

Contextual Expositions of Igbo Proverbs in Selected Mike Ejeagha's Folk Songs

Abstract

This paper explores the use of Igbo proverbs in selected folklorist Mike Ejeagah's folk songs- Omekagu (one who behaves like a lion) and Uwa Mgbede Ka Mma (life of serenity is beautiful). Mike Ejeagha, the folk artist is known for his ingenuity in fusing tales rich in proverbs within his folk songs. This paper argues that the contextual meanings of the exemplary proverbs in the selected songs are derived from the content of the tales in the selected songs. The researcher will do a textual analysis of the proverbs in the songs while asserting that the meanings of the proverbs are embodied in the story line. In analysing the meanings of the proverbs in the songs, this research affirms the place of proverbs in the socio cultural environment of the Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria and it finally shows that Mike Ejeagaha's folk songs can be an agent of cultural and historical storage of the Igbo culture.

Key words: Folk tales, Folk songs, Igbo proverbs, Mike Ejeagha

Introduction

The Igbo people as Africans are lovers of music and as such music permeates their social environment from birth to death. As a people, the Igbo have different kinds of music which come into play depending on the occasion - they have music for birth, festivals, marriage, farming and funerals. The Igbo people express their sociological, philosophical, ethical, epistemological and cultural beliefs in music. In essence, Igbo folk song is the sole representative of the people's cultures and traditions. Umezina [1] opines that Igbo folk music is communally-owned and folk oriented and serve as tools of education, entertainment and social cohesion (Umezina: 2012 343). Obviously, the functions and place of folk music among the Igbo cannot be overemphasised.

Interestingly, Nnamani [2] affirms that Igbo folk song is a type of song that is replete with tales or storytelling where noble ideas are acknowledged and praised while vices are discouraged or condemned. He goes further to assert that Igbo folk song is also a means of imbibing idioms and proverbs. (Nnamani 2014: 306). Nnamani implies that the tales within the body of the songs express the societal practices and behaviours that are valued and abominable in Igbo culture. However, there are some that are not punctuated with tales instead it comments on the social life of the people. In this bid, Igbo folk song provides a platform through which cultural values, morals and beliefs are transmitted from one generation to another.

Folklorist Mike Ejeagha

Ejeagha is a folk musician from South Eastern Nigeria precisely Omezi-Qwa in Eziagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. He is popularly known as Gentleman. Ejeagha as a folk artist has succeeded in cutting a niche in the society for his creative incredibility in

transforming Igbo folktales to a new dimension through his style of music popularly known as *Akuko N' Egwu* which means storytelling in music. The contents and forms of his music are derivatives of the Igbo culture that expose the language competence of Ejeagha as an artist. Proverbs in his songs are palliative measures in recurring oral repertoires of the Igbo which are embedded in the culture of the people. The proverbs he infuses into his songs serve as a major vibe to authenticate the contents of the song as part of Igbo oral folklores. His deployment of proverbs in the selected songs is our major concern in this research.

Folktales

Folktales remain part and parcel of the human society from generation to generation. The people of a particular society express their cultural experiences, knowledge, and educational prospects through folktales. Akinwumi Isola [3] believes that folktales play a servicing and monitoring role to other aspects of culture in traditional African society. Folktales celebrate the full spectrum of African culture and speak to the spiritual [religious, physical, philosophical] and cultural needs of Africans. (Quoted in Kehinde 2010: 6). African folktale is however committed to preserving and ensuring historical revival of the folk telling practice. The tales remain means of informing and teaching people the cultural traditions of a people. Most times folktales address different issues both the good and bad either to encourage and discourage people from such acts. Folktale is an agent of cultural transmission and should be guided from going into extinction.

Ogbalu [4] argues that folktales stem from man's desire to communicate his experience to others, to let others share his views about life, to direct members of the society, to satirise deviant characters in the society and to instil the spirit of love among members of the community (2014:

60). Obviously, folktale can be used for the advocacy of social change and progression. The folk artist understudy is committed to publicising the culture of his people through his famous style of music punctuated with tales.

Moreover, Usman, Ohwovoriol, Dik and Torutein [5] align that “folktales are also known as tale-telling used by oral artists to provide relaxation and teaching moral lessons. They further state that it is used to instruct both the young and the old to respect the dictates of their customs thereby, preserving a large number of the societal laws for posterity (2013:238). Folktales serve as a source of inspiration, emotions, and passions that appeal to the reasoning of the people thereby invoking the ability to induce positive behavioural changes in the society. Hence, one could suggest that one of the reasons there is moral decadence in today’s societies is due to the decline in folktale telling among people.

Taiwo Oladele [3] claims that, to understand the culture of any part of Africa, one must read or listen to the folktales because they illustrate the simplicity and superstition of the rural African peoples, and reflect the stage of development of a particular society (Quoted in Kehinde 2010:6). Perhaps, the tales in the songs of Ejeagha are strong reservoir of different aspects of the Igbo culture which derives its importance from the content of the tales. The tales in the songs also suggest that folktales have different variations since folk artists have the ability to create and recreate stories that border on issues of life. Having variations of the same folk tales from a particular society or artist gives room for new innovations and assertions that stories abound in the human society invariably which Mike Ejeagah’s storytelling in music have accomplished through modernisation and relocation of Igbo folktales from the moon light gathering, huts of grand-mothers, hinterland to a different space of performance known as new media communications and publication.

Igbo Proverbs

The Igbo-English Dictionary (*Okowa Okwu*) by Eke [6] defines a proverb as “popular short wise sayings with words of advice or warning” (2001:328). This definition recognises Igbo proverbs as wordings that illustrate the consequences underlying extraneous actions thus it encourages people to depart from misconducts that lead to a dead end. On the same footing, *BBC English Dictionary* [7] affirms that proverbs are short sentences that people often quote to give advice or make general comments about life. (1992:924). Therefore, proverb is an utterance that expresses acts of truism derived from the culture of a people. It warns and cautions the behaviour of the people in life situations. Such is the function of proverbs among Igbo people and it remains a centrality in their speech and communications.

Proverbs are like life-wires, souls and forces of speeches in social gatherings and communications among the Igbo people. Proverbs form a foundational background of Igbo cultural productions, thus the Igbo popularly say that *onye aturu ilu kowara; i mara n' ego eji lu nne ya lara n' inyi* (the bride price paid to marry the mother of someone who could not understand a proverb without explanation is futile). Overtly, proverbs from time immemorial are integral part of the people's life. Most times, people derive power of conviction and certainty in different life situations by inciting proverbs that are appropriate to authenticate their positions in situations-settlement of disputes, arguments, family gathering, or most importantly teaching the ways life of the people.

Proverbs exist in the midst of the Igbo people therefore they express their thoughts and positions in speeches, gatherings, merriment, tribulations and victorious moments with proverbs suitable

for such occasions. The Igbo believe that the ability to infuse proverbs in speeches, communications, teaching, and meetings show the level of linguistic competence one has in the use of Igbo language as “a son of the soil” (*nwa afor Igbo*). Perhaps, Achebe’s definition of proverbs as palm oil with which words are eaten (*mmanu eji eri okwu* [8] (Achebe 1958: 24) further ascertains the place of proverbs on the language competence of Igbo people. In particular, proverbs are one of the basic ways to identify with the cultures of the Igbo people because it communicates the principles, philosophies, and the cultural knowledge of the people which are handed down from generation to generation. Generally, it is a cultural production that emanates from a particular place and transmits the achievement, failings, hopes and aspirations that promote peaceful coexistence among the community. In this regard, Omoḷoṣo [9] points out that proverbs are enclosed in the cultural and traditional beliefs of language users, which must be understood in order to understand the proverbs, as the beliefs form the background knowledge that language users draw upon to deploy and decode them (Omoḷoṣo 2012:1318). In other words, the understanding of the Igbo culture is prerequisite to deciphering the meanings of the proverbs in Igbo folk tales.

FUNCTIONS

Furthermore, proverbs are cultural agents used in the settlement of disputes and transmission of information among the people. The people frequently use proverb in conversational situations to comment on the issue at hand. This means that proverbs are released in the presence of the speaker and the hearer or audience to assert the truth, subjectively concerning both the cause of the dispute and topic of discussion. Proverbs are vehicles of expressions used by the people in social gatherings, festivals, storytelling, family meetings and so on employed to imbibe truth and justice in the hearts of the people.

Okolo [10] maintains that the wordings of proverbs are fixed as their contents and the message transmitted in them have a cultural standardisation in both form and content. He further argues that this make the memorisation and retention easy for anybody that wishes to internalise it into their speech will not have to grapple with the problem of variation. The meanings of proverbs are contextual and it is also dependent on the knowledge of Igbo cultures and traditions. A good speaker has to make use of them in appropriate contexts because contexts play a major role in their correct interpretation. It is an aberration in Igbo cultural context to introduce a proverb in a given situation which does not interpret or draw a deeper feelings from the audience, proverbs are not clauses or sayings which the speaker uses for a play or joke. Igbo people have strong attachment to the proverbs that describe or analyses situations meaningfully which are beneficial to both the speaker and his audience. In view of this, proverbs in the selected songs are contextualised within the tales by the folk artist- Ejeagha.

Summary of the Tale in the Song: Omekagu

This song tells a story of a king who deeply loves his youngest son (Omekagu) and vows to bequeath the throne to him, despite the vehement opposition from his cabinet members. According to the chiefs, the tradition of the land forbids the youngest son from becoming king while the first son is still alive and healthy. Nevertheless, the king refuses to refrain from his decision. On a certain market day, the king orders the palace chief guide to parade Omekagu on a horse round the land so that the people will meet the heir apparent to the throne, but at the dawn of the event, the aggrieved Okpara Eze (the king's first son) blows the magical horn he picks from the forest obliging it to blow Omekagu to death for desecrating the land. Then, the king realises the injustice he unleashed on his first son. However, in the process of uncovering the mystery behind the sudden death of Omekagu; order is restored in the land.

Table 1: Analysis of the proverbs in the song Omekagu

Proverb	Literal translation	Contextual Meaning
1 Onye si nwatakiri jide nkakwu ya debe kwara ya mmiri o ga-eji we kwuo aka	One who instructs or tells a child to catch a shrew with his bare hands should not hesitate to provide him with the water to wash his hands	People should be ready to face the consequences of their actions or decisions
2 Otito ntogbu na-egbu nwa nkita	Excessive praise leads the dog to an early grave	Unnecessary love and care destroys the future of a child
3 Idide sina o bu afọ oma ka ya ji awa ani	The earthworm burrows the ground in good faith	Hard-work leads to success
4 Ireoma ka ejula ji aga n' ogwu	A snail crawls slowly on the thorns with its tongue	Difficult situations in life is overcome with diligence and humility
5 Ji anaghi esi na odudu epu ome	The seedling of a yam do not sprout from the tail	The first son becomes the head of the family and the custodian of the tradition at the demise of the father in Igbo cultural climes.
6 Ehi enweghi odudu chi ya na-achuru ya ijiji	It is the gods that fend off flies from the anus of a cow that has no tail	God is the defender of the defenseless
7 Onye tunye mgbugba ogede na mmiri emecha o se elu	A banana peel never sinks when it is thrown inside water	Truth cannot be hidden

Proverb 1 and 2: Parental Guidance/Child Upbringing: The Igbo people believe that children are the prides of their parents and should be shown the right path to succeed in life. Based on this: these proverbs illustrate the Igbo belief that parents have the sole responsibility of training a child - *nzulite umuaka dina aka nne na nna* (the training of a child is the sole responsibility. Parents teach and guide a child to imbibe and inculcate the right attitude so as to become beneficial members of the society. To the Igbo people, good child upbringing breeds responsible individuals and by extension the larger society. These proverbs also condemn attitudes like pride, rudeness and arrogance caused by the kind of names and privileges some parents lavish on children in the name of love. The culture of the Igbo condemns such actions due to the negative influence it has on the character of a child.

In entirety, these proverbs describe the attitudes of the adult Omekagu who grows up to become an insensitive member of the society without human feelings and tramp upon the rights of the first son which is a forbidden act among the Igbo people. In particular, it discourages parents from encouraging bad behavioural traits in children.

Proverbs 3 and 4: Perseverance: these proverbs use the nature of two crawling animals to summarise the life of the first son (Okpara Eze) in the song. These proverbs usurp perseverance, patience, diligence, hope, hard-work, and fortitude respectively. Symbolically, these two animals crawl on their skin in order to stay alive or die of hunger. The proverb professes the profits of confronting difficult situations with positive attitudes. In turn, it admonishes the Igbo people to keep the egalitarian spirit of survival with which the Igbo are known while maintaining their integrity as truthful men like the Okpara Eze who endures, challenges and overturns the decisions and erroneous acts of Omekagu to become victorious at the end.

Proverb 5: Abomination/Taboo (Arụ): the proverb addresses one of the important aspects of Igbo cultural values and norms. In Igbo land, there are rules and regulations that guide social attitudes of the people and breakdown of the social order and constituted authority may lead to anarchy. Therefore, the people are expected to observe and inculcate such laws in their daily lives. Hence, the proverb - the seedling of a yam do not sprout from the tail means that the Igbo assigns responsibility to people hierarchically (oldest-last).

The proverb revolves round the issue of succession in Igbo land. It is a taboo/sacrilegious for a second son to ascend the throne when the eldest son is alive and healthy. Here, eldest sons are seen as custodians of Igbo traditions thus they are expected to preside objectively on issues as holders of the Ofor (spiritual essence of the people). The breakdown or negation of the

constituted order can bring havoc on the people or even on the individual as the case of Omekagu who died as a result of revolting against the first son (Okpara Eze). In view of this, Nwala opines that Omenala (dos and don'ts of the Igbo culture)

Includes major beliefs about the origin of the universe and its nature, the place of the spirits, deities, man and other beings in the universe, the nature or character of taboos, regulations, prescriptions and prohibitions as to what is proper in such a universe-rules of marriage, sexual intercourse, attitudes to strangers-and forms of social relationship, as well as the realm of simple decency and etiquette. Indeed, *Omenala* is a body of law and morals along with their metaphysical foundations [11] (Quoted in Onwuegbunam 2015: 4).

Proverb 6: Supernatural Beings (*Chi, chukwu, chineke*): the proverb acknowledges the presence of supreme beings on earth which controls the affairs of men and a reference to the religious knowledge and belief in God among the Igbo people. This proverb reminds the Igbo people that there is supreme God called *chukwu, chineke, chukwu orisa, osabreuwa* who delivers the innocent from oppression and the tribulations of the wicked. In life, when we are wrongfully accused or denied what rightfully belongs to us as in the case of Okpara Eze, we should remember that God will surely vindicate and deliver us. This proverb also addresses individual/s who infringe upon the right of people to have a rethink thus they should wait for God's vindication like Omekagu's father that refuses to listen to the warnings of elders concerning his decision to crown Omekagu instead of the elder brother. Hence, the Igbo culture vehemently condemns injustice, suppression and intimidation of any kind in all areas of life.

Proverb 7 Truth (*Eziokwu*): the proverb underscores the importance of truth as a guiding principle in life. According to Ejeagha, it is difficult to hide truth as it is like a diamond that is casted among the dark. It is also evident that the voice of truth cannot be hidden or suppressed; it definitely will surface in spite of time constraints/ objections. In short, truth cannot be destroyed

or suppressed in spite of challenges just like the Okpara Eze is vindicated in the story despite the effort of the king to crown his second son. In other words, truth cannot be hidden like Okpara Eze who is diligent and humble fellow in time of difficulties is exonerated from the unpleasant situation, thus the elders remind the father that the gods has started to fight on his behalf.

Analysis of the Second Song - *Uwa Mgbede ka Mma* (A life of diligence is the best or a life of serenity is beautiful)

This song reawakens the consciousness of people on the importance of humble beginnings. Ejeagha uses imageries and symbols to buttress his points in the song. Firstly, he compares the sources of wealth to the processes which precede stages of child growth which ranges from crawling, standing, walking to running errand for the parents. The second comparison exemplifies the processes of cultivation of yam tubers which is the major economic wealth of an Igbo man - clearing the bush, planting the yam, weeding, harvesting and feasting. These imageries are employed to further illustrate the relevance of pursuing a meaningful occupation. In recent times, the Igbo society has witnessed a total hike in the get - rich- quick syndrome that propels many to leave the shores of the land for greener pastures in western world while others engage in unlawful business ventures. The menaces have succeeded in creating a loophole on the integrity of the Igbo as a people. Consequently, Ejeagha as a prophetic artist admonishes the people to embrace a humble attitude in their occupations as life has different phases - time to toil and time to reap.

Table 2. Literary translation and contextual meaning of proverb

Proverb	Literal Translation	Contextual Meaning
1 A na-ebido n’ ala we riwa elu	One starts climbing from the ground to the top and not the	A solid foundation is the root to success

	other way round.	
2 <i>Ori n'ike na-ala n' ike</i>	He who eats fasts dies fast.	Bad fruits do not last
3 <i>Ocho ngwa ngwa na-ala ngwa ngwa</i>	He who pursues in a fast pace; goes in a fast pace	Acquiring wealth in a wrong way leads to premature death
4 <i>kama m ga-agba ka ngwo; ka m gba ka nkwu</i>	It is better for me to flow like the wine of the palm tree than to flow like the wine of the raffle tree.	Quality will always supersede quantity

Proverb 1: Humble Beginnings: The proverb explicates a popular saying in Igbo oral repertoire that a humble beginning is the key to success. This proverb informs people to sow before reaping because whatever is not sown has no solid foundation and can fall at any moment. An Igbo man in his wisdom is aware of this phenomenon and obliges the people to start building from the foundation. It is a warning to youths and adults who crave/aspire for the good things of life but lack the will power to work hard in order to better their condition in life to desist from bad practices (fraud, forgery, stealing and so on)

Proverb 2: Social Vices: this proverb do not necessarily mean physical food rather it is the source of wealth, resources, assets, and the luxuries that people have acquired on earth. In this regard, the Igbo man is of the view that when one soils his hands in evil by indulging in things that are unlawful for the sake of becoming rich, they will encounter a problem or a situation that may lead to untimely death or change of status. This proverb sounds a note of warning to people who engage in all sorts of crime - drug pushing, illegal smuggling of arms, money ritual, human trafficking to repent and embrace the kind of career that will bring peace and joy into their life and loved ones. Ejeagha vehemently condemns poisonous craze to climb the social ladder through illegal means; he condemns all inhumane acts in the quest to become rich and wealthy.

Proverb 3: Disruption of social Order: for one to understand the meaning of this proverbial expression, a little inquiry is derived from process of child growth as narrated in the song. A

child is expected to crawl before walking or to suck before eating solid food, however, when a new born child begins to take solid food or begins to walk without crawling then there is an impending problem. This is true because such a child has disrupted a social order therefore the child is likely to grow and die fast before he begins the journeys of life. In life, people should learn to engage in things that correlate with societal stipulations to avoid failures or pitfalls on the way. The proverb advises and warns people that unlawful attitudes come with dreadful consequences.

Proverb 4: Uprightness: this last proverb summaries the view points of the song: *kama m ga-agba ka ngwo; ka m gba ka nkwu* - it is better for me to flow like the wine from the palm tree than to flow like the wine of the raffle tree. It is impossible for someone who is not knowledgeable in Igbo culture to interpret the meaning of the above proverb. The implication of the proverb is two-folds. The first one gives a clear description of a tree which drops a little wine each day while lasting for a number of years whereas the wine from the later (the raffle tree) flows fast while it dies off and becomes firewood. The proverb juxtaposes the source of wealth between two people, the first person represents palm tree as an individual who toil morning, afternoon and night to make money before he becomes rich while the second person portrays an individual who becomes wealthy through illegal means.

This proverb preaches the dignity of labour and hard work in spite of the challenges of life, good things comes with hard work and perseverance. It is obvious that Ejeagha can be credited as a social commentator who addresses issues that transcend different generational order in Igbo society. The proverbs in the tales can be situated within the past and present situations in Nigeria and the world at large where people have erroneous belief that Igbo culture is cancerous and disastrous.

Conclusion

This paper tries to foreground the fact that, the contextual meanings of Igbo proverbs are derived from the cultural ethos of the people which heralds their principles, philosophies, beliefs and experiences in life. It also shows that Igbo proverbs can be a contestable ground to confront the dwindling of cultural practices among the youths and the society in general. With the analysis of the proverbial expressions in the songs, Igbo folk music of this kind has been identified to be an exponent of Igbo culture to variants of cultures in Nigeria. This study recognises the beauty of Igbo proverbs in tales, songs, speeches, and dialogues as an educative, informative and corrective venture in these present times of globalisation of the world cultures.

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