

The background of the book cover is a textured, painterly image. The upper half is a deep blue sky with some lighter, wispy clouds. The lower half is a green landscape, possibly a field or a forest, with some darker green areas and lighter, yellowish-green patches. The overall texture is grainy and artistic.

Topical Issues in Sociolinguistics: *The Nigerian Perspective*

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16. Ibibio Women's Satirical Songs: A Sociolinguistic Perspective¹

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Abstract

The ways in which various people in the world use speech have long been of interest to linguists who have made systematic observations and comments about the different norms of linguistic behaviour. Researchers have observed that there is a relationship between culture and language (cf.. Hudson 1980, Wardhaugh 1986, Coates 1991, Edwards & Katbamma 1991). Language is part of a people's culture. Culture is transmitted through language, and thus influences language use. Again, males and females are known to exhibit different ranges of verbal skills, and these differences are often attributed to the speakers' social and cultural settings (cf.. Trudgill, 1986).

In the Ibibio culture, for instance, while women are forbidden from performing certain ritualistic functions, they are more often associated with satirical songs and tales. In their organized cultural associations, the women resort to satirical songs as a means of communication in diverse contexts. This paper examines the linguistic, social, cultural and artistic features of these songs, using the ethnographic framework proposed by Hymes (1974). The result reveals some interesting aspects of the Ibibio socio-cultural life which could be of great practical significance to women in this millennium.

Introduction

In my opinion, the satirical songs in this study come within the scope of folksongs, which are songs in the traditional style of a people. Folksongs (and folktales) form part of recreational activities in Ibibioland, as in many parts of Africa. In the traditional setup these activities involve men, women and children because they are usually entertaining. At the same time, they are very educative, and as Samson-Akpan (1991:546) points out, Ibibio folktales (and folksongs also) "... teach worldly wisdom based on observations of people's behaviour, and underline the adverse results of not listening to wise counsel and reason".

Studies have revealed that in pre-colonial Ibibioland, women were vocal and active and made their impact felt in the society in various ways (Ina

1991:555). They belonged to well organized and powerful cultural societies, *most of which were exclusively for women and were organized to deal with matters concerning women*, such as maintaining good moral conduct among women and also protecting them against maltreatment by the menfolk, notably husbands (Ina 1999:559). The women in their organized groups made use of satirical songs to inform about happenings in the society. We consider these songs as folksongs in their own right. The women seem to be specially endowed to compose and sing these songs to suit any circumstance - be it to ridicule, praise, cajole, advise, etc. This shows great communicative competence and a lot of artistic creativity and verbal ingenuity is involved in the process of selecting such a language behaviour. (singing). The concept of communicative competence goes beyond linguistic competence, that is, the grammatical and phonological rules which speakers of a language internalise as they learn to speak that language (Chomsky 1965:4). According to Milroy (1980) as cited by Coates (1991: 64), communicative competence involves knowledge of when to speak or be silent: how to speak on each occasion; how to communicate (and interpret) meanings of respect, seriousness, humour, politeness or intimacy.

Theoretical Framework

We shall adopt the ethnographic framework initiated by Hymes (1974) and taken up by others (Sherzer 1977; McDermoth 1977; Wardhaugh 1989 among others). The concept of ethnography is defined by anthropologists as "what one needs to know in order to get along in a particular community" (Sherzer, 1974:144). The ethnography of communication, or of speaking, is an approach within the field of sociolinguistics that offers a particular perspective for understanding language (Speech) behaviour in cultural and social contexts. Singing could be classified as a language behaviour learned and performed in social contexts. The assumption in ethnography is that every community has rules for any form of language behaviour such as greeting, conversing, insulting, praising, showing appreciation, agreeing or disagreeing. The ethnographic framework takes into account various factors involved in speaking and describes all the factors that are relevant in understanding how a particular communicative event achieves its objectives. These factors include setting and scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms of interaction and interpretation, and genre. Hymes uses the acronym SPEAKING for the various factors he deems to be relevant. Hymes'

ethnographic approach, which we have opted for, appears to capture the real essence and use of satirical songs in the Ibibio cultural setting.

The Structure of the Satirical Songs /Data

Satirical songs are usually brought about by curious happenings in the society. For instance, if a woman stole she was paraded through the village streets naked and ridiculed in satirical songs. There were cultural societies like *Ebre* and '*Ibaan Ison*' which had a duty to regulate the conduct of women and maintain good discipline and moral behaviour. These traditional institutions do not accept women of questionable character into their membership. Talbot (1968:191), notes that when members of *Ibaan Ison* society gather together not one man may be present at their gathering.

According to Akongkor-Ekpe (200:227), *Ebre* is devoted, till today, to the preservation of traditional Ibibio values relating to motherhood, the family and womanhood. Members of such women's cultural group whose role in the society is to check social vices especially among the womenfolk usually compose and sing satirical songs about any member who did anything that society frowns at. If a woman committed adultery, or coveted another woman's husband, or if a young girl got pregnant, the women would decry these happening through songs when they met. Men who maltreated their wives were equally cautioned through songs. Women of valour, who performed noble acts were praised through comic songs. These songs are usually witty, and replete with symbolic and metaphoric phrases and words. The music is usually melodious, interesting and captivating and accompanied with drumming and clapping of hands. Obviously, the themes of the songs are developed in conversation. That is to say, before the songs are sung, some or most of the women involved may have met casually in the market place, the farm, the church, at family or society meetings and had talked about the matter, so that the women build on one another's contributions. In other words, the women work together to produce shared meanings. Examples of such songs are:

- i) Ibaan e-m-bo ebe edo. Yak nkpo
 women they me take husband marry, let thing
 anam owo owo ofiok nkpo
 it does person person he knows thing
 "Women have snatched my husband from me. Let one learn a lesson from
 one's experience"

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- ii) Nko ebe akpakpa iban eb k mb k
 Till husband he-dies dies women they tell story
 Nana ebe e-ke-fon
 how husband he was good.
 "Women appreciate their husbands only after their death".
- iii) Eti anwaan ufok ndo adad ukpono o-no
 Good wife house marriage she- takes honour she gives.
 ebe idiok anwaan ufok ndo eben esuenne ono id n
 husband bad wife house marriage she takes shame she gives village.
 "A good wife brings honour to her husband, but a bad wife brings shame to the entire community".
- iv) uf keyo ibaan ndo odo eti ebe ndo
 umbrella women marriage it is good husband marriage
 "A good husband is a good shelter for a married woman."
- v) Ibaan nnyin nsido tiked uka isan? Eyin odo tiked uka isan,
 Our women, what ticket go journey? Child it is ticket go journey birth
 umauman ke ufok eti owo
 when give in house good person.
 "Our women, what is the ticket for (this) adventure (marriage)? A child (children) is the ticket for the adventure, if you have them for a good man".
- vi) Ebe ete nnyon – m-bo nte n-nyonno-o
 husband he says I go I say that I will not go
 n-nyon n-yon n-kpon ikot eyop, n-kpon ufok ndo n-kpon
 I go leave plot palm I leave house marriage I leave
 ndito, n-kpon ama mmi m-bo nte n-nyonno-o!
 children, I leave lover my I say that I will not go – o!
 "My husband says I should go, I say I am not going – o;
 Should I go , leaving the palm plot, the marital home, my children, my lover ? I say I will not go-oo"!.

-
- vii) Anie nkpo anwaan anam nkpo uko uko
 Possessor thing woman she does thing confidently/proudly
 i-nam- ma nam uyom.
 She does not do noise.
 "A rich woman does her things confidently/proudly
 she does not blow her trumpet".
- viii) Okon Uwang yak eyin owod eka ke mme nny n nkpan
 Okon uwang let child he kill mother for I have also admonish
 Ikoppo sioono idem kpon eyin
 "he does not hear remove self from child.
 "Let Okon Uwang kill his mother. I have advised him against it but he
 has refused to listen".

Analysis and Discussion

Language behaviour cannot be understood if taken out of context (social, cultural, etc) and studied in abstraction, and so in order to understand the behaviour (singing in this case) of the Ibibio women of the pre- and immediate post-colonial era one has to understand their background and the Ibibio philosophy on womanhood. As in all traditional African societies, women in traditional Ibibioland were relegated to the background. They played the second fiddle, and were meant only to be seen and not heard. Their major role in the society was to produce children, look after them and maintain the home. In the Ibibio culture, women were intimidated by all sorts of superstitious beliefs. For instance, when a woman married, she was made to swear an oath that she would not have extra-marital affairs as long as she was married to her husband. It was believed that if the women broke the oath, "*Ekpo nka-owo*" (spirit of Adultery) would inflict her with a tortuous labour during childbirth. "*Ekpo nka-owo*" was rather fiendish. When a woman was in labour, and if the labour was protracted, the traditional birth attendant would try to find out if she had had affairs with other men. Sometimes she was forced to confess what she had not committed, otherwise "*Ekpo Nka-owo*" would strike her dead while in labour. Meanwhile, she would be abandoned in labour until she would confess and sacrifices made to appease the gods. Often, the women would die in the

process. In moments like that (during the tortuous labour), some women resorted to satirical songs like the one below:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Akpodo mmana ndi | 1. If after I was born |
| 2. Owo isi-dohor Adom | 2. One did not have to marry a man |
| 3. Nso mkpeka ka ke
ufok udor Adom | 3. Why would I go to the
house of marriage. |
| 4. Nka ñkedia ndok | 4. To go ad "eat" Scorn |
| 5. Mfon-mfon nto Eka-mmi | 5. The handsome sons of my mother |
| 6. Mmo ko efon ebono | 6. Are there handsome and waiting |
| 7. Me mkpi-dohor
UdohEka-mmi | 7. If I wouldn't marry the
second – born of my mother |
| 8. me mkpi-dohor Akpan? | 8. Wouldn't I marry the first born? |

PART II

- | | |
|--|--|
| 9. Akan-anwan amum owo uman | 9. The old woman midwife |
| 10. Ate mi siak owo | 10. Says I should mention the person |
| 11. Mme nyung nsiak afit owo iba | 11. I have mentioned all two persons |
| 12. Ate mi ikeme-kem | 12. She said to me it is still not enough |
| 13. Utu ke nsiak akpan Ima-ami | 13. Rather than mention my main lover |
| 14. Nya kpa
nyong Ekpo) | 14. I will die, and go (home
to the spirit world) |
| 15. Utu ke nsiak akpan Ima-ami | 15. Rather than mention my main lover |
| 16. Nya kpa nyong Ekpo | 16. I will die, and go (home
to the spirit (world) |
| 17. Yin di-mana ndien O | 17. O child come and be born. |
| 18. Ke mme-nyene mbom
Yin di-mma ndien O
Ke mme-nyene mbom | 18. For I am miserable
O child come and be born
For I am miserable |

(Taken from Akongkor-Ekpe, Udoh. *The House of the Forest*. Lagos: Lordstime International Ltd, 2000. p. 228)

There is a story² that sometime in 1964, a woman in Afaha Obong in Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State had given birth with the help of a traditional birth attendant. Several hours after giving birth, the placenta was not expelled. She was abandoned because people thought that that had happened as a result of her infidelity to her husband. The husband, too, had abandoned her. Some catholic Christians who came and found her in that condition quickly rushed to the priest in that locality and informed him about the matter. The priest immediately went and rushed the woman and her baby to St. Luke's Hospital, Anua in Uyo, in his car. There in the hospital, the doctor simply pressed the woman's womb and the placenta was expelled. But for the timely intervention of the priest, the woman would have died in the name of "*Ekpo Nka owo*".

So it was that when women felt like expressing certain feelings and emotions which they could not boldly express before the menfolk, they resorted to satirical songs and expressed their feelings in roundabout or indirect ways. This is how the women chose to deal with the male sex. One could say that generally, subordinates chose to deal with their superiors this way. We have come to this conclusion based on the observation that the housemaid or babysitter often resorted to satirical songs about her mistress when she was not well taken care of. This is considered a very vital social function of the kind of satirical songs under study, as they provide a valuable mechanism for releasing tension.

It would be observed that the general themes of most of the folksongs cited in 3.1 above are marriage and child bearing. Researchers have found that the content categories of conversations among men are different from those of conversations among women. When women talk to women, they often focus on self, feeling, and affiliation with home and family (Wardhaugh 1989:308-9). The content categories of Ibibio women's folksongs appear to confirm this assertion.

We shall now examine the linguistic and socio-cultural implications of the Ibibio women's songs against the background of the ethnography of communication proposed by Hymes.

Setting and Scene (S): Ibibio women sing their satirical songs at their meetings which are usually held in each others houses or in the house of someone who is marking an event -birth, death, etc. Usually the song is relevant to that event or to a recent event that is either frowned at or applauded.

Psychologically the women feel they are the only participants at their gathering, but in reality, non-members of that particular co-operative or cultural group are always hanging around. However, the women are pleased to be heard. They are always in high spirits as there is usually plenty to eat and drink. They sit in the open air or under canopies if the owner of the occasion/house can afford it. However, meetings are not the only settings for satirical songs. As had been discussed above such songs could occur anywhere and under any circumstance, like when a woman is in labour or even while at home busy with household chores.

Participants (P): They are members of the co-operative group there present. There is usually a chanter, an expert singer who may also be the composer, while the others respond in unison. On-lookers are usually carried away and find themselves singing and dancing along with members. It is to be noted that the expert singers involved in this kind of satirical songs are highly respected and widely acclaimed because what they do is a rare talent and they are usually relatively few in number in the society. The death of any one of them could be likened to the destruction of a body of written literature in western culture. Here again, it is not only members of co-operative groups that can compose and sing satirical songs. Anybody that is endowed can do so, but then privately and not as a public show.

Ends (E): The main objectives of Ibibio women satirical songs is to regulate the behaviour of the people in the society by advising, scorning, mocking etc. For example satirical song number (i) in 3.1 above has a number of roles to play. It describes the behaviour of the husband snatcher while at the same time advising women to beware of the kind of friends they keep. By singing such a song, the victim (the one whose husband has been snatched) is also seeking sympathy and support from other women, especially those that have been victims of similar circumstances. The practice then also provides an avenue for "letting off steam" when one is tensed up, like in the case of a disgruntled babysitter or housemaid, or the woman burdened with a prolonged labour. They entertain too.

Act Sequence (A): According to Wardhaugh (1998:239), this factor has long aroused the interest of linguists, particularly those who study discourse and

conversation. The satirical songs are “ethical” propositions of the statement – question- exclamatory type, whose purpose is to serve as guide to behaviour in the social milieu where they are uttered. The tunes are most often traditional.

Key (K): The messages are usually conveyed in a mocking, sarcastic manner to show disapproval. If the song is about a noble act, the singers are usually in high spirits and the message is conveyed hilariously. In both cases, the singing is accompanied with dancing and drumming. We note here that sex plays a significant role in the manner in which the message is conveyed. The women indirectly express their feelings through the songs even though the approach may appear confrontational, a thing that the men rarely do.

Wardhaugh attributes the differences in the use of language by both sexes to their different sociolinguistic subcultures, having “...learned to do different things with language...” (p.309). This is likely to have arisen from the fact that men and women have different interests and different roles in the society. Other sociolinguistic-based studies of sex differences in language use (cf.. Trudgill, 1986) have shown that women are generally speaking more aware of the social significance of linguistic variables because they are more closely involved with child rearing.

Instrumentalities (I): The use of songs to pass on message is significant in many ways. It portrays great communicative competence because it requires skills. Mere talking itself is a very complex activity and much goes into it, let alone talking figuratively.

Norms of Interaction and Interpretation (N): This refers to the specific behaviours of proprieties that attach to speaking. The women, while dancing and singing, do mimic the people and events that the songs concern. Others cheer those who do the dancing and singing. If one who performed a noble act happens to be present, he or she is cheered. On the contrary, the one who committed an immoral act is jeered at. This could make one run away from the village. The attitude of the Ibibio woman in (iv) can be interpreted on the basis of the role – expectations of the woman as wife and mother, and thus a caregiver whose duty is to ensure the proper upbringing of her children. As a good mother, the preoccupation of the woman is to prevent her child from

bringing shame and embarrassment to the family, thereby making them a laughing stalk

Genre (G): As we had already said, the kind of songs under review are regarded as folksongs. Like folktales, they too are meant to teach "... in an entertaining and participatory milieu". (Samson-Akpan, 1991:546)

It is to be noted that the Ibibio women's satirical songs portray the socio-cultural values of the traditional Ibibio society. As can be deduced from the few satirical songs cited above, marriage and child bearing were very important issues in the Ibibio society. A woman who did not marry by the age of 20 was looked down upon. And for the married ones, they had to have children. Motherhood was the culmination of the joy of marriage, as expressed in folksongs (v) in section 3.1 above. The women were very devoted to the cause of marriage and were prepared to endure anything to remain in the marital home. They were more resilient, persevering and steadfast in their resolve to attain their goals (cf. satirical song (vi)). They were (and still are) caregivers and cherished that role. The therapeutic effects of caregiving by the women cannot be over-emphasized. Children were well brought up, thereby reducing crime rate in the society. There were also fewer cases of mental illnesses then.

Functions of Satirical Songs

We have seen from the few comic songs presented in this study, that satirical songs vary from those of solidarity, to those of insult, to those of conciliation, to those of admonition etc: As they vary in type, they also vary in their social functions. Some of them are meant to entertain (cf. (vi)), some castigate social vices, (cf. (viii)) while some attract corrections, thus helping to maintain sanity in the society (cf. (i))

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the sociolinguistic implications of satirical songs sung by Ibibio women in various social contexts. The songs provide insights into Ibibio social structure and values. For instance, some of the satirical songs under study have shown that marriage plays an important in Ibibio culture as in most cultures of the world. Through marriage one fulfills

God's divine plan for mankind as well as social expectations. Some of the songs also show that having children is the foremost expectation in marriage.

The Ibibio women used language through satirical songs in socialisation during which process they were able to curb excesses in the society and to check immoral behaviour. In spite of male dominance, the women played important roles in the family and the society at large. The satirical songs depict their strength and resourcefulness, for within the Ibibio socio-cultural setting, the women used satirical songs (which is an aspect of language and culture) to express Ibibio traditional, social and cultural values.

Satirical songs (and folksongs, folktales and folklore in general) seem to be a dying element of Ibibio oral tradition, as young Ibibio women of today rarely take part in them. In our days, traditional values have eroded, giving way to western values. If this trend continues, it is obvious that generations to come will not hear of these satirical songs (folksongs). Yet, there is a lot the modern woman can learn from this aspect of the Ibibio culture. First and foremost is the idea of "Co-operativeness". Coates (1991:70) affirms that women's conversational style is based on *co-operativeness*. (Co-operativeness) and "Co-operative talk" seemed to form the work ethics of Ibibio women of old. They were always working jointly and looking for ways and means to support one another. The present writer often heard and saw her late maternal grandmother talk about and participate actively in "nka co-operative" (Co-operative Association). There were many co-operative groups made up of women living in the same neighbourhood, street, family, or worshipping in the same church or selling in the same market. The aim of these co-operative groups in the village was to consolidate social relationships and to support one another. They made small contributions and loaned out to one another to trade with.

Another thing about Ibibio satirical songs which should have far-reaching implications for the modern women is the verbal skills displayed by the women. As Ekpa (1999:36) remarks, "women must see language as a resource of fundamental importance, a dynamic communication medium with which she must be empowered". The Nigerian woman of the 21st century should be empowered with words that would build rather than destroy. She should seek to excel in the art of verbal manipulation, as the Ibibio women of old rather than in verbal confrontation and war. As caregiver, and with her improved educational background as an added advantage, she has the capacity to educate in many ways, particularly by upholding high moral values (like women in the

past) in a society where moral values are decaying. By so doing, she would be contributing in no small measure to national development.

However, those practices that are inimical to womanhood should be discontinued.

Notes

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2. I am grateful to Prof. J. U. Obot who narrated the story.

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