

USEM

*Journal of Languages,
Linguistics and Literature*



Volume 10, 2021

Proverbs and Nation Building: The Ibibio Perspective

Uwem Jonah Akpan & Ekemini Umoekeh

University of Uyo

uwemjakpan@gmail.com & inemekem@yahoo.com

Abstract

One of the beauties of the Ibibio language is the variety, expressiveness and sheer wisdom of its proverbs. A proverb is a short statement often used for the purpose of emphasis, stating moral principles, supporting an argument, giving advice or stating what is thought to be true and natural. Proverbs constitute a significant commentary on a people's orientation and history. They are legacies derived from diverse and complicated cultural resources handed down as public memories and transmitted through language from one generation to another. Proverbs are associated with age, just as age is associated in the mind of the Ibibio with wisdom. They are significant indices of what the user considers to be true. In the Ibibio society, proverbs also serve the functions of philosophy, ethics and law. However, despite their robust functionality, the forces of modernity such as Western Education, Christianity and Urbanisation are conspiring to endanger the Ibibio culture particularly the language (the main vehicle of cultural transmission). Consequently, its gems/ornaments which include the proverbs are gradually sliding into extinction. This paper therefore, advocates that there is the urgent need for the restoration of the Ibibio language and other crucial aspects of the Ibibio culture to a place of honour to enable the present generation use the inherent proverbs and apply same in nation building as it was the case in the past. The paper adopts a historical analytical methodology.

Keywords: proverbs, nation building, Ibibio, language, modernity

1. Introduction

The Ibibio, live in Akwa Ibom State which is their indigenous home land. They number about four million and constitute the fourth largest ethnic nationality in Nigeria (Offiong, 1991; Udofot, 2017; Akpan 2018). They number about four million people according to the figures of the 2006 National population exercise. Udofot (2017) states that their language, Ibibio is spoken all over what used to be known as the six Ibibio Districts of Calabar Province – Abak, Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Itu, Opobo (Ikot Abasi) and Uyo, while Annang, a dialectal variant of Ibibio is spoken in the former Abak and Ikot Ekpene Districts. The main occupations of the indigenous Ibibio people are farming and fishing (Udo, 1983; Akpan, 2018).

The Ibibio migrated to their present location from Usak Edet region of present-day Cameroon Republic to their abode in Akwa Ibom area. After living in the area for many centuries, a war broke out at Ibom in modern Arochukwu region of Abia State which triggered the dispersal of another wave of Ibibio to the area.

Ibibio land was a segmentary society which was organised on the basis of village republics. Each village was autonomous and independent. No village legislated for the other and the village was the only political entity which affected practically the daily lives of the citizens. The village head was chosen on the basis of age and experience who as well could claim descent from the

founder's first born male. Each village was lineage-based – *ekpuk* – and the lineage consisted of a number of families - *ufok*. Both the lineage head and the heads of families were members of the village council responsible for making all village legislations. Traditional society was one in which the old and the aged were veritable instruments for the maintenance of law and order. Along with the various age grade and secret societies such as *ekpo*, *ekpe*, *ekong*, *idiong*, *atat*, etc., the elders exercised tremendous influence in the Ibibio society (Noah, 1988).

The Ibibio are a people with rich cultural heritage. Culture is that which makes a people or a community different and gives them their identity. According to Tylor (1871), culture or civilisation, in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Ukpong (2007) observes that culture is the totality of the ways of life of a people. It embraces everything that contributes to the survival of man on earth – not only physical or biological factors but also psychological, intellectual as well as other factors of non-material nature.

According to Udoidem (2008), culture is often taken to mean our old way of life exemplified in dress, dance or cultural artifacts, some of which are no longer relevant. Culture, on the contrary, is our present way of life derived from our past which includes our language, speech, proverbs/sayings, songs, food, etc. It is the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, religion, etc.

2. Proverbs

No one knows the exact origins of Ibibio proverbs. For sayings that have come down over the centuries, and possibly over millennia, and have seen alterations here and embellishment there, no one can say for sure where they originated or who coined them. Many proverbs are derived from Ibibio folktales. In such cases, the proverbs are often the compact capsule statement deriving from the imaginary events narrated in the tale, which the narrator wants the audience to keep in their minds. These may be the wise sayings attributed to the various characters in the story most of whom, are animals, birds etc. (Esen, 1982).

Iwoketok (2014) states that Ibibio proverbs constitute a very vital linquo-cultural aspect of Ibibio people's collective experience and date back to the people's earliest beginnings. Validating this assumption are the numerous allusions made to different facets of the people's collective experience. There are therefore myriads of proverbs from Ibibio land, exhibiting near-infinite relevance. Their rarity in conversation today does not invalidate their existence and usefulness. Every conceivable subject has far more than enough Ibibio proverbs to contain the situation including the unknown, thus affirming that Ibibio proverbs signify the reality of the world across age and time. They are not mere beautifiers of speech. The more they are collected, the more the more they seem to emerge.

Indeed, one of the most widely used forms of oral literature is proverb. Ibibio proverbs featured among the earliest collections of the genre in Africa. In 1865, Burton collected 2,268 proverbs from various ethnic groups in Africa, including the Ibibio, Ewe, Ga, Twi and Yoruba. Also in 1965 John Messenger did a study on Ibibio proverbs. Such interest in Ibibio proverbs by foreigners has, however, not sought to verify the relationship between the genre and the people (Noah, 1994).

Noah (1994) adds that to appreciate the importance of proverbs in African literature, it is necessary to understand how the people perceive these forms. In this regard, one notices that Ibibio culture assigns proverbs certain qualities and functions not attached to ordinary verbal communication. Thus, proverbs are considered as a vital ingredient in oration or conversation, a catalyst without which the discourse flags whereas it confers sudden vitality on speech. Also, proverbs add a type of flavor to the speech, otherwise it is deficient in “taste” and cannot have the desired impact on the listener. The brevity of the proverb adds another dimension to its attributes: it is a formula that condenses speech. A brief single -sentence proverb can adequately, effectively and forcefully replace a lengthy discourse. Another important use of proverbs among the people is that they validate ideas or thinking proposed in a speech or conversation. By their succinctness and poetic appeal, proverbs impress the essence of a discourse upon the mind of the people. Finally, their wittiness and piquancy recommend proverbs as a category of philosophy whose truism is undisputed. The above perceptions of proverbs underlie the importance and popularity of the genre among the people of Akwa Ibom State. Proverbs therefore are applied in various spheres of human existence and endeavour.

McKenzie cited in Okure (1983) classifies proverbs as belonging to a class of wisdom literature formed by the union of a number of pre-existing collections or collections of sayings. Proverbs and stories are necessary for understanding a pre-literate people. He describes a proverb as a short statement of a universal truth written in expressive language and is filled with expressions of wisdom and experience of moral saying and counsels. According to him, proverbs and stories are necessary for the understanding of the African people including the Ibibio.

According to Obiechina (1975), proverbs are the kernels which contain the wisdom of the traditional people, they are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words. They derive from the day to day detailed observation of the behaviour of human beings, animals, plants and natural phenomena, from folk lore, beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and the entire system of thought and feelings of the society. Proverbs are said to be the “palm-oil with which words are eaten. The use of proverbs communalises and traditionalises a speaker and indicates attachment to the community and its linguistic climate. Okure posits that:

Proverbs, stories, myth and legends are found in abundance among the Ibibio. There is a proverb for every occasion, proverbs to suit every situation and to light up every experience. They have been handed down orally. Some of them are believed to be records of actual historical events, while some are believed to be created by people’s imagination. They serve many purposes. Social and personal difficulties can be settled by an appeal to the sanctioning proverbs. Some teach a moral lesson, some warn, others entertain, and some stimulate people’s imagination. There is in proverbs, a rich deposit of wisdom of many generations and wise people know how to use them properly. African societies have proverbs which teach new things to the hearer and others which warn him against evil conduct, some are used to encourage people in doing something while others show what is bound to happen in certain circumstance (Okure, 1983: 64).

The Ibibio have great regard for proverbs which are especially appropriate to adult life and are highly effective instruments of social control. They have often been characterised as the distilled wisdom of the ancestors and people respect the wisdom implicit in proverbs, as arrows that strike

at the heart. Proverbs are used to express moral values as well as the ethics of the society. They are convenient standards for appraising behaviour in terms of the approved norms and because they are pungently, clearly and wittily stated, they are ideally suited for commenting on and correcting the behaviour of others, irrespective of their age and dignity (Okure, 1983).

Okure (1983) notes that among the Ibibio, correct procedure in interpersonal relations is stressed, and the large chunk of proverbs which outline this pattern of accepted behaviour reflect this emphasis on doing the acceptable thing. To give a salutary warning to an Ibibio man, one needs to only use some of the poignant and thought-provoking Ibibio proverbs and then the culprit will feel the reubuke in his heart. To understand their moral life, moral judgement and moral values, one needs to look into the meaning of some of the proverbs, so that some of the “canons” can be visualised.

3. Nation Building

Nation building has been defined as the work-in-progress involving building a political entity based on common citizenship, building a common sense of purpose and a sense of shared identity and a collective imagination of belonging. Nation building embodies national-integration, national development and national consciousness. The absence or weakness of core values, effective leadership, national identity and ideology undermine nation building efforts (Eyoh, 2018). Elaigwu notes about the concept thus:

Nation building...on the horizontal dimension involves the acceptance of other members of the community as equal fellow members of a “corporate” nation – recognition of the rights of other members to a share of common history, resources, values and other aspects of the state – buttressed by a sense of belonging to one political community. It involves the feeling that we are all citizens entitled to a share of the bitter and the sweet. Nation building, therefore, is the wide spread acceptance of the process of state-building; it is the creation of a political community that gives a fuller meaning to the life of the state (Elaigwu; 2015: 70).

Even though the term “nation building” in modern sense gained prominence in the 1960s and 70s when President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania advocated it for fragile post-colonial African states (Eyoh, 2018), it has been applicable and relevant in the traditional Ibibio society. The above postulation is ascertained by Esen thus:

In the traditional philosophy of the Ibibio, the individual was not perceived as having any intrinsic personal worth. What counted as the worth of the individual was the extent of his contribution (actual in adults, potential in children) to the survival happiness and welfare of the society. The welfare of the group or society had precedence over that of the individual. In Western thought, the group exists so that the individual may survive. In the traditional African thought, it is the individual who exists so that the group may survive. The needs and choices of the individual often must be subordinate to the collective will and interest of the group. To assert the interests of the individual above those of the group is considered undesirable and deviant (Esen, 1982: 223).

4. The Notion of the Community in Ibibio

According to Okure (1983), the ordinary person in Africa does not merely talk about community, he or she lives and experiences community every day. Initially one may say that community is a conscious commitment to give and share life together with a limited number of people in a defined geographical area. It is a precious value that binds peoples and families together. It is a value that enables people to have a common understanding leading them to mutual trust, help, respect for personal freedom, as well as mutual responsibility. As the Ibibio is shaped by the religious, moral and social life of the community to which he belongs, he is taught to understand and to develop greater respect for communal life, social relationship, sexuality, charity, justice and relevant values. It is believed by the Ibibio that the family is the first place where a person lives in the community. The Ibibio generally believes that personal development takes place within the community, first in the family circle, then in the wider community with other human beings as he consistently strives to create that community. Indeed, while the person is of more value than the community in which he lives, it is the community that develops and helps in socialising a person. A sense of community is the atmosphere which kinship thrives (Okure, 1983).

One of the most important features of community life is “sharing”, which strengthens the relationship of mutual trust. This is why the Ibibio is taught from the early stage of his life to share what he has with close relations. This attitude may become very significant to the point that the child may not be able to eat anything without sharing with a relation. Moreover, the deep sense of sharing triggers cooperation between people in the family. Family solidarity is easily built and maintained and common goals are easily achievable. In conversations, there is a constant use of the first person plural “we” and possessive pronoun “ours”. The spirit of community eventually takes a central stage in the individual’s orientation (Okure, 1983).

5. Some Ibibio Proverbs/Wise Sayings and their Significance

5.1 *Mkpatat nwak ke ukot/ikpong akpa nte unen* (he that is alone dies like a fowl)

This proverb exemplifies kindred and community consciousness and means that the man without a family dies like a chicken. It states that the piassava had to wrap itself and he who is alone, has no family and no one to speak for him or defend him. No one defends one who is alone consequently, such a person dies like a chicken and no one asks questions. The ancient Ibibio demonstrated strong kindred ties and community spirit. They were identified by families, extended families, communities and clans which were closely knit together by beliefs, norms and taboos (Udofot, 2017). Ezen (1982) posits that kindred and community spirit of the Ibibio is one of the greatest assets. Other scholars of Ibibio culture have observed the same tendency among the Ibibio. Udoidem (2008) refers to it as *ukangnyinism* or *yakami-ism*. According to him, this starts with the family. Every person has to identify with a family and is not fulfilled in self-actualisation outside his membership of a family setting. Bastards and people who cannot trace their ancestry to a recognised family were subjected to extreme ridicule in the community.

5.2 *Eto idaha ikpon ikappa akai* (a tree does not stand alone by itself and become a forest)

The proverb conveys the idea of cooperation or unity. It means that no one person can meet the needs of the whole community; rather, many people are required. It literally means that a tree does not stand alone and become a forest. It stresses the need for coming together, working together and staying together to be able to maximise accomplishment. It conveys the central orientation that the strength of the Ibibio man is in togetherness. Because a tree that stands alone

cannot make a forest, birds cannot live there and it can, therefore not be useful to the community. Forests were a very valuable asset to the Ibibio people. From the forests the people got not only wood and other building materials, but also meat from the wild animals, leaves, roots and barks for medicinal purposes and varieties of food materials. A single tree, irrespective of its hugeness, could not supply all these; only a forest could. In this sense, it was meaningless for one tree irrespective of its size and height to behave as if it could alone serve and satisfy the various needs of the people.' Several trees must stand together and complement each other in supplying the needs of the people. An individual, no matter how powerful and rich, cannot be everything to everyone in the community. It requires many people with their diverse talents and capabilities working together in order to meet the various needs of the community (Esen, 1982; Ekong, 2001; Iwokedok, 2014; Udofot, 2017).

It also conveys the message of the danger of working alone as an individual. In the pre-colonial era, where inter-ethnic conflicts were rampant, a single person who is attacked alone cannot withstand the combined aggression of the opposing group. Even in the area of working together, it was usually in groups and on the basis of age grades. For instance, men worked together to clear the bush and plant or harvest for one another in turns while the women also weeded the farms and planted in groups in one another's farms. The youth also had their specific roles to play in the community. Paid labour in Ibibio land is a recent development. It used to be more effective to work together because larger grounds could be covered. If brothers/sisters contribute, the contribution can never be burdensome (Esen, 1982; Ukpong, 2007; Udofot, 2017). Udofot (2017) notes that the import of the proverb is agreement to work together. If parties do not agree, they can never come together to perform a task or engage in a project. The Ibibio were people who readily teamed up to attack a common enemy or perform a task. The teaming up created groups based on understanding and friendship which cemented the family, community and clan relationship and loyalties.

6. Child Upbringing

6.1 *Mkpat eka unen iwoto ndito* (young chicks do not die from the trampling of their mother's feet)

This one exemplifies children upbringing. It codes the fact that mother's love and care is selfless. She must be ready to give up her comfort including her life to protect her children. Above all, she must be there with them and for them (Udofot, 2017).

It also means that the heavy tread of a mother-hen does not kill her young. In the Ibibio society, it was not only the parents who could discipline a child since the child was regarded as the "community property". Any adult who saw a child involved in an unwholesome act or immoral behaviour could easily correct and even discipline the child without fear of the parents disapproval. Indeed, parents would even be appreciative. This situation helped to check the morals of young men and women. Since girls were supposed to remain chaste until they were married, adult members of the society constituted themselves into a watchdog of the community. Songs were composed to expose and condemn unwholesome behaviour. The greatest custodian of the child's upbringing was the mother. Like the proverbial mother hen, she had to be there for the children. She did not sleep away from the house unless in extreme necessity. She gave up her comfort and make extreme sacrifices of material things to ensure that her children were brought up in a disciplined fashion. The saying that a good child is the joy of the father and a bad one is the mother's sorrow holds true among the Ibibio. The mother is blamed for her children's

misbehaviour especially in the case of teenage pregnancy outside marriage. The ancient Ibibio knew that there was no surer way to spoil the child than sparing the rod. The Ibibio could have said "spare the rod and spoil the child", but they were a chicken-raising people. This particular proverb came from the action of the mother hen (Esen, 1982; (Udofot, 2017).

The proverb could only occur in the language of a people who engage in poultry business. In the past, there was not one family house in Ibibio land where chickens were not kept routinely. Cocks and hens were raised for eating, for sale, for sacrificial and other purposes. It was always pleasant to see a mother-hen with a large brood of chicks which she fed by scratching up food from the ground, and defended noisily against kites and hawks. Quite often, the mother hen would accidentally tread on her tender day-old chicks and the little featherless thing would squeal and roll over in pain. An onlooker would think that the chick would not survive it. But, as the Ibibio rightly observes, no chick ever dies from the tread of its mother's feet (Esen, 1982).

7. Security Consciousness

7.1 *Eka Ebok ama obo eyen: umaha edikpoono iwot okok, etim me ama usan oton?* (the Mother Monkey said to her child; you do not like knocking your head against branches of trees; is it then the soup that you prefer?)

Monkeys used to be favourite game of hunters in many parts of Ibibio land. The forests were full of them and since monkeys live in large communities, the hunters found them relatively easy to shot. Monkeys know this and learned very early in life the tactics of survival consisting mainly of brisk swings from branch to branch at a pace that would be too hot for the hunter to follow, or too irregular for his steady aim. Such tactics must involve young monkeys new to the tricks in the inconvenience of frequently dashing their heads painfully against tree branches. Naturally, some young rebellious monkeys would resent that and refuse to take such inconvenience. The Mother-Monkey therefore admonished, that it was better for the young one to bear the pains and live longer (Esen, 1982).

8. Cyclic Change that comes progressively associated with age

8.1 *Isua akappa, usion obuho* (as the years go round, the fragment of old pottery sinks deeper into the ground)

Uision is a piece of the fired clay from a broken earthen pot. Ibibio women were great potters whose products were sold far and near, and were used for cooking, water fetching and storage, bathing, decoration, religious and other purposes. All the pots were handmade and fired to the desired hardness, then polished. If a pot fell down, it broke into pieces like modern China ware. It is such broken pieces of clay that are known as *usion*. Sometimes when one digs into the earth, one may be surprised to find *usion* lying buried several metres below the surface. This tends to raise questions. When an earthenware breaks, the pieces are just left lying there on the surface of the ground. No one takes the trouble to bury them. So how does it come about that *usion* can be found buried so many metres below the surface? The Ibibio explanation is that as the years roll round, the pieces of clay sink further and further into the soil (Esen, 1982).

The proverb is about the cyclic change that comes along progressively with age and maturity. It implies a progressive change from the surface to the depth from the bad to the good, from youth to age, from the immature to the mature, from destructible to indestructible. In Ibibio philosophy, this change in the life-cycle of the piece of clay represents the cycle of human life. The piece of

fired clay *usion* originally comes deep down in the bowels of the earth as wet clay, the raw material from which pots are made. It is moulded into a pot. The pot is used for all sorts of purposes, until after its tasks on earth are accomplished, it breaks (and dies). Then the pieces gradually begin to sink deeper and deeper into the ground until what was formerly raw clay reunites with its original source deep down in the bowels of the earth. It is symbolic of the life cycle of man: birth, maturity, performance of earthly functions, age, death, re-union with the ancestors (Esen, 1982).

Esen (1982) commenting on the significance of the proverb states that it symbolises the fact that the first object with which the Ibibio touched their newly born baby was the lump of the earth. As a child came out of her mother's womb, the midwife who received it into the world had a lump of earth in her right hand, and as soon as the child uttered its first cry, the midwife touched its body with the lump of earth. Some over-eager midwives often got the lump of earth ready even before the labour reached its critical stages. That is the basis of another proverb: *ukite-kit iwuot eyen afo abek ntan* (picking up the lump of earth without first waiting for the baby's head to appear). In plain language; anticipating the results too early, or counting ones chicken before they are hatched.

The first contact of the child with the lump of the earth is significant. It symbolises that link-up between the new life and its origins. The ancient Ibibio, quite independently of the Bible and the Christian religion, had always known and believed that man originated from the earth. At the end of his life on earth, when all his tasks are done (just like the pot) he lies down dead and broken. But his survivors remember where he came from and send his flesh and bone back into the earth (just like the *usion*) to re-unite with his ancestral origin. Udo also underscores the significance of the land thus:

The Ibibio pre-colonial economy depended to a large extent on land. From time immemorial the Ibibio attached great importance to their land. They regarded it as their "First Mother". It is their Mother Earth, because it is the soil which is their source of water: the rivers, seas and ocean which were so much a part of their everyday life and which provided the various species of fish, for example crayfish, which they sold to many communities in what is today modern Southeastern Nigeria. It is to them that some of their water deities, for example *Ataokpo Ndem Uruan Inyang* and *Otuk idim Ndem Iwa Awa*, lived and protected them. It is the soil which bore them, so to speak, for it produced cash and food crops. It is in this soil that their ancestors were buried who though dead, continued to look after their welfare. Some of the living would, in turn, be buried there with their ancestors...the Ibibio also believed that without the land, they would be dead men, women and children. Land became the very centre of their lives and of their communities. They do nothing to profane the land, and if this happened, they immediately expiated the sin by offering sacrifices (Udo, 1983: 195).

This proverb is generally used in two kinds of situations. If a person who, was wild and unruly as a young man and was almost written off as good for nothing, gradually begins to show good sense, some wisdom and sound moral judgement in his affairs, his father and kinsmen usually become delighted in his transformation. They link the change with the growing age and maturity, and observe happily that as the years roll by the *usion* is actually sinking deeper into the earth.

On the other hand, if a man, old enough to think and act wisely behaves in a foolish way deemed inconsistent with his age, the proverb may be used to remind him that as the years roll by the *usion* in him ought to sink deeper into the earth. In such a contest, it is considered a very harsh rebuke (Esen, 1982).

9. Social Justice

9.1 *Yak ibiom obop efok, yak ekrang obop efok, ake mimaha nooh kiet obopefok, yak mba abeika* (let the eagle perch, let the kite perch, which ever says the other must not perch, let its wings break off).

This proverb is very common among the Ibibio people. In this proverb, the eagle is represented by the rich, strong or noble because it can fly higher than other birds, and kite is represented by the poor. It is the conviction of the Ibibio that the world was created for all to cultivate, above all, that man is created human and divine. The eagle and the kite (rich and poor) are both God's creature, free to ply the earth and to "perch". Neither is supposed to block the way against the other. Hence, in life, there is room for all men to "perch" and to attain supreme value. Both prejudice, hardness of heart in competition, the destruction or blocking of people's chances people's way to success in life are believed by the Ibibio to be against human progress and, above all, against God's and universal justice. Therefore, every Ibibio strongly abhors any attitude that militates against this universal progress and justice (Okure, 1983)

The proverb indicates and points to the fact without this universal notion of justice, there can be no harmony, peaceful co-existence, love and respect in the community. It expresses the fact that justice and freedom are among the fundamental human rights. Above all, that justice demands that no person be deprived of this God-given right to successful life and progress; therefore, for the Ibibio, one who tries to block the way of success of another or to destroy the other's chances is fighting against the divine will and justice and is an enemy to progress and peace. He is a person of ill will. This proverb rejects and warns against any situation of oppression of man by man which is evident in most places of work. Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his pursuit of self affirmation as a responsible person is that of opposition. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence and injustice and interferes with man's ontological and historical vocation.

10. Respect to Elders

10.1 *Uma ukpono owo mfin, eyah ukpono fien mkpon* (if you respect today's king, others will respect you when your turn comes).

Okure (1983) states that this is often given as an instruction to those governed to obey and respect their kings and chiefs. It points to the fact that respect is reciprocal and that justice demands that a man do to others what he expects others to do to him. Above all, justice demands that respect and cooperation be given to those in authority. It is one of the canons often employed by parents, rulers and superior to couch their subjects and children to good conduct and cooperation. Other parts or versions of this proverb go like this: *etok eyen ama ayie ubok nno asana, aya dia ndidia mme mbong* – "A child who can wash his hands clean may eat with elders", or "Abasi inoho idiok unam nnuk" – God does not provide a wild animal with horns. That is, one who is unjust, dishonest, un-cooperative, disrespectful cannot achieve a height. In other words, if he does, he will be a stumbling block to his people or community, he will do more harm than good.

10.2 *Ado anie ufok idiaha efere akwere?* (The soup cannot be finished when the owner of the house has not eaten)

This conveys an attitude or respect to elders which is here represented by the proverbial owner of the house. He should be cared for generously, failure to do so amounts to disrespect. This indicates the fact that in the Ibibio traditional society, elders were revered and respected by all.

11. Ingratitude

Nkok Ibok nno usine enyene edet ondom: (After a man is cured, he bites or forgets the doctor or the one who cures him)

The proverb refers to ingratitude which the Ibibio regard as injustice on the part of the person cured of his disease for rewarding evil for good, for refusing to be grateful. This becomes very significant because the Ibibio is always grateful. This serves as an instruction on the principle of “give and take”. For a man who claims his right on the one hand and neglects to carry out a corresponding duty or to respect the rights of others is unjust. Because man is social by nature, he should live, work and cooperate with others, and above all, should encourage the other. It is deemed a great injustice among the Ibibio if, after having helped a person, the one helped forgets the one who helped him. The person helped is expected to demonstrate his gratefulness not only in words, but also in deeds. Otherwise, he will be said to be guilty of ingratitude which is injustice. This proverb is often used as a reminder to the Ibibio about God, who is Supreme and about his providential care; and the obligation to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise to Him. The canon also serves as an instruction to those children who tend to forget their parents and their responsibility towards them. Because justice demands that children should take care of their parents, especially in times of sickness and when the parents are approaching old age. If they fail in these responsibilities, they are said to be guilty of injustice towards their parents (Okure, 1983).

12. Early Preparation

12. 1 *Utai ekebo ke akpa itok oson itok* (The alligator said that the first dash is the mainstay of the race. That is, in a race the first dash is decisive)

The Ibibio regard the alligator as a timid animal that can disappear at the first attempt of an enemy to establish contact with it. As a result, the alligator naturally runs away with all the energy it possesses. That means the first burst is very important because if the alligator does not succeed to escape, it would be caught and that means that the first burst is the thin line between life and death. Esen (1982) asserts that the originator of this proverb positioned it to fit into any aspect of human endeavour which demands the application of the initial energy to obtain initial results. He cites the examples of football teams that capitalise on early goals to consolidate their victory.

13. Leadership

13. 1 *Obong isibono ikpoon* (A king does not shout/rule alone)

Leadership is conceived by the Ibibio people as calling on the citizenry. This concept is conveyed in the word of *boon* which means call, cry out or shout. It also depicts the manner by which Ibibio people usually disseminate information through the town-crier. The proverb therefore suggests that a ruler should realise that he cannot rule successfully by doing everything

himself. He must engage the assistance of those who can contribute positively to the welfare of his community. On the other hand, the proverb speaks to the citizenry that rulership demands the cooperation and participation of all to succeed, they should therefore be willing and ready to render their service at any time. The need for cooperation and contributive effort for a successful democracy is advocated. The general meaning of the proverb is that the best and most efficient law, organisation or individual is not infallible (Iwokedok, 2014).

13. 2 *Udia uyokho nsasak asetime idan ke ekod* (the greedy sun-bird always pulls off an arrow from its occiput)

The proverb reproves careless people and those who do not have self-control. It warns that the consequence of such negative inclination is being caught off guard by prisoners, vicious fellows or murderers. The proverb also speaks against excess selfishness and greed; especially the kind that makes people cling to positions, power and privilege at the risk of their lives, though their tenure has expired. The proverb says such people stick on until they are disgraced out of office or are disgracefully dispossessed of such positions or property. It means that there should be restraint in doing things. One should be disciplined where food is concerned. It warns that the glutton who does not show discretion in his eating habit is likely to get harmed. The teaching is that people should be satisfied with what they have or are offered because straining to get more is likely to cause them trouble, discomfort or destruction as exemplified in the life of the insatiable sun-bird.

14. Proverbs and Conflict Resolution

The conduct of peace makers in the traditional societies was underpinned by implicit philosophical values and principles (Alagoa, 2004). First, the principle that those who wish to resolve conflicts must appear impartial and inspire the trust and confidence of the parties in conflict. Accordingly, rulers who were the first line of contact in such situations were expected to behave impartially to all manners of persons in their office. In general, the Ibibio try to avoid conflict and therefore going to a court, be it formal or informal, because getting involved in a case is a great enterprise – win or lose, it costs money. Because of the corruption of many police officers, the court they dread most is the formal court. Police officers require “kola” (a code name for bribe), before they will investigate and prosecute a case. The case may drag for months or years, something the Ibibio hate. When the case is decided, there is no swearing of an oath to protect the two parties from harming each other (Offiong, 1997).

Conflict between husband and wife is common. Generally, refusing to eat a wife’s meal signifies a conflict situation between wife and husband. Usually a wife reports the problem with her husband to her parents-in-law. Often, a mother-in-law who is on good terms with her daughter-in-law will be the first to know about any conflict between her son and his wife. Regardless of who receives the complaint, an attempt to resolve the matter swiftly is always made. A woman may try to appease her husband by begging for forgiveness. Should this fail, a go-between or the woman’s family becomes involved. Always, the aim is to reconcile both parties. Divorce is the last resort and is viewed as a failure (Offiong, 1997).

Customary gender roles and stereotypes inform decisions in cases involving husband and wife. Custom dictates that women in a patriarchy be submissive to men. Thus in a case which a woman would win outright in an egalitarian society may not be decided in her favour here because this would give her license to be at loggerheads with her husband; decorum and harmony in the family are possible only if a woman is submissive. If a woman cursed her

husband, she is fined a cock; if she wished her husband's death, she is fined a she-goat. After resolution of the conflict, a wife's first meal for her husband is pounded yam, which is considered a delicacy. In deciding a case, a woman is reminded that two he-goats, two rams, or two male dogs cannot live under the same roof. In other words, a woman must not behave as if she were equal to her husband: she must be submissive (Offiong, 1997).

Conflict between extended families involves the council of elders and such conflicts almost always involve land disputes, stealing, fighting, adultery, fornication and witch accusation. Once a case is reported to the village head, who is the ex-officio chairman of the council of elders, he consults with other elders in the village and then a day is set for the hearing of the case. Depending on the nature of the case, the chairman may invite elders within and outside the lineage to participate. The litigants are entitled to invite elders sympathetic to them.

According to Offiong (1997), the "jurors" for the day having been selected, the next item of business is prayer/libation. One village elder is usually well versed in the art of libation. He gets a calabash, fills it with palm wine provided by the litigants, and then calls on ancestors to be present to guide everybody in the deliberations to follow, to give the "jurors" an understanding mind to discern truth from falsehood, and punish anybody who might try to pervert justice. This exercise of libation and prayer is significant. It places the "jurors" on oath to remain impartial and gets all to focus on the desire to seek peace between litigants. It unites all present in common action before the hearing begins; it enables all to focus attention on the need for maintaining the harmony and well-being of the extended family, village or lineage.

The presiding elder then outlines the expected decorum and fines for violators and then warns that the case is serious and should not be treated in a hurry; there should be a thorough probing, and this should take as long as necessary to get to the truth. He concludes by admonishing: *okop ikoedem kiet odo owot owo*. Meaning, taking sides after hearing from one party is grossly unjust: it is a capital offence. Therefore, a decision must come only after weighing evidence of the two parties. When the plaintiff and the defendant as well as their witnesses have spoken and carefully cross-examined, cases not concluded in one day are adjourned till another day. Usually, the "jurors" retire to a convenient corner outside the view of the audience to deliberate on the evidence.

In delivering the verdict, the spokesman relies on proverbs because they convey wisdom. An elder well versed in proverbs is highly respected. Proverbs soothe and are like seasoning which makes an otherwise unpalatable food edible. In emphasising the importance of respect to constituted authority, the spokesman will say that a community without elders is doomed. Since elders are the custodians of knowledge, wisdom, and morality, they deserve the respect and cooperation of all, warning in advance that the punishment to be announced is not commensurate to the offence.

A proverb such as: *enyong ese-ayaan ebok*, meaning that (even a monkey can fall from a tree). It indicates that in spite of the total mastery of the monkey of the tree top which is his natural environment which he performs all kinds of jumping stunts, the monkey needs not be over confident of its ability as it could miscalculate the distance, takes a bad jump and fall to the ground. It was readily used to warn anybody that engages in anti-social behaviour such as stealing with the emphasis that the evil conduct will be exposed.

15. Repositioning of Ibibio Proverbs for Nation Building

A proverb is a pithy statement with a global influence. But mere brevity does not qualify a statement to be called a proverb. It must present a serious thought. It is generally conceived as the wisdom of many and the wit of one, a condensation of an experience one might say. A proverb can be amusing but not meant for entertainment. With silent guidance, proverbs mould public opinion and private life. No race, whatever the colour, age or clime, no culture, has been without them. They are a model of compressed or forceful language. It serves as a reservoir from which artists or anyone for that matter can draw to give freshness to his speech (Iwoketok, 2014). Proverbs are traditional answers to recurrent ethical problems; they provide an argument for a course of action which conforms to community values; they arise in the midst of conversation and are used by speakers to give "name" to ethical problems confronting them and to suggest ways in which it has been solved in the past. The use of proverbs in these ways would invoke an aura of moral rightness and make the comfort of past community procedure available to the present and future (Essien, 1980).

As Essien (1980) has noted, judging from the nature of people who live in a basically oral culture like Nigeria, no amount of rapid progress in technology would change the people essentially within a short time. Therefore, certain Nigerian elite who seem to be all for modernity and technology and seem to refer to the use of proverbs in a derogatory sense, needs to modify their mentality. The life of the Ibibio and other Africans appear to be deeply rooted in the use of proverbs. Contact with these proverbs would make it possible to retrace the history of certain events, especially as there were no written records. It would be possible to forge new links with the past if the culture of the people is to remain authentic.

The Ibibio has a tradition of imparting pleasurable. One of the effective ways that has been used for this purpose has been proverbs. It is believed that the proverb speaker, besides holding the attention of his audience, always provokes laughter or tears as the case may be. This apt methodology of teaching could be interjected into the Nigerian school system.

16. Conclusion

The Ibibio word for proverb is *nke*. The word is a generic name for all those types of verbal expression which have more than one meaning. Such expressions are generally short and are couched in words that are simple, pleasant, often picturesque and entertaining and easy to remember. Proverbs are the kernel which contains the wisdom of the people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words and form a mnemonic device for effective communication. The proverbs of the Ibibio are recorded in the memory of the ancestors and handed down by words of mouth. They represent the people's philosophy. A whole range of human experience can be expressed in graphic and concise form and the wider implications of specific situations brought to mind (Udoiem, 1984). Udoiem (1984) also states that the use of proverbs is a type of human communication. Like most communication, it is basically a giving and receiving of meanings. The Ibibio language (like most other African languages) is very rich in proverbs. In Ibibio culture, the master story-teller, the orator, the adviser or the wise man, if he is speaking to local listeners, often needs to use a lot of proverbs not only to captivate and retain the attention and interest of his audience, but also to stress and concretise the main issues under discussion (Udoiem, 1984). By the use of such proverbs, some which are listed above, the Ibibio show the importance attached to justice. One could go on without end, as there exist thousands of such proverbs. But these few ones show how many of their proverbial utterances are replete with moral virtue. The important or essential point that is worth mentioning is that

that proverbs are seen as statements of “factual truth”, they are expressions of beliefs and modes of speech which draw from a cultural experience, attitudes and values of the Ibibio society for their moral relevance to justice.

It should be noted that modernity has adversely affected the applicability of the Ibibio proverbs. One of the reasons is that the Ibibio people do not pay serious attention to the use of their language. As Udofot (2017) has posited, what the Ibibio need is a “cultural homecoming” starting with teaching their children their language before English language. Through that way, they will have a mother tongue and identity. They will learn Ibibio culture transmitted through the Ibibio language. The knowledge of the culture of unity, respect, togetherness, kindred and community spirit will serve as variables in nation building. The introduction of the use of proverbs into the classroom would modify the Western oriented background of learning in Nigerian schools. It is not appropriate for the Ibibio to neglect its oral culture because the advanced technological societies seem to pay less attention to theirs.

References

- Akpan, E. (1994). “Traditional and Contemporary Communications”. *Akwa Ibom State: The Land of Promise: A Compendium*. Peters, S.W. Iwok, E.R. and Uya, O.E. (Eds.). Lagos: Gabumo Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Alagoa, E.J. (2004). “Peace-making and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria”. *Nigeria: A Cultural Perspective to Peace Advocacy*. Arinze, E.N. and Iheanacho, E.O. (Eds.). Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Antia, O.U. (2005). *Akwa Ibom Cultural Heritage: Its Invasion by Western Culture and its Renaissance*. Ikot Ekpene: Abbany Publishers.
- Charles, O. (2010). *Joseph. Ethnography Sub African Region*. Calabar: Serenity Publishers, 2010.
- Ekong, E. E. (2001). *The Sociology of the Ibibio: A Study of Social Organisation and Change*. Uyo: Modern Business Press.
- Elaigwu, J.I. (2015). *Nigeria Yesterday and Today for Tomorrow. Essays in Governance and Society*. Jos: Aha Publishers House Ltd.
- Esen, A.J.A. (1982). *Ibibio Profile: A Psycho-Literary Projection*. Calabar: Paico Press.
- Esen, A.J.A. (1987). “Traditional Education Among the Cultures of Cross River State” *Akwa Ibom and Cross River States: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture*. Abasiattai, M.B. (Ed.). Calabar: Wusen Press Ltd.
- Essien, P (1980). *Proverbs as Cultural Tools of Education in Nigeria (Annang as a Base)*. Calabar: Cross River Newspaper Corporation.
- Eyoh, L. (2018). “Nigerian Literature and the English Language in the task of nation Building: Revising Chinue Achebe’s Vexed issue of Leadership”. *63rd Inaugural Lecture of the University of Uyo*.

Iworetok, U.E. (2014). *Ibibio Proverbs Translated and Explained*. Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks.

John, E.E. (1987). "Ibibio Literature from the Origin to the Present – An Introduction". *University of Cross River State Cultural Week Brochure*. Uyo: Modern Business Press.

Messenger, J.C. (1959). "The Role of proverbs in a Nigerian Judicial System". *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 15, No. 1.

Noah, I.A. (1991). "Ibibio Oral Literature". *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture*. Abasiattai, Monday B. (Ed.). Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan Press.

...(1994). "Literature and Folklore". *Akwa Ibom State: The Land of Promise. A Compendium*. Peters, S.W, Iwok, E.R.& Uya, O.E. (Eds.). Iagos: Gabumo Pub. Co. Ltd

Noah, M.E. (1996). "The Ibibio State System". *Foundations of Nigerian Federalism: Pre-colonial Antecedent*. Abuja: National Council on Nigerian Inter-government Relations. Eliagwu, Isawa J. (Ed.).

Obiechina, E.N. (1975). *Culture, Tradition and Society in West African Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Offiong, D. (1977). "Conflict Resolution Among the Ibibio of Nigeria". *Journal of Anthropological Research*. Vol. 53, No. 4,

Okure, P.A. (1983). *The Notion of Justice Among the Ibibio People*. Nihl Obstat: Petrus Rossano

Tylor, E.B. (1968). "Primitive Culture". *International Encyclopedia of Social Science*. Vol. 3. Singer, M. (Ed.). London: Macmillan Co. and the Free Press

Udo, E.A. (1983). *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana FEP. Publishers.

Udoidem, S.J. (1984). "The Epistemological Significance of Proverbs: An African Perspective". *Pre'sence Africaine*. Nouvelle Serie. No. 132

Udoidem, S.J. (2008). *Engineering Culture for Community Peace and Sustainable Development*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.

Ukpong, E.A. (2007). *An Enquiry into Culture: Ibibio Names*. Uyo: Dorand Publishers.

Uya, O.E. *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives*. Calabar: Clear Lines, 2004.

