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**The Sociolinguistic Relevance Of Ibibio Proverbs**

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**Introduction:**

Ibibio is one of the languages of Nigeria spoken by a people who constitute the fourth largest ethnic group of the country, and are also known as Ibibio. Ibibio is therefore ethnoglossonym, the name by which both the people and their language are called. According to Crozier and Blench (48) Ibibio is a Lower Cross language. The Lower Cross belongs to the Delta – Cross sub-group of the Cross River group, in the Benue – Congo family of languages.

A thing to note about the Ibibio language is the elaborate use of proverbs in the communication of various social, political, religious, diplomatic, linguistic and other concepts. The very Ibibio proverb "Akaan iko etan ke nke: old sayings are coded in proverbs", illustrates a language decked and adorned with proverbs. Generally speaking, and according to Ukut (109), a proverb could be regarded as a brief, wity, terse statement which captures some truth in a symbolic form". We can also regard a proverb as a figure of speech or idiomatic expression extracted from a pool of one's experience in life.

It is a well-known fact that every utterance made by a speaker can be traced to a given context. This includes such speeches that may be made proverbially or figuratively.



Brown and Yale (25-26) have observed that no complete account can be given of an utterance without taking into consideration the context in which the linguistic form had been uttered. In other words, every Ibibio proverb can only be interpreted from a particular context.

The proverbs discussed in this essay were collected over a period of more than two years from elders in the Ibibio speaking community, in natural speech situation. Also some of the proverbs were gotten from literature in general. The proverbs in this essay have been classified on the basis of what they teach. The glosses enable us to do an interlinear translation, and according to Ukut (32), they also provide "the framework for the semantic translation of the sentential structures".

#### **Analysis and Discussion of Ibibio Proverbs:**

The speaker's and addressee's background, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits that could be acquired as a member of society are major factors in the interpretation of proverbs. Our analysis will take these factors into consideration, and in the examples that follow, we shall illustrate the use of proverbs as models of communication in Ibibio.

#### **Proverbs Giving Advice**

*Ifiok ikemme owol*

*Knowledge it is not enough person*

*'No one is a reservoir of all knowledge'*

Here is an indisputable universal truth in just a few words. It is a fact that is applicable in all areas of life and

human endeavours such as medicine, law, education, science and technology. It implies that none should claim intellectual superiority over the other, all things being equal. Among the Ibibios, this is a common adage wherever a person looked up to for solution to problems fails to live up to expectation. This proverb also confirms that full knowledge, absolute knowledge, belongs to God only.

*Eto isidaha ikpoon ikappa akai!*

*Tree not stand alone become forest*

*'A tree does not form a forest'*

The truth in this proverb is a practical reality observable just as the one above. Yet, its application is more relevant in what affects humans socially. The proverb teaches that no person can succeed in life all alone, be it a ruler, a student, a nation etc. The Ibibios use this proverb specifically in that context, and it finds its equivalent in the English, "No man is an Island".

*Id/An iniehe nte ofon*

*Country not have where good*

*'No country is without problems'*

The message in this proverb is a simple global truth, and in the Ibibio world vision, there is certainly no problem-free society. It is a proverb whose vision of the world discourages people from running away from their place of origin because of problems. Rather, it encourages people to stay back and face the problems of their countries squarely. The positive result of

such an endeavour can prove to us the truth in the English proverb "East or West home is the best".

The Ibibios usually use this proverb in a number of contexts. For instance when they hear about an event in another country which is as bad, if not worse than what happens in their own nation or when somebody such as a child contemplates running away from home due to some perceived problems.

### Proverbs Giving Warning

*EmAm nnyin ekpe ekoot eka;  
They catch baby lion they call mother*

*'Capture the cob and call the lioness'*

Although it is true that when a person captures a cob the lioness will put up a hard fight in order to recapture her cob, this proverb can be extended to what goes on in the diplomatic world. To illustrate, a certain national of a particular country may be abducted by the authorities of another country expecting that certain political demands be met before the victim is released. It is exactly in the same sense that this proverb is expressed here.

*Ayaara adia Abasi abat isua;  
Male he eats, God he counts years*

*'Every tyrant has his day of reckoning with God'*

This proverb teaches that no matter how despotic a leader or anyone for that matter may be, God is numbering his days. The principle or wisdom of the proverb can be seen in

what has been happening to certain corrupt world leaders including those from Africa. In the Ibibio culture this proverb is used each time somebody say, a notorious armed robber is caught. It also applies if someone in authority is behaving despotically but most especially when his end has come.

*Ufen Abasi ikamake ikpa;  
Punishment God, it does not hold cane*

*'God's punishment does not come with cane'*

This is another proverbial expression of God's way and manner of punishing the world. Sometimes it may not be obvious that we are receiving punishment for offences committed, but the punishment comes all the same. This proverb is usually uttered among the Ibibios as a warning to offenders that although they may not see God with a cane in hand coming to punish them, He punishes all the same, and at times much more severely than with a literal cane.

### Proverbs Showing Experience

*Mbara oson edet  
Nail older tooth*

*'The nail is older than the tooth'*

This proverb contains a basic anatomical truth, that of the human nails being naturally older than the teeth. A baby is born with all the nails of the fingers and toes usually intact. But no baby is ever born with the teeth. Furthermore, it is an anatomical fact that when the teeth finally comes, they are not



permanent but milk teeth which will be replaced by the permanent teeth.

Philosophically, this proverb implies that wisdom comes with age, that is to say, the older a person is, the wiser he/she becomes when compared to the younger people. As one might expect, this proverb is usually applicable in a situation where two things, individuals or events are compared in order to establish the superiority, quality or wisdom of one over the other.

*Osong owo oson ifiok*  
*Older person older knowledge*

*'He who is older than a person is older in knowledge'*

This proverb expresses another universal truth. Naturally, the older a person is, the more knowledgeable he/she is supposed to be, all things being equal. Among the Ibibios, the proverb is usually enunciated each time an older person has been able to find a solution to a knotty problem. The proverb encourages interaction among people of different ages for mutual benefits. In other words, we can benefit immensely from the wisdom of those who may be older than us either in age or in experience.

*Asana isan ekit afia okpok*  
*Walker walk sees white lizard*

*'One who travels out sees a white lizard'*

As a people, the Ibibios do believe in the civilization of other people. They also believe that there can be extraordinary things beyond their own shores and borders,

and this is captured in this proverb. In its literal translation the proverb says that anyone who travels out will see white lizards. The implication is that there are no white lizards in Ibibio land, and if one must see them, he/she must visit other lands and culture. Expectedly, this proverb is usually expressed among the Ibibios each time they hear or see something strange, unknown or unheard of. They see that as an opportunity to learn something new.

### **Proverbs Showing Expectation/Hope**

*Oyom akwa nkpo okono mban enan*  
*Person want big thing hang jaw bone*

*'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown'*

In this proverb the message conveyed is the truth that whoever is eyeing an important position must be ready for a heavy responsibility. The reality of the fact expressed in the proverb affects everybody in all walks of life and may be better understood in the context of the time and effort put in by the student reading for a higher degree, a businessman looking for business opportunities or a politician looking for an elective post. Nothing good comes easy.

*Abasi ama obot mbat, obot udaraikpat*  
*God when He creates mud He creates rinsing foot*

*'When God creates the mud, He creates the water to wash the feet'*

The above proverb which we have translated literally simply implies that God has a solution to every problem. A

sunshine that follows a heavy downpour, peace that comes after war, and a blossoming health that follows a deadly illness are some of the reasons that have brought about this proverb among the Ibibios.

*Nkpo odo nno uno*  
*Thing is give me I give you*

*'Life is give and take'*

The Ibibios believe that one can go through life successfully on the basis of the principle of reciprocity. The proverb captures this in just a few words, and the philosophy expressed is true in respect of any two individuals – friends, nations, etc. that have entered into a bilateral relationship. The alliance can thrive if both parties operate by this proverbial philosophy. Among the Ibibios this proverb serves as a reminder to the close – fist that life is give and take.

*Eyin ekedo okot odubook*  
*Child was he grow he come nourish you*

*'The child is the father of the man'*

This proverb expresses a near irony as it were but on close examination the content is the whole truth. The Ibibios see children as those who, on growing up, would take care of the parents, especially in their old age. This proverb is usually expressed when children live up to this expectation, or as a piece of advice for them.

### **Proverb Indicating Care/Caring**

*Akama isip keed idoho unyim*  
*Holder kernel one is not stingy*

*'He who has one kernel is not stingy'*

Here is a proverb which expresses a socio-economic truth, namely that a person who has one kernel cannot be said to be stingy in terms of giving. The proverb helps us to see the disadvantaged position of someone who is not economically buoyant. This condition is capable of making an individual or even a whole nation look stingy against their own wish. Take for instance a situation where somebody has just one thing and another wants to take it. That can be enough reason for the above proverb to be uttered, and the Ibibios usually apply it in such a context.

### **Proverbs Showing Remembrance**

*Akaan okook ekedo ekin'*  
*Old bamboo was frond*

*'An old bamboo was once a fresh frond'*

In this proverb the point being made is that although old age has set in, one was once a youth. This is always the feeling either when an old person is challenged by a younger person or feels the urge of doing something within him but cannot do it due to old age.

*Nkpo akanam ikot mfon adat*  
*Thing did bush 'afromomum citratus' ripe*



*'There is no smoke without fire'*

The conviction that there is nothing that happens without a motivating force behind it has given rise to the above proverb among the Ibibios. In expressing this truth, the recourse is to the "afromomum citratus", and the concept is that before this fruit becomes ripe, something must have happened to the bush where the plant grows, thus prompting its ripeness. But as we have said elsewhere in this essay, the application of the proverb is not to the plant basically, but to humans and is applicable to all areas of human endeavour. However, the Ibibios reserve this saying for occasions when something shocking or unusual happens.

#### **Proverbs Indicating Encouragement**

*Efit nkpo ofon ndomonse*

*All things good try*

*'It is good to give a try to everything'*

The people called Ibibios are quite ingenious, adventurous and enterprising too, that is what is embedded in this proverb. The proverb teaches that it is good to give a try to anything worth undertaking, otherwise one could miss a golden opportunity. Among the Ibibios, this saying is usually heard when one is confronted with a different or impossible task. It is also a common expression heard each time somebody has succeeded in carrying out that which was thought of as impossible.

#### **Proverbs Expressing Mediation**

*Anwana anwan odo iba omuum oyoho ita*

*Fighter is two, referee completes three*

*"It takes two for a fight and a third for an umpire"*

The above proverb contains an age – long diplomatic truth that it always takes two to fight, and a third for settlement. In our contemporary societies – Africa, Europe and the Middle East, factions are rising up with arms against others, and it is always through the diplomatic effort of a third party that peace can be achieved. A vivid example is the conflict between the nations of Israel and Palestine, and the intervening role played by the United States and other nations. It is always in such a context that this proverb is uttered among the Ibibios. The philosophy behind this proverb is that the presence of a third party establishes peace between warring parties.

#### **Proverbs Showing Solidarity**

*Ino itoho ino eta*

*Thief not blow thief blow*

*'There is honour among thieves'*

As everyone knows people of dubious character know one another and often they appear to have sworn to an oath of secrecy and protection. This Ibibio proverb simply means that thieves do not call themselves thieves. This adage is usually a common expression wherever an ugly incident such as theft has occurred and people are asked to mention the culprits. The Ibibios have known by experience that no one who is a thief would like to point out a fellow thief, hence the proverb,

people and that they are timeless and universal in terms of the truths they express. According to Noah:

*proverbs are striking phenomenon not only on account of their strategic role in discourse, but also because of the popularity of the genre especially in African cultures. Being somewhat transcendental, they outshine their garment of local colours and radiate into spheres of universal truth. (90).*

The universal truths which are embedded in the Ibibio (African) proverbs should guide our leaders in all fields of endeavour as we move into the third millennium. The teacher could use proverbs to teach/build up language skills and to develop vocabulary and moral awareness and wisdom in the learners. Because of their entertaining quality (the imagery created in the comparison) they put the learners in a relaxed frame of mind while learning.

We wish to conclude this discourse with one more proverb as another way to show the richness of Ibibio proverbial expressions.

*Nkpo se inie ntoono ana enie utit  
Thing it has beginning must have end*

*'Everything that has a beginning must have an end'.*

## Note

<sup>1</sup>This essay is based on a paper presented at the Third World Congress of African Linguistics, Lome, Togo, August 21 – 26, 2000. It was originally entitled "The Philosophy and Semantics of Ibibio Proverbs".

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which also finds its equivalent in the English proverb as translated above.

### Proverbs Showing Diversity

*Kwa idum kwa uyo inuen;  
Each locality each voice bird*

*'Customs vary from community to community'*

This proverb teaches about variations in customs, cultures and civilizations. These variations are expressed metaphorically through the use of birds' voices. As a people, the Ibibios are quite observant, rational and eager to explore new environments. It is usually while in a new environment or in different culture that this proverb is heard which in turn is based on what they see that may be different from what obtains in their own civilization and culture.

### Proverbs Expressing Ignorance

*Nnan eyin inwan  
Blind eye open*

*'One who sees but refuses to see'*

This is a proverb with a message that is self-explanatory, describing a universal truth which affects most people in all areas of life. It is a problem that has affected people politically, economically, socially and most especially religiously. The English proverb "None is as blind as those who refuse to see" is its equivalent. Among the Ibibios, this proverb is often expressed in the context of somebody who

has seen the truth but refuses to admit it as true especially when such a truth is very glaring, self-evident and needs no argument.

### Proverb Expressing Succession

*Edet adaka edet ada  
Tooth it moves tooth it stands*

*'When one tooth moves out, one tooth moves in'*

This is a proverb which expresses an anatomical fact as it were. The fact is that whenever one tooth goes out, another one replaces it. However, since humans are the center of all proverbs, it follows that what the proverb is saying is in the context of one person being bound to be succeeded by another person from time to time be it in the family, community, government, or industry. In other words, nobody is indispensable. There will always be somebody to fill a vacant position.

### Conclusion:

The renowned novelist, Chinua Achebe has spoken of proverbs as "the palm oil with which words are eaten" (5), and the Ibibio proverbs which we have considered are clear examples of a peoples' way of expressing themselves with words that are packed full of wit. In them we have seen a people's ability in the use of proverbs to communicate their concepts of God, anatomy, botany, politics, diplomacy, socio-economic realities, nostalgia cause and effect. From the proverbs analysed, it has been possible to see that the indigenous Ibibio proverbs reflect the philosophy of the Ibibio