a means of expression of thought, ideas and feelings. It is also used to impart information in a variety of ways and situations which may be used to express the user's feelings or to arouse desires and emotions in other people. Language is the life blood of the people's culture, through which norms, values, traditions of the people are preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. Effective communication makes for intelligent use of stylistic devices to spice up the linguistic utterances and one of such spices is proverbs. Though proverbs are short expressions, they convey a lot of ideas and understanding.

In the words of Lawal (1992:19), proverbs seem to contain the richest pool of pragmatic factor since a proverb properly contextualized, provides data that are at once linguistic, philosophical and cosmological. Proverbs thus have some of the greatest pragmatic constraints on language users. If there is any group in Nigeria that honours the use of proverbs in communication, it is the Igbo people. As language on the macro level is a highly formidable instrument in the formation of human character, so also is proverb required in the micro Igbo society for the transmission of societal norms and values from

one generation to the other. This implies that proverbs form a major medium through which the Igbo man artistically expresses his views. Proverbs still form a veritable tool available for the inculcation of the following values in the minds of human beings which include cultural assimilation, conflict resolution, entertainment and sharing of various experiences of positive value.

Proverbs are called “wise sayings” of the ancestors and are highly valued by the Igbo people. When one wants to counsel marriage partners, he does so through proverbs because they throw more light on the subject and convincingly drive points home. Since proverbs are wise sayings of the ancestors, the couple gains by applying the counsel therein. So proverbs are used to resolve marriage conflicts. Conflicts have considerable value when they are managed constructively, and proverbs are an excellent and indirect mechanism for resolving marriage conflict. The main focus of this study is to have an insight on what proverbs are as a crucial and better way of resolving problems in marriage.

Review of Related Literature

This section will attempt a comprehensive definition of proverbs and its functions in society. It will also examine issues on marital conflict, conflict resolution and conflict theory as applied herein.

Definition of Proverb

A proverb is an adage, saying, or maxim that expresses conventional truth. Such expressions are generally short and are expressed in words that are simple, entertaining and easy to remember. Esere (2000:13) defines proverbs as a “short clever saying full of wisdom, intended as rules of conduct and behaviour.” It is a short rhetorical saying expressing a general belief. (Onwudufor, 2008:14) opines that a proverb is a saying in a more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it. Proverbs form part of the various figures of speech in language; it is an embodiment of the wisdom and ethics of the traditional societies.

Esere (2000) in her assessment of proverbs in Africa observes that “in many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology come out particularly clearly in proverbs”.

A proverb is a condensed but memorable saying embodying some important facts of experience that are taken as true by many people. According to Macarthur (1996:234) the word proverb is derived from a Latin word “proverbium” (a saying supporting a point). *“Pro” means on behalf of while “verbum” means word. It is a pithy saying which had gained credence through widespread or frequent use. Most proverbs express some basic truth or practical precepts. A proverb, which describes a basic rule of conduct, may also be known as a maxim.* What this implies is that every Igbo proverb is important especially when it suits the context of usage. Norrick (1985:73) states that proverb is “wisdom of many and the wit of one, the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression”. The Yoruba people describe proverbs as the horse that can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas, while the Igbo people describe proverbs as “mmanụ e ji eri okwu” (the palm oil with which words are eaten).

A collection of proverbs may come to be associated with a person famous for wisdom, just as the book of proverbs in the Bible is attributed to King Solomon. Proverbial sayings are popular in the middle ages and are treated as accepted wisdom. In the present day, usage may often be regarded as clichés; but their persistence indicates their sociolinguistic importance, (Macarthur, 1996).

Wilson and Smith (1970) state that proverbs are ideas made in the conservation of ordinary people, which have been accepted as wise and sensible, and so passed on to the language for use on suitable occasions. They sometimes conveniently express an idea better than the speaker and help him to produce a wise thought. They further add that proverbs express in few words, a truth which is related to everyday experience. They are widely used in traditional society to describe in very few words, what could have otherwise required a thousand words.

Wilson and Smith (1970) posit further that proverbs are multi- functional and flexible instruments of everybody's reasoning, although they maintain solidified attitudes or traditional modes of thoughts of certain cultures. A proverb is a proposition loaded with hidden feelings, wishes and intentions of the speaker.

Umeasiegbu (1986:45) sees proverbs as any expression recognized by a people as embodying the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors. He admitted that the definition has its pitfall but the strength lies in the words recognized by people as embodying the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors. This he believes is important, for an outsider cannot tell the people whose law he is studying what a proverb is. Onuekwusi (2011) sees proverbs as popular, common and numerous, they are pleasant expressions which adorn the rhetoric of a people. Proverbs constitute a part of oral tradition of a people which is unconsciously acquired from generation to generation. In his words, " *a proverb is a philosophical allusive and metaphorical citation that gives credence to a traditional truth and wisdom. It is allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truth outside itself. It is philosophical because it is product of a long period of reasoning and observation which expresses some timeless truth.*"

Seeing the proverb from other angles of definition, it is said to be a tool for linguistic expression and composition for the purpose of rhetorical adornment and persuasion. (Kewulezi, 2004:17).

Functions of Proverbs

A proverb might emerge into a conversation for instance, in a conflict situation in order to resolve the conflict, it can be used to advise both parties involved in the conflict, concerning a recommended direction of action. Supporting this, Umeasiegbu (1986) states that proverbs are excellent, indirect, and authoritative mechanism for resolving conflicts. The function as an indirect mechanism is to smoothen the rough edges of communication among individuals. If a person's guilt is declared in a proverb, he is given an opportunity to take his blame graciously.

According to Adegoke and Esere (1998), proverbs are used in settling disputes between parties in commercial bargaining and in all forms of oratory. It is the language of diplomacy. In the absence of written forms, the wisdom and experiences of the Igbo ancestors were preserved in proverbs. In the words of Alhassan (1988:41), " *...proverbs are employed to reinforce and sustain the traditional respect for elders, and they also serve as*

a potent means of social control. In settling quarrels and disputes, a proverb comes in handy because it is only one who is knowledgeable in words and proverbs that can settle quarrels with the use of proverbs.”

Proverbs form a great part of a people's traditional repository of what they consider to be of great value and concern to them. They are the quintessence of a people's collective wisdom sustained and transmitted from generation to generation. Lawal (1992:32) posits that “...proverbs are the veritable horse that conveys one safely to the discovery of ideas.” The aesthetic qualities and functions of proverbs can be gleaned from their different poetic techniques.

Igbo proverbs also serve didactic functions, especially for the younger generation. This is why level-headed youths crave the company of the elders so that they can glean linguistic, cultural and historical information usually conveyed in elders' speeches full of appropriate proverbs. As the proverb says, any youth who washes his hands clean shall dine with the elders. People respect the wisdom embodied in proverbs for they strike like arrows into the heart.(Norrick 1985).As well as conveying linguistic reality, proverbs can become an artistic device for giving complexity to narrative; unity of form, coherence and pattern to action, direction to moral and social insight. They can also indicate force and resourcefulness of character, the strong mind can manipulate the repertory of proverb to its own advantage. Kewulezii (2004) also noted that proverbs are used to express the morals as well as the ethics of the society. They are the convenient standards for appreciating behaviour in terms of the approved norms, and because they are potently and cleverly stated, they are suited for commenting on and correcting the behaviour of others irrespective of their age and dignity.

Onuekwusi (2011) opines that:

a proverb is a tool which African writers use to justify the actions of character, criticize bad, unethical and immoral behaviour. Through the use of proverbs too, they express wealth of philosophy, wisdom and perception of life as they affect and control their communities. The use of proverbs encourages the right virtues in the community.

Marital Conflict

Conflict according to Edafe (2008:25) simply means quarrel and or disagreements. Conflict generally is the presence of dispute between two or more persons. The degree of conflict is affected by the nature of dispute between the parties and also by the mood of any of the parties. Marriage is no exception to conflict situations.

Marriage has been described as legal union of a man and woman as husband and wife. It is relationship between two adults of the opposite sex who make emotional and legal commitment to live together. “Marriage involves the coming together of a man and woman to raise a family, and to meet the satisfaction of security and of an enduring affection and companionship.” (Esere 2000:86).Marriage as a social institution is cherished and highly approved in every culture of world popular. It is usually contracted amidst joy, happiness and merry-making for the couple, family members and friends. Marriage, being a social-economic background to form a family, probably because of prevalent personality

differences, the marriage institution is seen to breed more conflict than most other social institutions. (Alhassan, 1988).

Marital conflict is an ill-wind that blows no one any good. This is because, when there is conflict in the home, the consequences are great for the couple themselves, the children of the marriage and to the society at large. Juvenile delinquency, armed robbery, hooliganism, autism, alcoholism etc are all consequences of marital conflicts. As a result of the role the family unit plays in the overall development of the society, the problem of marital conflict calls for urgent attention because when the home, which forms the cradle of the society is settled, the society itself is at peace (Esere and Idowu, 2000).

Marital Conflict Resolution

According to Adegoke and Esere (1998:69) total and permanent absence of conflict were it possible, apparently would not be a desirable situation even for most intimate situations. This does not imply that a bitter quarrel in marriage is a good thing. People say and do things in anger that can damage any relationship sometimes permanently. But a disagreement between married partners can be constructive and useful if it is handled in the right way. Thus it is not how often couples engage in conflict that matters but how well they resolve the conflict before it degenerates to separation or divorce. This is where the use of relevant proverbs to interpret the salient issues causing the conflict comes in. It is also used to explain possible options that would help to bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict. These proverbs, when taken to heart and applied by the couple will help to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation that is conducive for fruitful negotiation.

The Place of Igbo Proverbs in Conflict Resolution

Proverbs are derived from detailed observation of the behaviour of human beings, animals, plant and nature, and in them are expressed the volkgeist, beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and the entire cultural system of Igbo society. Norrick (1985:62) observes that:

Proverb is an integral part of Igbo language – an indispensable tool in authentic discourse which embodies matured seasoned philosophy. Proverbs, are short and make for good retention, it functions as device, a teaching device to insult, praise, lament or allude. These various uses which a proverb serves make it enjoy current usage and its presentation to date lies in form and the different functions it fulfils.

Proverbs are coined from a thought to an emotion or a wish and at the same time to “an intention or an act”. A proverb might emerge into conversation for example, in a conflict situation in order to resolve the conflict. It can be used to advise both parties involved in the conflict concerning a recommended direction of action. It is the situation that determines the choice of proverbs during conversations. Thus Kewulezi (2004) rightly posits that: “when people use proverbs, there is always some relationship between two situations being compared; it is this concantenateness between the human experience and another that give proverbs their relevance.”

Proverbs as a Technique for Conflict Resolution

Though different techniques of conflict resolution exist, the use of proverbs presents itself as a veritable tool for resolving marital conflict. This work examines selected proverbs that are effective in the resolution of marital conflict.

1. **Aka nri kwọọ aka ekpe, aka ekpe akwọọ aka nri:** While the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand also washes the right hand. Only one mate cannot make the marriage succeed. The interpretation of this proverb is that unity, understanding and cooperation can strengthen the marriage bond and build trust. There should be cooperation, openness and trust. Keeping secret or failing to support a mate can result in problems. For a marriage to succeed, the couple needs mutual or symbolic relationship.
2. **Nkịta anaghị agbanahụ ọdụdụ ya n'ọsọ:** The dog cannot run away from its tail. This proverb when interpreted means that neither mate can do without the other. The husband and wife are one, and the same body. When one is happy, the other will be happy and vice versa. Proper consideration and application of this proverb will move married couples to declare unfailing or undying love for each other. Hence, resolution of conflict and problems.
3. **Ọkụkọ chī ụmụ rịa elu osisi, o were maka ụmụ ya rịtuo:** If a hen that rears chicks climbs a tree, it is bound to come down for the sake of her chickens. The interpretation of this proverb is that responsibilities cannot be delegated or abandoned. The man cannot abdicate from his responsibility in the home, neither can the parents delegate the responsibility of training their children. When responsibility is executed in the home properly, this will promote peace and unity in the home.
4. **Di na nwunye gbaa izu, ibe ji aghọọ nnukwu nri:** When husband and wife confer together, a piece of yam becomes abundant food. The interpretation of this proverb is that openness to each other will help a marriage succeed. Unity is essential for the growth and survival of a marriage and with planning, consultation and agreement, a couple can make their marriage work, whereas without planning there will be problems in their marriage.
5. **E mee nwata ka e mere ibe ya obi adi ya mma:** If you treat a child as his peers are treated, he will be happy. The society accepts certain general norms and common etiquette. No one likes to be left out or deprived. The above proverb can be applied in a situation where two women are married to one man, what is given to Mrs. A should also be provided for Mrs. B, thus emphasizing the need for equity and fairness.
6. **Nwaanyi mụta ite ofe mmiri mmiri, di ya amụta ipi ụtara aka were suru ofe:** If a woman decides to make the soup watery, the husband will learn to dent the fufu before dipping it into the soup. A man is expected to know how to handle the affairs of his household and demonstrate headship in all circumstances. To allow a woman to dominate him is unacceptable. He must do all he can to remain the head. In case a particular woman remains incorrigible, the husband will adopt a strategy to counter her actions without hurting her feelings and if she is naughty, he would again adopt different strategies to outwit her.

7. **E kelee onye ntị chiri, elu anughị ya, ala anụ ya:** When a deaf is greeted, if the heavens do not hear, the earth will hear. In other words, let all strive to do the right thing, even when many will not be happy about it, there are those who will certainly appreciate it. In a marriage, dispute or misunderstanding should not make the wife use the situation as an excuse for bad behavior. She should rather play her role dutifully, respect her husband and continue to work to gain his respect, and training their children to do same. Therefore doing what one is supposed to do in a marriage despite indifference on the part of the mate will enhance peace and unity, and reduce conflict between husbands and wives or co-wives.
8. **Mmadụ anaghị ebi n'ala biri n'elu:** A person cannot have everything he or she wants or desires in life. This proverb is indirectly used to advice people against self-centeredness and lack of contentment which implies that one should not expect to have all. No marriage is perfect, no man or woman can possess all the qualities needed for a successful marriage. Both must appreciate each other for the good in themselves, not for the bad they find in each other for this will lead to the failure of the marriage. Proper application of this proverb will help couples to see good in each other and then find happiness and peace.
9. **A gaghi eji maka ụjọ daara enwe n'elu maọbụ agaghị m eji maka na enyi m nwaanyị mara mma wee rịa ube e koro iyi maọbụ arụsị.** This proverb can be used to advice couple to refrain from living a double life. It also condemns the habit of pretending not to know the truth, as a result of fear or whatever. A man should not because of fear of losing his marriage, push himself into debt or more serious problems neither should a woman for fear of losing her husband, put herself into problems like consulting spirit mediums or using charms. Families that experience this type of problem can apply this proverb for easy understanding of life.
10. **Onye ndidi na-eri azụ ukpoo:** A patient dog eats the fattest bone. This proverb implies that with commitment and patience, one can achieve very difficult tasks. It can be used to settle marital conflict. It is not a must that every home shall have everything perfectly. Each mate should exercise patience and have enduring love knowing that overtime they may achieve set goals. The couple should not be in a hurry or compete with friends, family, and neighbours. For example, when a husband suffers financial misfortune and as a result, the wife feels she can no longer bear the pressure of poverty, with this proverb she can be exhorted to remain calm and allow her husband time and psychological freedom to sort things out financially rather than leaving the home.

Theoretical Framework

We find that indeed proverbs can play a very significant role in the settlement and prevention of conflict or disputes in marriages. The selected proverbs here considered are direct, unambiguous, and versatile. This work uses the use theory of meaning to propound its position. The use theory asserts that the use of a certain word by a person can become adopted and used by that person as well as others to have a particular meaning or interpretation. According to Ndimele (1997:20), a German scholar named Wittgenstein in his book *Philosophical Investigations* proposed this theory as an alternative to other theories on Meaning. To him, the meaning of any linguistic expression (be it a word, a

phrase, or a sentence) is determined by the context in which it is used. So, for one to know the meaning of a word, one has to listen and see how it is used by the speakers of that language. Accordingly, one must listen to the proverb as expressed by the speaker, listen to the interpretation given by the speaker, as well as the application of the proverb to the given situation or context. That way the listener benefits and can readily make good use of the proverb.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are provided whereby if some or all of them are utilized the use of proverbs in resolution of marital disputes can be sustained.

1. Religious leaders should be encouraged to imbibe Igbo proverbs when settling marital disputes as a way of preserving Igbo language, culture and proverbs more so, where the parties involved will benefit from the interpretation of the proverbs side by side the tenets of their religious beliefs.
2. Incentives should be provided by the government and private sector for the development of written works on Igbo proverbs, language and culture. This will provide a rich library and research materials for generations to come.
3. Traditional rulers and town union leaders should document their proverbs as this will provide a “proverb-bank” or reference point for members of the community to preserve their proverbs for future generations.
4. Igbo proverbs and culture should be properly integrated in the general studies curriculum of tertiary institutions especially in Eastern Nigeria.
5. Igbo teachers in all categories of education should be encouraged and sensitized on the need to use Igbo proverbs in their daily conversation as a way of developing their use of proverbs and teaching skills.

Where the above recommendations are adopted, the use of proverbs will be of immense benefit to the youths who appreciate their language. It is vital that youths appreciate their language through effective use of proverbs to enhance smooth communication and marital happiness. It will also reawaken the minds of the Igbo people concerning the use of their proverbs as a powerful and important tool for settling conflicts in marriage.

Conclusion

In the annals of the history of man, conflict has always existed in human relationship, business, between states or nations and even in marriages. Various mechanisms have been designed and developed to provide avenue for dispute resolution. Manuals have been designed and developed to enable and foster the amicable resolution of disputes. Dispute professionals even exist! Nonetheless, there have been more autochthonous means of resolving disputes. In religion, the Muslims use the Koran, Christians use the Bible for the same purpose. While some may prefer religious fetishes, others preferred the use of proverbs.

Proverbs seem more veritable and effective in dispute resolution because they carry the history and volkgeist of the people. Thus, the people develop the proverbs based on experiences and real life situations. On this pedestal, proverbs make sense over time, they are not built on hypothetical situations but on true happenings over time in the history of a people. The use of proverbs in resolving conflict especially marital conflict was

discussed in this work and a number of such relevant proverbs were mentioned and discussed. The analysis of such proverbs highlights how issues can readily and easily be resolved using proverbs.

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