

Igbo Proverbs: A Veritable Tool for Conflict Resolution as seen in Okebalama's *Ọdị Uko Na Mba*

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Abstract

Language is an important instrument for the transmission of culture of the people via literature in a given society. Literature is the mirror of the society. Therefore, language, as a vital tool of communication in the society functions effectively in literary work. Igbo language has the ability to empower its speakers. Proverb, being an aspect of Igbo language has the ability to enhance the communicative skills of its users if properly put in use. The trust of this paper is to discuss the meaning of proverbs and show their effectiveness in conflict resolution using Okebalama's *Ọdị Uko Na Mba* as a case study. The concept of conflict is given full attention. The findings show that conflicts do exist in Igbo society among husband and wife, parents and their children as well as among siblings, and that proverbs are implored in forestalling and resolving conflict in Igbo culture. Igbo proverbs, an aspect of Igbo language should be embraced for smooth communication among individuals. Its proper application and comprehension go a long way in resolving conflicts and creates avenue and atmosphere for peaceful co-existence among members of the Igbo society.

Keywords: *Language, Literature, culture, proverb, conflict, conflict resolution.*

Introduction

Language is the vehicle for the transmission of ideas and thoughts among individuals within and outside their cultural heritage. Without language, man is like any other animal. Human beings inhabit in groups and this facilitates interaction which sometimes results to disagreement. That notwithstanding, whenever such disagreement arises, words of wisdom are implored to calm the situation in order to restore peace and togetherness. In such situations, the usefulness of proverbs comes into play.

Igbo language stands out as one of the languages richly blessed with proverbs. During interactions among various social groups as well as at the individual level, proverbs are embedded into such interactions in a creative manner suitable for the moment. Oftentimes, in the gathering of elders of Igbo people where very sensitive issues are being discussed, the use of proverbs supersedes every other ordinary speech. This is in line with Iwuagwu (2008) view that the speaker's use of proverbs "authenticates his views and asserts his position as a repository of traditional wisdom". The following proverb "*onye a tũrũ ilu kowaara yā, ego e jìrì lụọ nnē ya fũrũ ọhịa*" (if a proverb is used and explained for someone, his mother's bride price is a wasted venture) further buttresses the fact that the Igbo people holds the use of proverbs at a very high esteem as to equate or relate it to an issue concerning someone's mother. In this paper, Igbo examples are tone- marked following Green and Igwe (1963) tone-marking convention, whereby low tone (˘) and downstep tone (-) are overtly marked while high tone is left unmarked.

Therefore, effectiveness of communication is made possible via language and proverbs are an integral part of the Igbo life and culture which is also an inseparable aspect of their literature as it mirrors their lifestyle.

What is Conflict?

Conflict is a natural phenomenon. It is in existence in all human society. The concept of conflict has been variously given different definitions by different scholars. Conflict exists between two individuals or groups when they quarrel over an issue. According to Uduma (2004), Karl Max, a proponent of conflict theory opines that conflict is inevitable in every human society. He classified society into two, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie always lord it over the proletariat. Conflict results as a clash of interest between individuals with conflicting objectives. Webster's Dictionary of English (2004) defines conflict as a struggle to resist or overcome; contest of opposing forces or powers, strife, battle.

Coser (1956) posits that "conflict comes from incompatibility of goals...a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resource in which the aim of the opponent are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals". This implies that when conflict sets in, friends become sworn enemies to the point of killing each other if care is not taken. To Stager (1967), conflict is seen as:

a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other, but not both. Each party is mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a desired objective or situation and each perceive the other as a barrier or threat to the goal (p. 16).

In other words, when conflict comes in, all will not be the same between the parties involved. Everyone becomes a suspect. Myers (1999) opines thus:

any time various parties pursue selfish interest ironically to their collective detriment; conflict arises. Conflict is not the absence of all the negatives like hatred, theft, jealousy, ritual killing, bribery and corruption etc. that pervades the land, our relationships, our work places, our homes etc. that we can safely say it's responsible for lack of peace but where there is no LOVE there will definitely be no PEACE (p.144).

Conflict is of various types. The six types of conflict identifiable include:

- **Intra- Personal Conflict:** This type of conflict exists within an individual. It is positive and enhances creativity for development. Philosophy is the product of intra-personal conflict.
- **Inter-Personal Conflict:** In the words of Aristotle, man is a social being. Interaction occurs at various levels within humans because no man is an island. In the process of this interaction, clash of interest is inevitable.
- **Intra- Group Conflict:** This type of conflict usually occurs within a particular culture group, which may be within religious, political, party etc.
- **Inter- Group Conflict:** This concerns a group, family, religion, party, club etc. pitching tent against opposing force. For example, in a family, some members may rise against others causing division among them.
- **Intra-National Conflict:** This is conflict within a nation. It takes place within a geo-political area in form of inter-ethnic, inter-religious and resource control problem of the Federal Government of Nigeria and the States involved.
- **International Conflict:** This concerns two or more nations due to boundary issues, trade wars, political issues, etc. Some countries initiate this to intimidate others.

Of all the types of conflict discussed above, the one mostly related to this study is the inter-personal conflict.

Conflict is naturally dynamic and if not controlled might lead to violence which results to physical injuries to persons. To some, conflict is an abnormal phenomenon while others posit that conflict is not destructive but can be productive.

Conflict Resolution

According to Garuba (1998), the purpose of conflict resolution is not necessarily to eliminate the conflict but to remove the causative factors in the interest of the parties affected. Heitler (1990) defines conflict resolution as “the attainment of the solution that satisfies the requirement of all the seemingly conflicting forces and thereby produces a feeling of closure for all participants” (p.6). This indicates that each time a conflict is resolved all the affected parties will have a sign of relief and satisfaction thereby ushering in peace.

To Okoli (2012), “conflict resolution refers to a range of processes aimed at alleviating or eliminating sources of conflict. Resolving conflicts that threaten the interaction between individuals in a group is necessary for survival, hence it has strong evolutionary value” (p.21).

What is Proverbs?

The concept of proverbs has either been defined or explained in various ways by different scholars. Webster’s Dictionary of English (2004) defines Proverb as a pithy saying especially one condensing the wisdom of experience, adage, saw, maxim. Finnegan explains that “proverbs are generally marked by terseness of expression, by a form different from that of ordinary speech, and by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor” (p. 388). Nwoga (1975) posits that proverbs are “the wisdom of many and the wit of one, the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression” and “edged tools of speech” (p.186). He further states that “proverbs have three meanings, the literal meaning, the philosophical meaning and the contextual relevance” (p.188).

The use of Igbo proverbs applies in different situations such as bride price settlement, entertainment, family meetings, advisory, conflict resolution etc. Proverbs are not used inattentively in discussions. For their meaning to be brought to the fore in any given situation, context must rule. This falls in line with Obiechina (1995) views which states that:

There are proverbs for every occasion, proverbs to suit every situation, to light up every experience. Every significant affirmation can be strengthened with a proverb, every customary value, belief, attitude or outlook can be settled by an appeal to the sanctioning proverb. Even contradictory views can be sustained by an appeal to different proverbs (p.156).

In his own contribution to the meaning of proverbs, Achebe (1958) opines that “the art of conversation among the Igbo is highly valued and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten”. As oil serves as lubricant to ease off friction, so is proverb as oil to make for easy flow of speech in every given situation. Therefore, the use of proverbs in the course of interaction is greatly valued.

Okpewho (1992) explains that “when people make speeches or hold discourse with one another, they frequently use proverbs to add some wit to their statements and to make their points more firmly” (p.229).

Proverbs apart from functioning as a means of communication stands out as useful instrument of artistic performance. Authors of novels utilize them variously in describing the life of the people. This is a clear indication that these authors are deep rooted in the culture of the people which they express through their characters.

Synopsis of the text *Odi Uko Na Mba*

Odi Uko Na Mba –written and published in 2003 is one of the novels written by Chibiko Ndubisi Okebalama. The novel discusses the marital experiences of a young lady and the quest for freedom. The text features the marriage of a young lady, Adaaku, a standard six holders, daughter of Nwokeocha, a railway worker and his wife Ihemjieme from Itu and Eze Uzochi, a nurse with orthopaedic hospital in Lagos, son of Nwoha from Umuezike. Eze’s inability to face the reality of life as it concerns his marital status, brings in conflict in the marriage sooner than expected. On realizing his mistakes, he tries very hard to make amend but his wife; Adaaku has already taken a drastic decision to end the marriage.

Adaaku’s decision to end her marriage to Eze receives serious opposition from the members of her family but with the support of her aunt, Ekwujuruka, she relocates to Cameroun with Eze’s daughter Ijeoma in search of well- paid employment which she succeeded in getting with her standard six certificates. Within a short while, Ekwu, a young man in her office, impregnates and dumps her. Being in the family way costs her, her job and she learnt a very big lesson never to trust any man. Providence quickly shines on her again and she gets a new employment as a confidential secretary with some fringe benefits attached. She officially divorces Eze with the court granting him custody of the two children, Ijeoma and Maraizu as custom demands. She later marries another man, Okoro, a big time business man that lives in Cameroun but not without teaching Ekwu the lesson of his life.

Adaaku’s marriage to Okoro turns sore from the onset, reason being that Okoro wants Adaaku to be a full time house wife, cooking and serving his numerous employees. To Adaaku, over her dead body will she allow such to happen to her in her life time. Okoro decides to act on his friend’s advice but receives the beating of his life from Adaaku. The abrupt quit notice from the government of Cameroun and their subsequent return to their home town finally crashed their marriage. In the bid to start life all over again, Adaaku was robbed of her valuable certificates and this turns her to ordinary cassava seller which is degrading to her personality. Finally, she meets with her first husband, Eze and her children- Ijeoma and Maraizu. Adaaku, upon realizing her mistakes and with the backing of Eze’s second, Eze forgives and accepts her back and they live together again as one happy family.

Instances of Usage of Proverbs in the Text for Conflict Resolution

The author Chibiko Ndubisi Okebalama used assemblage of proverbs in the text. The synopsis of the text indicates that it concerns marriage and its related issues. In Igbo culture and society, all issues pertaining to marriage and its attending problems are viewed with seriousness. Marriage is meant for mature and experienced minds. Therefore, whatsoever that concerns it must be handled with wisdom and maturity and not be treated with kids

gloves. Proverbs as repository of wisdom becomes a veritable tool at hand as the need arises.

On page 3, Nwokeocha cautions against not allowing Eze to marry Adaaku, his daughter as he says:

1. Ya mèrè, anụ m na -agaghi èri aga m ènye ya onye ga- eri yā.
(Therefore, the meat I cannot eat I will give it to the person that will eat it)

By this proverb, Nwokeocha reiterates that not giving out his daughter's hand in marriage is not to his advantage since he knows that he cannot marry her and to avoid future conflict between them. There is a stage in a woman's life when she is expected to move from her father's house to her husband's house. When that time comes, keeping her further is detrimental.

On page 3 again, Nwokeocha says,

2. màkà nà ùgwù bù nkwanje nkwanje nwaànyì amụọ ibè ya
(Because it is in giving honour that a woman begets another)

By this proverb, Nwokeocha maintains that though Adaaku is his daughter, he did not give birth to her all alone, so, his wife must be involved to avoid conflict. Giving out a daughter's hand in marriage involves both parents. If a man relegates the wife to the background in such situation, there is bound to be conflict.

On page 5, Eze says,

3. kamà ihe m nà -ègwu gà- èsi n'òñù tàgbuo m, ya si n'ùfù gbapù. 4. Kamà I gà-
akwòrọ m n'azụ ụkwụ m ana-akpụ n'àlà, zìe m ka m jiri ụkwụ m gawa
(Instead of me to be consumed by what I am digging; may it escape from the
corner. Instead of you to carry me at your back with my legs dragging on the ground,
put me down and let me walk with my legs)

By the use of the two proverbs above, Eze advises himself to part ways with his sister and start building his own home so that conflict will be removed.

On page 10, Eze says,

5. Mmà nwannē anaghị èru n'òkpụkpụ
(The knife cut of a relative does not touch the bones)

By this proverb, Eze admonishes his wife, Adaaku to take things easy and not to push him to react over his sister's action toward him to avoid conflict. He applies the same proverb on page 44 when he says:

6. Iwe nwannē anaghị èru n'òkpụkpụ

On page 11, Eze says,

7. Màta nà onye obì ukwu nà-èbu onye metara ihe mmụō ụzò ànwụ
(Be it known to you that a hot tampered man dies first before the offender of
the gods)

By this proverb, Eze still advises his wife, Adaaku to calm down in order not to land herself in trouble so as to eschew conflict.

On page 13, Eze says,

8. M̀a ùbe m̀èr̀ǹǹ eze j̀i racha nt̀u
(But the pear made the king to lick ashes)

By this proverb, Eze advises himself further on why he should swallow all the insults from his wife just to avoid conflict.

On page 25, Eze says,

9. À nagh̀i èji ut̀utu ama nj̀o ah̀ja
(Misfortunes are not always dictated quite early)

By this proverb, Eze reiterates that though things have not been going on well between him and his wife, Adaaku, since they got married, it does not mean that all hope is lost. There is hope for good things to come in future. This mind set is believed to help in removing conflict. His father -in-law, Nwokeocha, holds the same view on page 32.

On page 61, Ihemjieme, Adaaku's mother says,

10. B̀ja ỳa ngwa ngwa k̀a a mara ji ga- ala n'uru mara nke ga-ala n'otiri
(Come quickly so as to know the yam that will be useful and the one to be discarded)

By this proverb, Ihemjieme advises his son-in-law, Eze not to waste time in coming home to hasten up the possibility of unravelling the reason behind Adaaku's behaviour to forestall more damages to her life and marriage and remove conflict.

On page 69, Eze advises himself saying:

11. Atur̀u s̀i ǹa ò digh̀i ihe kariri il̀e anya
(The sheep says that there is nothing like looking)

By this proverb, Eze cautions himself not to take immediate or drastic action as regard Adaaku's absconding with his daughter, Ijeoma but to observe things to avoid conflict.

On page 76, Ihemjieme cautions her sister Ekwujuruka saying,

12. Onye na-anogh̀i mgb̀e e lir̀i ozu ǹa- àb̀o ỳa n'ukwu.
(He who was not present when a corpse is buried exhumes it from the leg)

By this proverb, Ihemjieme cautions her sister Ekwujuruka not to dabble into an issue which she was not there when it all started to avoid making mistakes. It is not always good to jump into conclusion on matters without proper investigation. Being quick in passing judgements results to conflict. This concerns Adaaku's return from her husband's house without his consent and Ekwujuruka, her aunt, took sides with her. If this caution was adhered to, conflict will not arise.

On page 84, Ugochukwu, Nwokeocha's first son says:

13. Ah̀ja nne l̀èr̀è nwa ỳa anagh̀i àgho ỳa ah̀ja
(The market a mother observes for the child will not be wasteful)

By this proverb, Ugochukwu advises his aunt Ekwujuruka not to encourage Adaaku to disregard her parents good wish for her. Doing so might result to danger and conflict ensues.

On page 98, Adaaku says:

14. Òtule, agbùsì àgbaala m, agà m amùrụzị āko
(Bottom, I have been stung by an ant, I have learnt my lesson)

Adaaku by this proverb realizes her mistakes and vows never to allow any other man to deceive her as Ekwu has done. This decision of hers equally motivated her to give her second daughter the name-Maraizu.

On page 120, Ugochukwu says:

15. À naghī anò ebe tere anyā èsusù ọnū
(Kissing cannot take place from afar)

Ugochukwu uses this proverb to encourage Okoro, his sister, Adaaku's suitor not to be far off but should come closer to know the mind of her family concerning his marriage proposal to her.

On page 150, Adaaku says:

16. M̀arakwa nà di nà nwaànyị gbaa izùzù ǹisi jī àghòo anya nrī
(You should know that if husband and wife confine a piece of yam becomes a big meal)

Adaaku encourages her husband, Okoro not to be disillusioned because of their present state. There is still hope for improvement. Had it been that Okoro listened to Adaaku, the conflict between them would have been resolved.

From the instances of the proverbs discussed so far from the text, it is obvious that they are veritable tools for effective communication and if seriously adhered to will be very useful in resolving conflicts among the people concerned.

Conclusion

From the discussions so far, it is evident that the use of proverbs in Igbo language is very effective in communication. Though proverbs are concise and condensed in words, their meanings could be expanded. The author has been able to include some of these proverbs in the text to prove that when situation of conflict arises between individuals, proper application of these proverbs will go a long way in resolving such. Adherence to the effective use of these proverbs in interaction can as well forestall conflict from taken place. Again, inclusive of proverbs in literary texts by different authors will drive home its importance in our everyday speech.

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