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**The Ibibio Language and the Fight against HIV/AIDS:  
Fruit of three Decades of Linguistics in the University of Calabar**

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**Abstract**

This paper emphasizes the importance of language in general, and indigenous Nigerian languages in particular, in education on HIV/AIDS prevention in Nigeria, with particular reference to the Ibibio language. The paper draws attention to the fact that the involvement of Ibibio in the fight against HIV/AIDS is one of the fruits of the three decades of linguistics in the University of Calabar. Data for this study come from field trips undertaken to some Ibibio-speaking communities in Akwa Ibom State and IEC materials on HIV/AIDS. These materials, in Ibibio, were field-tested in schools, market places, socio-religious groups etc for intelligibility. The knowledge, together with other measures have helped in decreasing the prevalence of the HIV/AIDS scourge in Akwa Ibom State

**Introduction**

HIV/AIDS, an acronym for Human Immune-Deficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, is a serious health problem worldwide. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for the bulk of the dismal statistics available even though the scourge was first reported among homosexuals in San Francisco, USA, in 1981. Some two decades after cases were reported, AIDS has become about the most devastating disease the world has ever faced. A United Nations document on HIV/AIDS and education reports that since the epidemic began, more than 60m people have been infected, out of which nearly 25m have died, leaving behind more than 13m orphaned children. AIDS is said to be the leading cause of death in Sub-Saharan Africa at the moment.

HIV/AIDS was first discovered in Nigeria, precisely in Enugu, in 1986, in a commercial sex worker, and has since then spread all over the states of the Federation. The prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria increased from 1.8% in 1988 to 5.8% in 2001. At present, Nigeria accounts for 5% of HIV infections worldwide and ranks second within Sub-Saharan Africa for the number of HIV infected adults (Federal Ministry of Health 1999 (cf. Ohiri-Aniche & Odukoya, 2004).

With such alarming figures and percentages, it has become increasingly necessary to provide information to people so that lives could be saved. In her response to the epidemic, Nigeria has set up many organizations and held many workshops on HIV/AIDS and education.

Language is a vital tool in knowledge acquisition / education and therefore to a large extent, survival. The reality, however, is that in most underdeveloped multilingual states, like Nigeria, poor educational policies often rob some citizens of deriving the full potentials of their mother tongue. The National Policy on



education hardly takes matters relating to the development of 'minority' languages seriously.

### **HIV / AIDS in Akwa Ibom State**

Akwa Ibom state, home of the Ibibio people was until 1987 when it was created, a relatively peaceful place. The rapid growth in the socio-economic life of the Ibibios, occasioned by the creation of the state, with Uyo as capital and the presence of natural resources ( such as oil, gas, solid minerals, palm oil, cassava) have brought a lot of people including foreigners into the state. The influx of people is an important determinant in HIV/AIDS transmission. Partly because of this, Akwa Ibom had consistently ranked high on the list of states with high HIV/AIDS incidence rate in Nigeria since the late 1990s. Statistics available at the State Action Committee on AIDS (SACA) office in Uyo reveal that as at 2005, 8% of the population of Akwa Ibom state was infected with HIV/AIDS.

This percentage is an improvement on the 12.5% rate in 1991 and 10% in 2001. However, there has been an increase from the 7.2% rate in 2003. A good percentage of the cases recorded is due mainly to sexual activities and unscreened blood transfusion. This is due largely to a decline in moral values, leading to an unprecedented increase in sexual promiscuity during the last few decades. Initial lack of general awareness has however played a significant role in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

A recent study ( Cultural Research Consult, 2007) shows that poverty, lack of adequate HIV- related knowledge and the persistence of certain local practices such as circumcision, tongue loosening, tribal marking and ear boring with un-sterilized instruments are at the root of the HIV pandemic in Akwa Ibom State. Women and young girls appear to be the most affected in the three Local Government Areas of Ika , Etinan, and Orue Offong Oruko where the study was carried out. Presently, there are about ten HIV/AIDS screening centers located in major hospitals in the state. In addition, there is a "Youth Friendly Center" located in the University of Uyo, and a CACA (Catholic Action Committee on Aids) at st. Anne's Catholic church, Ifuho in Ikot Ekpene and at St Luke's hospital, Anua in Uyo.

### **Education and HIV/AIDS**

Education, which is the bedrock of development, has been advocated as the best way of providing knowledge and encouraging "the development of attitudes and skills that can limit the spread and impact of the pandemic " (JUNP on AIDS 2003:6). Given the devastating consequences of HIV/AIDS, and since there are no immediate medical solutions in view, the spread of the disease must be mitigated through the creation of awareness of the dangers of the disease and the need for a healthy society for the overall development of the manpower needs of the world in general, and the Nigerian nation in particular. Education in the HIV/AIDS context is not limited to the formal educational system , but includes informal education, as many of those most at risk are not in the formal educational system. This is why "Information, Education and Communication" (IEC) materials (posters, handbills, billboards, etc) are useful in the dissemination of information on HIV/AIDS. In this regard, the role of language cannot be overemphasized. This is why, in next section, we discuss language briefly before going on to the role of the Ibibio language in HIV/AIDS sensitization campaign in Akwa Ibom State.

### **Language**

Language, as we all know, is a means of communication within the human race, possessed by every living human being. And, according to Hacuta and Cancino (1977), it is the most readily accessible window to the human mind. Essien (2003) defines language as " ...a system of structural arbitrary vocal symbols by which human beings make meaning and communicate and interact with each other in a given community,...a system of rules and principles in which sound, structure and meaning are integrated for communication" (6-7). For Okonkwo (2003:139) language is "...the social point of departure for individual thinking and collective endeavour leading to social development and conveys not only the experiences and knowledge of past generations to individuals but also communicates the new achievements of individual and collective thinking as social products (particularly in terms of technical, scientific, technological and cultural discoveries and conventions). He further opines that, above all, language is...the indispensable instrument for the furtherance of group solidarity through effective communication leading to meaning sharing...it also enshrines the common experiences that the people in question have garnered from the impact of their surroundings, the memory of their fathers, their common experiences in time as a polity, their triumphs, their woes, their loves,



their hates. These, therefore, reinforce that oneness of mind, that oneness of thought already forged in the people by their common language. However, according to Noah (2003:177) "language is not insulated from the complex dynamic of society. It is usually hamstrung with other variables such as access to socio-economic power, symbols of group identity, political power, ideological control and even survival." There is no wonder then, that matters concerning language are always sensitive issues. People seem to be emotionally attached to their languages and would learn better in them. Language is, therefore, so important and so all-encompassing that it is used "...not only positively to cheat, deceive, lie, mislead, misinform, misdirect, deride, insult, antagonize etc, but to teach, explain, inform, direct, enlighten, praise, pray, please, etc", Essien (2003:8). This statement underscores the usefulness of language, and particularly indigenous languages, in passing on the message of HIV/AIDS. The Ibibio Language Writers Association (ILWA), custodian of the Ibibio language, conscious of this fact, deemed it necessary to use the language (Ibibio) to sensitize the Ibibio-speaking people on HIV/AIDS.

### **The Ibibio Language and the Campaign Against HIV/AIDS**

In his inaugural lecture, Essien (2003:17) attests that "...the greatest beneficiaries of linguistics in Calabar are the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom, whose language is now numbered among the 200 greatest in the world." The unprecedented growth of the Ibibio language since the production of its orthography in 1983 attests to this fact. Prof. Okon Essien has made invaluable contributions in this regard. He chaired the panel that produced the orthography in 1983, formed and heads the Ibibio Language Writers Association that produced the primer series recommended for primary schools in Ibibio land, produced *A Grammar of the Ibibio Language* and *Ibibio Names* among other works. Above all, he has produced a sizeable number of Ibibio (Efik, Ejagham, Ibo, etc) linguists, including the present authors, who have assisted, and will continue to assist him in building up the Ibibio Language.

One of the greatest achievements of the Ibibio Language Writers Association is its involvement in the campaign against HIV/AIDS. Bamgbose (2006) has drawn attention to the fact that linguists must be socially relevant by contributing to "...the linguistic welfare of the communities among whom they work, in much the same way as companies and governments are enjoined to take CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) seriously." As a humanistic science, linguistics has a major role to play in health care delivery. Many people suffer from ailments which could have been avoided if they had had adequate information. The use of indigenous Nigerian languages for dissemination of information in the health sector is an aspect of this social responsibility of linguists. It is in the spirit of social responsibility that the Ibibio Language Writers Association undertook to enlighten the Ibibio people on HIV/AIDS, using their own language as the medium of communication.

### **Activities of ILWA in the HIV/AIDS Campaign**

ILWA began the fight against HIV/AIDS in 2004 with exploratory visits to arrange meetings with village heads and other community leaders in order to meet the villagers. Among the villages visited were Ntan Ekere, (Ibiono L.G.A), Ishiet Erong, (Etinan L.G.A), Obio Offot (Uyo L.G.A) and Use Ikot Ebio (Uyo L.G.A) for this purpose. Later on, advocacy and community diagnosis visits were undertaken to these villages. ILWA had very useful interactions with these village communities. The people were asked questions intended to elicit their knowledge, ignorance, superstitions, doubts, fears, etc. of HIV/AIDS. They, in turn, asked very useful questions and made comments which revealed their attitude, understanding and belief towards the scourge. ILWA gave the people historical facts, information and education on HIV/AIDS, dismissed myths and discouraged stigmatization of HIV/AIDS patients, thus disabusing people's minds. All these activities were done in the Ibibio language. The informal, personal manner with which ILWA made the IEC material presentation left a lasting impact on the communities visited, as we reliably learnt. Earlier information on HIV/AIDS, as we got to know, were either impersonal: from the mass media, in English or the Nigerian Pidgin or in a formal church setting, during sermons.

At the end of each visit, the people became more enlightened than before, more concerned about the spread and the devastation of the disease in Akwa Ibom State. In one of the villages, the people requested for



written information and educational materials in Ibibio, on HIV/AIDS.

1. This motivated ILWA to produce IEC materials in Ibibio.
2. The experience gained from the visits helped in no small way to prepare and produce the right kind of IEC materials.

### **The IEC Materials**

The IEC materials produced by ILWA include posters, handbills, brochures and a billboard. In addition, radio jingles were run on AKBC (Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation) during the second quarter of 2005, after they were tested for intelligibility in different settings including market places, churches secondary and primary schools.

### **The key issues addressed through the IEC materials are:**

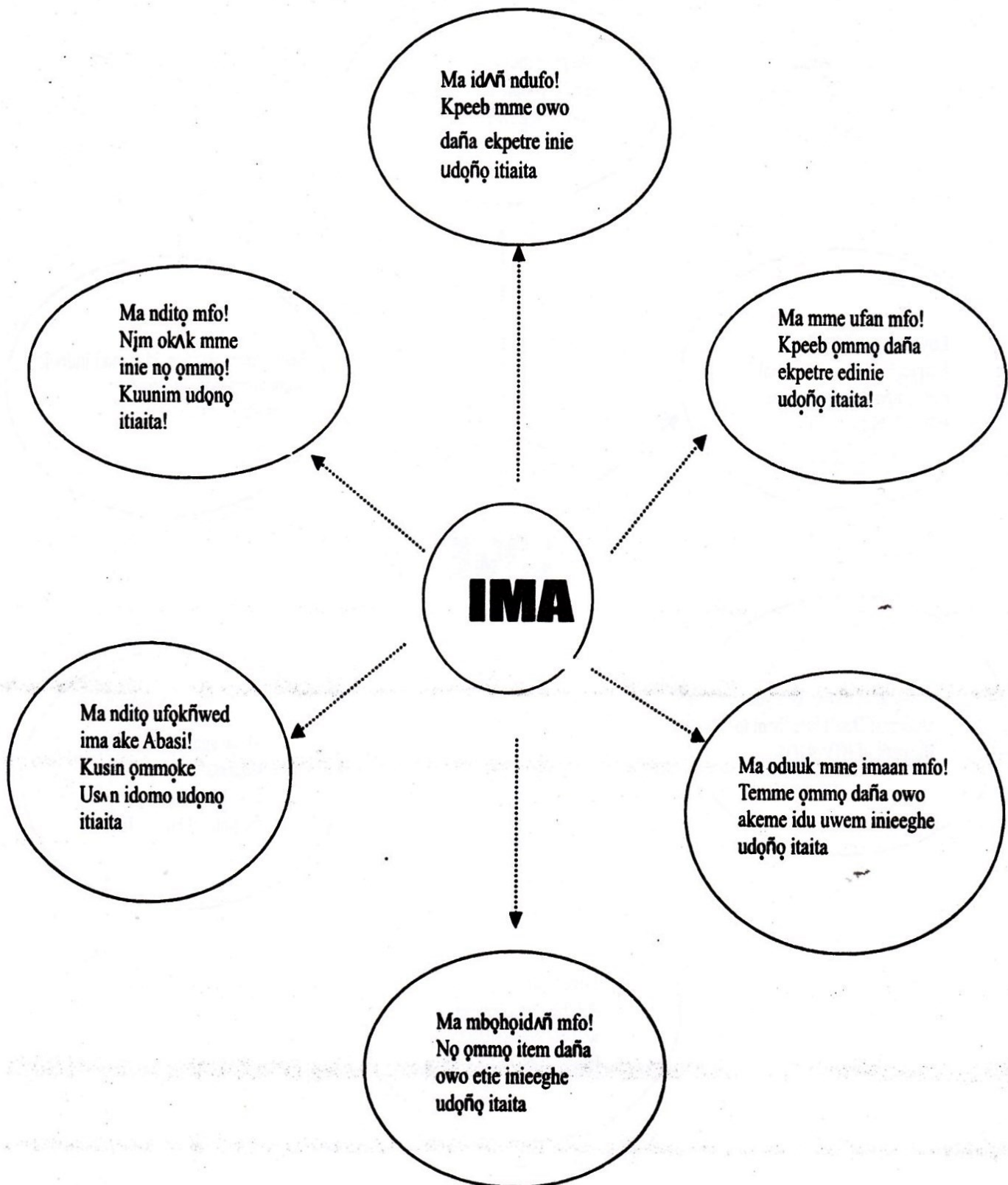
1. the nature of the infection and how it is transmitted;
2. what behaviours to avoid, such as not engaging in casual unprotected sex and needle sharing;
3. respect for human rights-infected and affected people are not to be stigmatized;
4. skills development necessary for people to interact with others, including people living with HIV/AIDS, in a non-discriminatory and supportive way.

### **The messages have, as objective, to:**

1. increase information and awareness on HIV/AIDS;
2. foster restrictive attitudes towards casual sexual practices;
3. reduce the level of stigmatization against those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS;
4. improve affection, care and support for HIV/AIDS infected people.

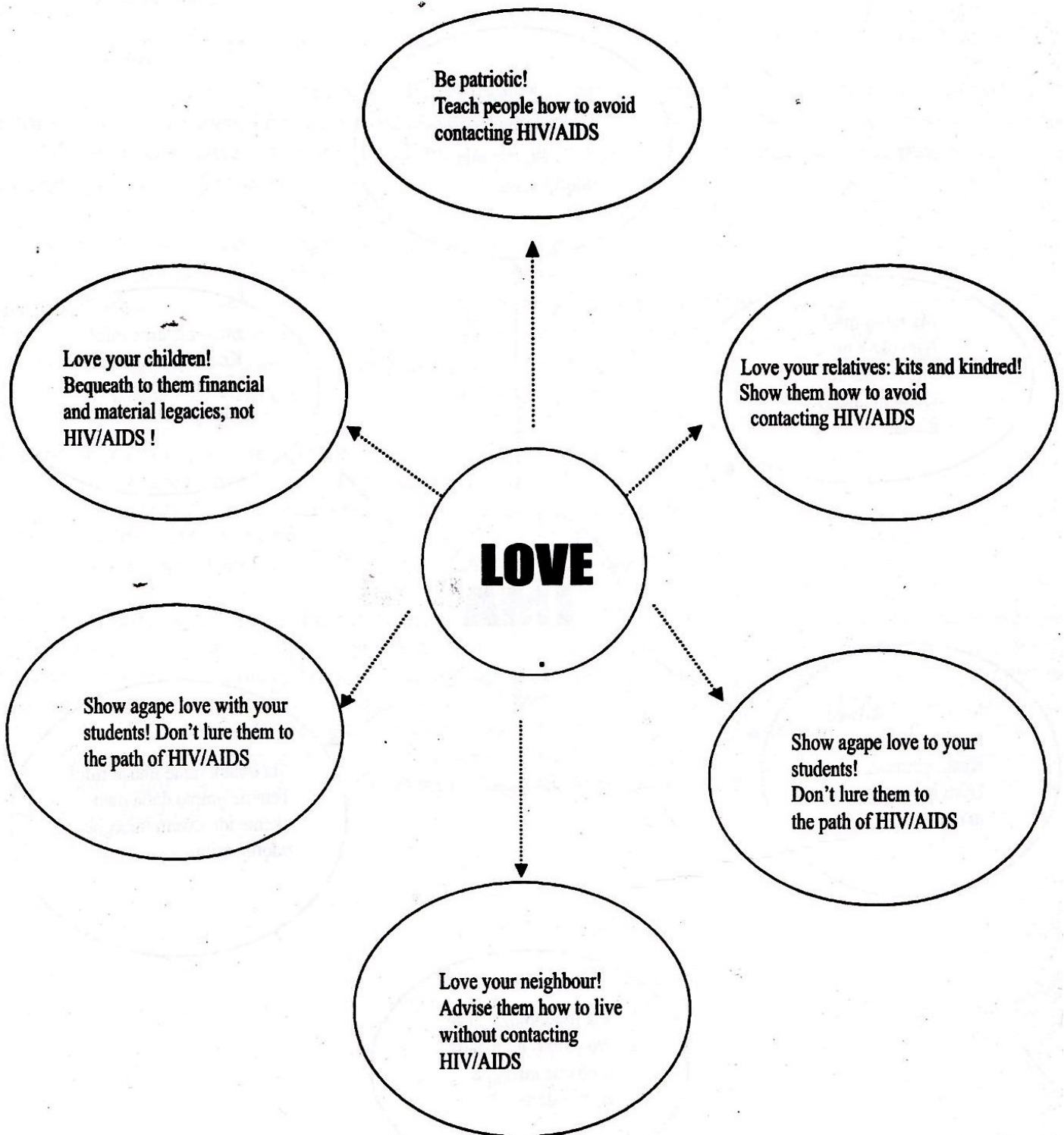
On the whole, the messages are meant to teach those who are not HIV positive to remain so, and those who are HIV positive to make efforts to stay healthy so as to delay the progression of the disease to AIDS, while those who have reached the AIDS stage are encouraged to manage the situation and prolong life. It must be mentioned here that the Ibibio Language Writers Association has been able to use Ibibio in the campaign against HIV/AIDS through the initiatives of Professor Okon Essien, the one who initiated the study of linguistics in the University of Calabar about three decades ago. Below are some of the messages on the posters and handbills produced by the Ibibio Language Writers Association and the subsequent English translation equivalents.

**Udoño Itiaita**  
**Se Ana Odiño Abaña Udoño Itiaita**



**Fig. 1 Ima (Love)**

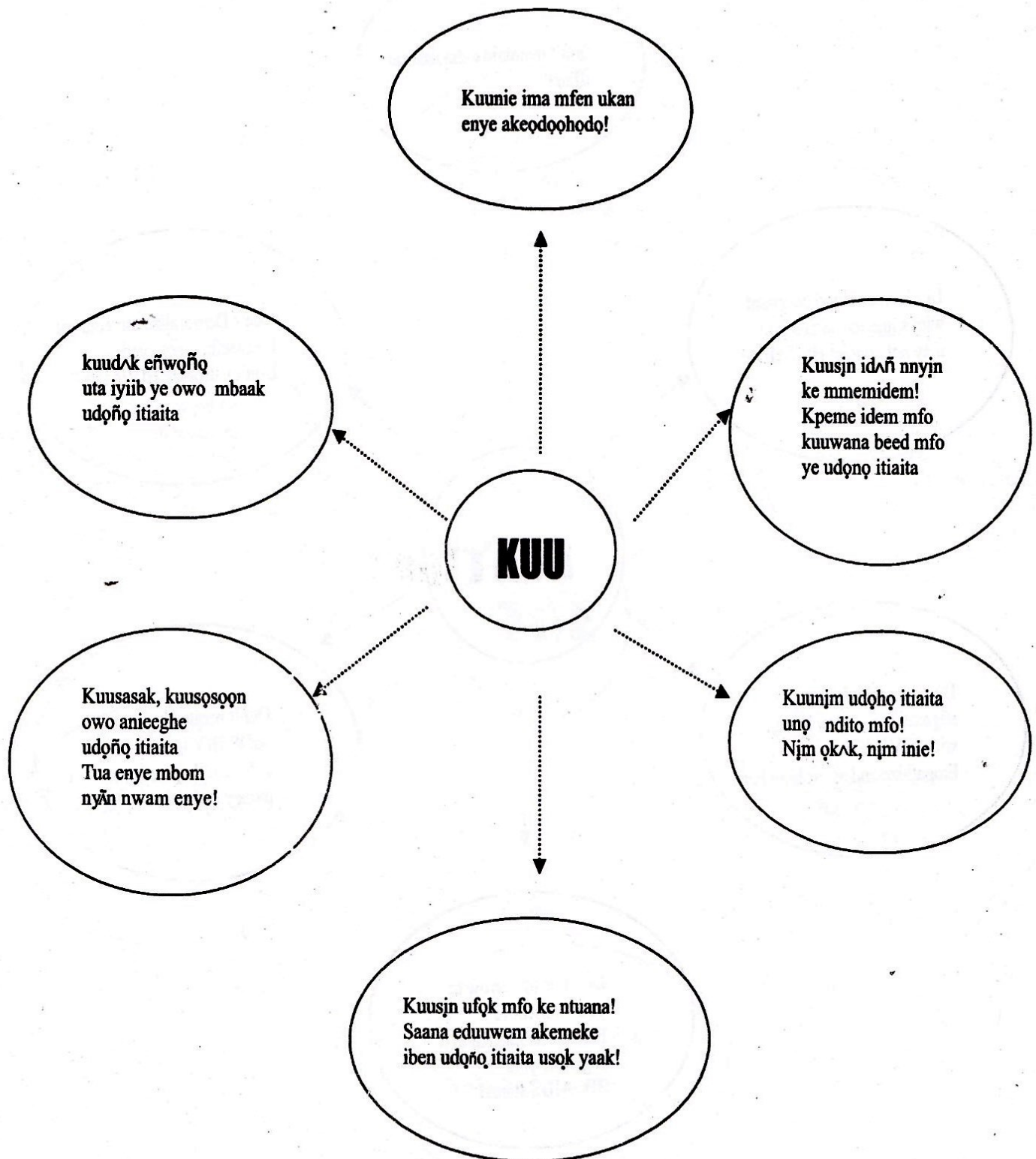
**HIV/AIDS**  
**What you must know about HIV/AIDS**



**Fig 1: Love (Ima)**



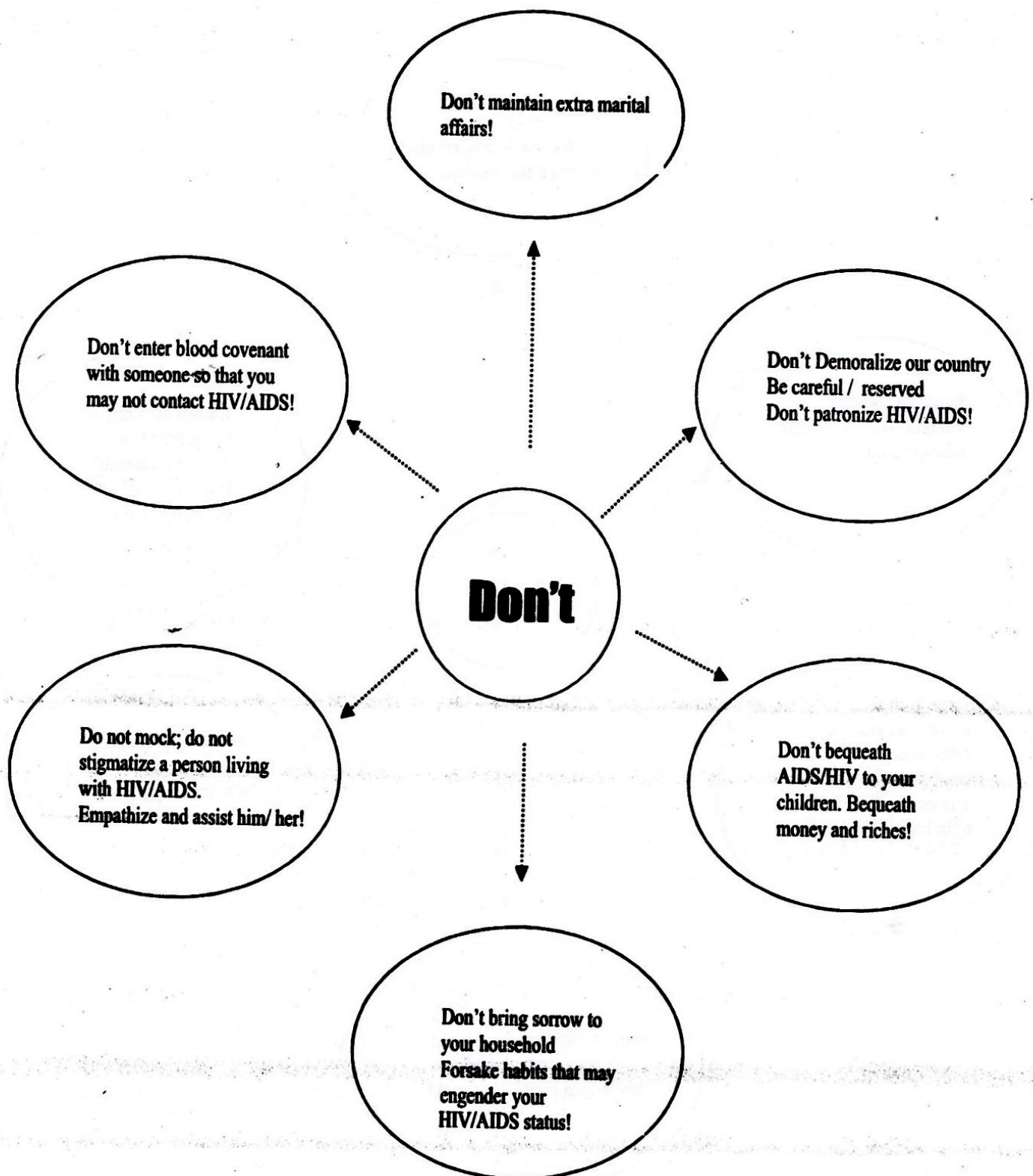
## Se Ana Odioño Abaña Udoño Itiaita



**Fig 11: Kuu (Don't)**



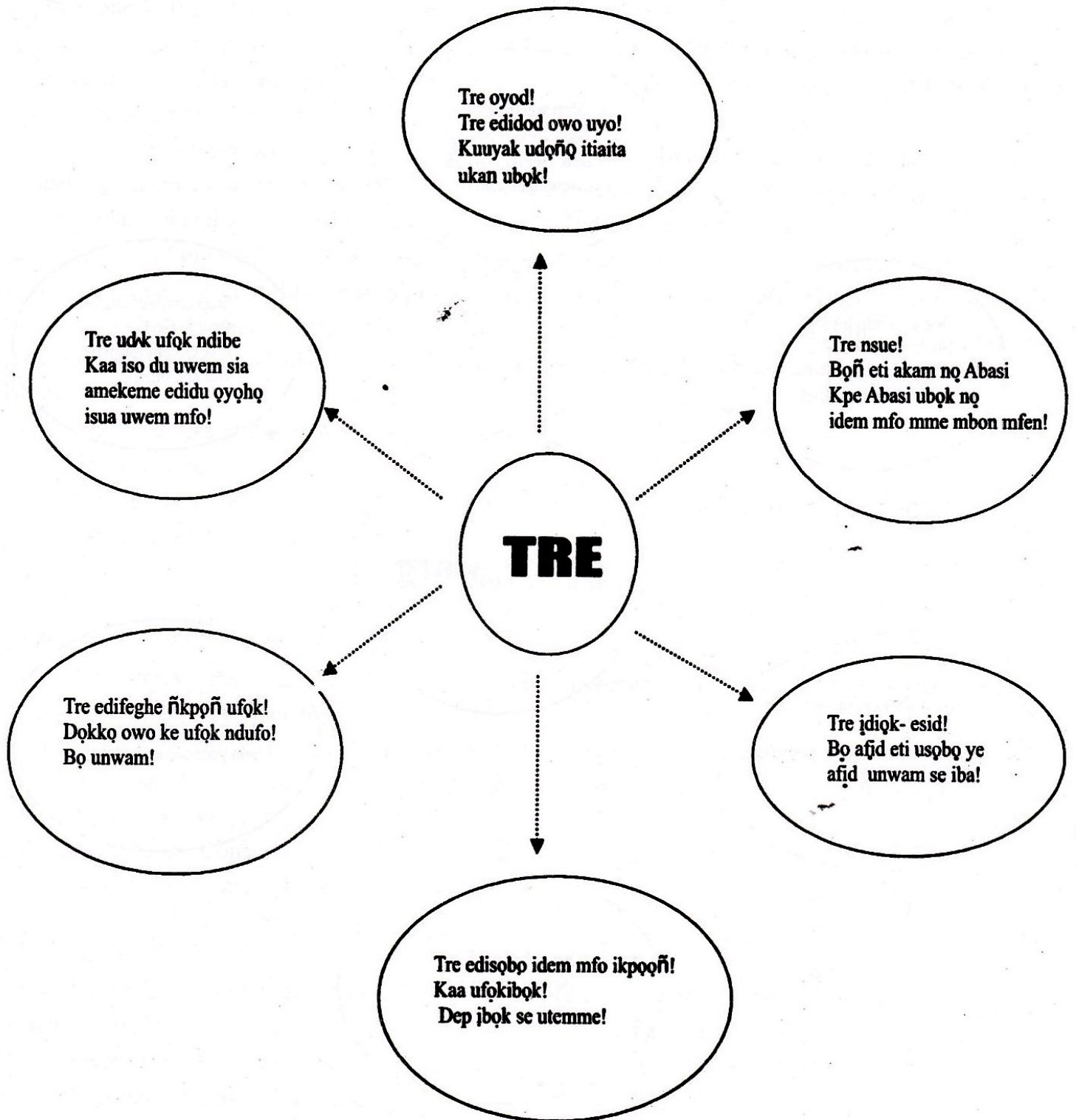
**HIV/AIDS**  
**What you must know about HIV/AIDS**



**Fig 11: Don't (Kuu)**



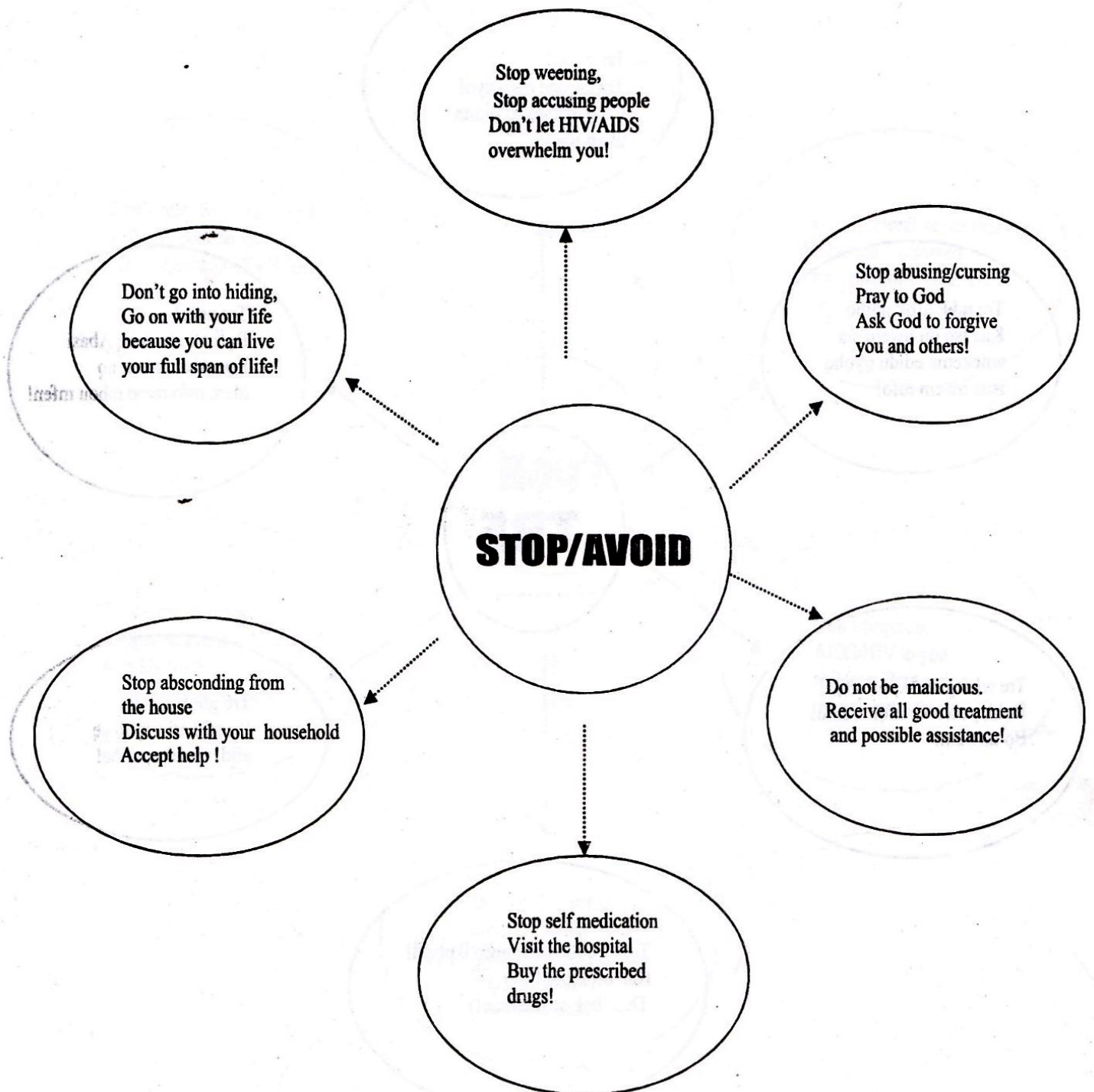
**Udono Itiaita**  
**Se Ana Odiono Abana Udono Itiaita**



**Fig 111: Tre (Stop)**



**HIV/AIDS**  
**What you must know about HIV/AIDS**



**Fig 111: Stop (Tre)**



## Conclusion

HIV/AIDS is here with us and so is still a very topical issue. Because of how it is transmitted, everyone is potentially vulnerable. Therefore, it is necessary to be enlightened on its prevention, transmission and management. The enlightenment can only be done through language, and the right language for the right audience (cf Okon 2004:290). Those who are not literate in the English language can best be enlightened in their mother tongues. The use of mother tongue in health campaigns has far-reaching implications for the languages themselves, as it would widen the range and domain of their use and thus help to keep them alive, and relevant. However, most information on HIV/AIDS in Akwa Ibom before the involvement of ILWA seems to have been distant, formal, mainly on the electronic media. The desired impact did not seem to be as effective as now.

Though studies have shown that indiscriminate sexual activities are on the increase in spite of the increasing sensitization campaigns (Smah 2003 cited in Ohiri-Aniche & Odukoya, 2004), stakeholders must not relent in their efforts to drive home the message of HIV/AIDS. As there is no cure for the scourge at the moment, people who are infected must be encouraged to do the right things so as to live well and stay healthy to be able to contribute meaningfully to their families and the society at large. In this regard, IEC materials such as the ones produced by ILWA would reduce the risk and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS by providing information, and thus creating awareness of the devastating consequences of the pandemic.

## Notes

1. We are grateful to Mrs. Atim Enoh, the State Project Manager, for providing this information.
2. This project was funded by the Akwa Ibom State World Bank Assisted HIV/AIDS Programme Development Project.

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