
REVITALIZATION AFRICAN PROVERBS A MEDIUM OF ENTRENCHING AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE AND MORALITY: THE ESAN PEOPLE IN FOCUS

T. O. Ebhomienlen

Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria

Abstract

The paper attempts amongst other endeavours to justify and defend the existence of African knowledge and morality. It is also an effort to discuss that proverb is an essential element in showcasing African knowledge and protecting morality in Africa. It further argues that African epistemology is enshrined in proverbs which are often referred to as wise sayings, words of elders and of forefathers. The thesis of this literature is “revitalizing African proverbs as a way to entrench African knowledge and morality. The paper adopts the comparative, analytical and descriptive methods to achieve its objective. The research encourages the use of proverbs to retain African knowledge and keep morality extant. The paper hopes to highlight some factors militating against proverb and discusses the way out. The paper will draw out some African proverbs and their moral lessons. This is in a bid to depict their relevance as the researcher discovers that the phenomenon – proverb is diminishing at home and in Diaspora. The literature further discovers that if works are not done in African in general and Esan in Nigeria in particular proverbs would gradually phase out. The paper concludes with suggestions that would revitalize proverbs in Esanland in particular and Africa in general.

Introduction

*Umonwan ako, oni kolo ki dia kui khamude
itanbi ebhke ea re negbe talo*

Meaning “The meeting of wise people does not take long as they would communicate with proverbs and idioms.

The quest for a research of this magnitude arises from the effort to call for revitalization of proverbs as a media for promoting morality and entrenching Esan Language in particular and African language in general. It is often said that proverbs serve as oil with which the spindle of communication is lubricated. Hence the extent to which a person understands a given language is tested with his/her understanding of such people’s proverbs. Proverbs are generic statement which does not only show the rich heritage of the living people but also that of the forbears. Most proverbs are often preceded with our father said”. This indicates that the phenomenon flows among the living and the “Living dead”.

The bordering issue at stake which this paper attempts to attend to is the eroding away of proverbs among the Esan People at home and in Diaspora. The indigenous language

is the tap root. Therefore the inability to understand an individual's indigenous language and most especially proverb is cutting off from the root. Proverb is the taproot of any dialect.

At this juncture it is worthy of note that language lose its beauty and attraction with the absence of proverbs. Traditional stories, poetry and folktales are all mostly enshrined in proverbs. Traditional medical communication has to do with more of proverbs. Diviners, soothsayers and other traditional adopts speak in proverbs hence one is not out of place to assert that proverb has social, economic and spiritual advantages. The work further explains the relationship between proverb morality and religion and recommends that proverbs should be revitalized so as to further enrich our linguistic dimension.

The researcher adopts the comparative, analytical and descriptive methods to achieve its objective. The research encourages the use of proverbs to retain African knowledge and keep morality extant.

Esan People

Esan is both a language and a people. Esan Is located in the centre of Edo state and they form the central senatorial district. Esan was a division in the old Benin Province of Bendel State and now in Edo and Delta States. It is bounded on the north and north-east by the old Kuku' ruku Division which became Afemai Division before it was spilt into owan, Etsako and Akoko-Edo Local government areas; on the south by the old Asaba Division now broken into oshimili, Ika and Aniocha local government areas; on The west by Owan, Orhiomwon and Uhumwode local government areas; and on the east by river Alike and the lordly

Niger (Okojie 1995:22).

Until 1945, the Ora speaking people of Sabogida were classified as Esan people (Okojie).

The populations of Ujiagbe, Ama, with many Awain communities Erha who are now classified Between Owan and Etsako local government areas respectively, speak Esan. Esan is currently made up of five local government areas. They are: Esan South East, Esan West, Esan North East, East Central and Igueben Local Government Areas.

Many historians have written on the origin of the Esan people. One tradition which sounds more credible to the researcher about the origin of Esan is closely connected with the "pot bellied" Oba Ewuare, the selfish, who small call the great. He built Benin with the primary motive to dominate it in all its totality (Ojiefoh 2002: 14). Ojiefoh argue that the Oba freakishly Ejected the Iken of Uselu and installed his son as Edaiken of uselu (Ojiefoh). He also made his Second son, Ezuwarha, he made the Enojie of Iyowa. Unfortunately the two sons died the same day as a result of a poisonous powder prepared by Ezuwarha, his young son to kill his Elder brother the Edaiken of Uselu. Both of them inhaled the poisonous powder and died. The death of the two persons left the Oba with no sons to succeed him. The bad news was kept from the Oba for some time. When however the Oba heard it he made fierce laws for all Binnis to mourn his sons. Among these laws according to Okojie (1994) were:

- (a) Now Ewuare the great monarch of great Benin Empire has no more sons... therefore no one has any more right to get children-intercourse was decreed forbidden in the whole of the city;

- (b) All living persons in the domain must join in the mourning of his two sons: no more washing, sweeping of the house or compound, not to talk of drumming or Dancing in the land;
- (c) As the most delicious foods are cooked ones no fire must be made within smoke Sight of Benin;
- (d) The laws were binding on everybody in Benin including the Oba Ewuare himself; the laws were clamped on the people for three years.

The implication of all the laws was that, every Benin was expected to live a filthy and unhealthy environment. A great number of people who could not abide by the harsh laws escaped from the jungle. Majority of these people who thus escaped from the unjust and selfish laws formed the Esan Ancestors, the founders of Esan communities. To this day the Binis in derision still refer to the Esan people as *Esan ne san fuo oha* (“The Esan people who jumped into the jungle”, and in its most abusive form, the Binis Man means “bush man”) (Okojie1994:23).

Proverbs

A proverb is a phrase, wise – saying, sentence, statement or expression of the folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation. Proverb is also seen as a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphysical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.(Okojie, 1994:23) proverbs is equally regarded as the horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideal. Proverbs as wise – sayings may sometimes give an indication of the moral ideas underlying the peoples’ attitudes. The repetition of stories, proverbs and traditional saying, it is said, may be an integral element of culture, corresponding among illiterate people to literature among the literates Andah and Okpoko, 1979:201-224). There may as well be educational or a form of intellectual recreation. It has differently been construed to mean a popular saying among a people, which is meant to advice, teach or warm. Proverbs gives us the insight into scientific expression of the Africans like the Esan people in African. The Esan scientifically observed that ‘*ede he ehenlen no yulu, oiho non nyenlen*’ (the river rejects a dead fish and not a living one). They also observed that ‘*abe monlen be mon bhi ilolo*’ (a person who stammers does not stammer when singing). Proverbs then become very powerful weapons for creative knowledge and critical reasoning. It unites, builds and strengthens the epistemic economy of the African people like Esan.

Knowledge in African View

African epistemology adopts the view that knowledge is the understanding of the nature of forces and their interaction. True wisdom under this epistemic pattern, lies in ontological knowledge, it is the intelligence of forces, or their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction. Here, it is believed that God is also wisdom, in that He knows all knows all forces, their ordering, the dependence, their potential and their mutual interaction (Nasseem in Azenabor, 2002:1)

Knowledge flows from the highest being (force) who is the wisdom itself as far as ontological hierarchy is concern in Africa. It is believed that it is God that release knowledge

to other lesser forces. This conception of reality as held by the Africans is actually linked to its worldview, which says, God is the Creator of all things. It is “Osenudazi” (God Almighty) that created “*agbon*” (the world or universe), both spiritual (*eilmin*) and physical realm, and everything therein.

In addition, Ijiomah states that although there are three forces that rule the universe, the power of man is physical, intellectual and spiritual, and that though man can change the world through his physical, rational or spiritual power for good or evil, he is however limited. Spirit and ancestors (*elinmjin*) influence the world also, because they are nearer to God, and so are less limited than man. He argues again that God supreme and his influence overtakes all other influence (Azenabor, 2002:134) For the Esan ‘*edion are yu ebha yieho*’ (it is only the ancestral spirit’s eyes that die and not his ears). This implies that there is a level of knowledge an ancestral spirit will make known to the living within his family setting since they, ancestor, are believed to be around the living to protect them. So the Africans see God as all – knowing and who ultimately is the source of all knowledge. Hamminga confirms the above when he writes that, “our community is a tree, (dead) ancestors are roots giving energy to the trunk, the adults, who in turn supply the branches, leaves and flowers, our children. The tree knows “we” know. The tree is the knowing subject” (Hamminga 2014:1). Knowledge in the African thought pattern is what is given. It flows from the spiritual to the physical. It is what is revealed to man by divine forces. Therefore the use of proverbs is a form of application of divine knowledge.

Moral in African Thought

According Mbiti (1978: 175) it is believed in many African societies that their morals were given to them by God from the very beginning. This provides an unchallenged authority for the morals. It is also believed or thought that some of the departed and spirits keep watch over people to make sure that they observe the moral laws and are punished when they break them. This additional belief strengthens the authority of the morals.

When we use words such as ‘good’, “bad”, “right” and “wrong”, we are using words with moral connotations. From time immemorial, man has been in constant search in the bid to discover some acceptable and rationally defensible standards concerning what kind of things can be considered good or bad. This discipline, referred to as *normative ethics*, attempts to set down conditions for moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness and of moral responsibility. The moral code therefore can be termed a “body of obligations universally recognizable through the use of reason and through reflection upon experience” (Andah and Okpoko, 1979:201-224). Thus, whatever tends to deviate from these standards and time-tested principles would be termed immoral. We want to add quickly that we are of the school of thought, which sees morality and religion not only as complementary but also sees religion as the major instrument in the furtherance of moral ideals and practices. (Asaju D. and Isiramen C. O, 145)

Most other countries and continents of the world have their proverbs and wise sayings. In Africa, it is the same and **African proverbs** are the pride of the African culture. From time immemorial, African proverbs have been used to convey messages during important conversations. It is believed that these sayings come from the wise and only the wise understands it. Over the years, it has become associated with the wise, the elderly and the grey haired that pride themselves in the knowledge of these proverbs and more often than

not, it is usually used to advise a child or a youth as the advice tends to stick more when the proverb is understood. These pieces of advice are most important tend to morality and well being of the child. In most traditions in Africa, it is usually atypical for one to tell an African proverb and still be the one to explain the meaning. This notwithstanding, Africa Answers brings you some of the *greatest and mind blowing famous African proverbs and their meanings*:

Proverbs, Morality and Taboos

So far, we have seen that God is the cohesive factor of the society, and that in the West African sense, religion binds the community together, especially as demonstrated in the covenant relationships.

But as we have pointed out above, the action or conduct of one man within the community can affect the other members for good or evil. In order to prevent man from becoming rebellious and thus endangering the welfare of the society, there are set patterns or code of behaviour for the individual and the community as a whole. There are certain standards or norms to be observed. If one observes the norms faithfully, it will be to the good of one and one's society; but if otherwise, it will bring disaster not only to one but also to one's community.

These norms and codes of conduct can be seen as moral values. Fundamentally, moral values are the fruits or offspring of religion and not just human inventions. From the beginning, God has put His law in man's heart, and has endowed man with the sense of right and wrong. Man's conscience has always instructed him that there are certain things which he must not do in order to have peace. Such things which are forbidden and must not be done are called taboos (*tabu*) (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:211).

Taboos are prohibited actions, the breaking of which is followed by the supernatural penalty. In considering taboos, with a divinity, such covenant usually has its sanctions and demands. One has to obey all the regulations of the cult and observe its taboos. Each divinity usually has certain things which are taboos to him. For example, among the Yoruba, all the worshippers of Orisa – nla, the arch – divinity, must not drink palm – wine because Orisa – nla forbids it. The theological basis for this taboo is seen in the tradition that Orisa – nla once became intoxicated after drinking palm – wine, and since then, he would neither drink palm – wine, nor allow his worshippers to drink it. We can explain the situation further. Among the Yoruba, orisa – nla is the divinity of purity and he represents the divine holiness. Because of this, he enjoins his worshippers to be perfect and without stain. But since palm – wine as an intoxicant affects man's character and purity adversely, he forbids it, and forbids any other thing that can affect man's morality adversely. And these are regarded as *taboos* to him. (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:212). These items of taboo are well expressed in proverbs; such he who takes the divinity's snail pays dearly for it. A visit to Traditional priests reveals they communicate most especially in proverbs and idioms.

Some Esan Proverbs and their Moral Lessons

Esan proverb	English interpretation	Moral lesson
Okhan kpobo nonsen, ode ba ewanlen le bae	If a child washes his Lands well he eats with noble.	A child should avoid childish and foolish act maturely so that he would be accepted be the nobles.
Onon bha mian aha emonlen gbogba bholele	He who dislikes to fences his compound	Advice to children to avoid wayward and uncontrollable life
Osiomon le man ore khanlen yi itikun	He who persuades a child to over eat does not accompany him toilet	Do not allow anybody to persuade you into trouble as nobody will bear the consequence with you.
Airede bhiukpe zo okhuoo si	A good wife is not married during festival	During festival every woman is beautiful and happy but be careful.
Enyen khere se nan reobhe kpa	No matter how little a snake is, one does not puts in the pocket	Avoid trouble makers and trouble itself, it does not any good.
Aha gbuhi non omo non bhoan ba, oman he kan ki ro wanlen	An orphan takes wisdom from the advice a father gives to his child	Learn from the instruction of other people
Egbu uke umowanlan da ree wanlen	A wise person learns from the mistake of a fool	Learn from other people's mistake
Airede eki sin ivin uden	Do crack kernel to make oil for sale on same market day	Prepare and plan well for whatever you want to do.
Aagbi ihue, elolo vie	When the nose is beaten the eyes would cry	An injury to one member of a community affects everybody – communal protection

The Role of Religion in Providing Moral Values

Part of any religious system is its moral values which regulate and harmonize human life. It is religion which tells us what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, what is just and what is unjust, what is a virtue and what is a vice. We saw that African religion has many moral values within the family and within the community. No society can exist without morals. Religion enriches people's morals, for the welfare of the individual and society at large. It is morals which build relationships between people and between them and the world around.

Contemporary African society is lamenting a moral world fallen apart... today the African society ... seems to be in a state of near chaos in the realm of morality" (Kinoti, 1992:75, 86).

This statement is echoed by many other writers. Shutte (2001:1), for instance, speaks about a "moral vacuum, something has gone and nothing has replaced it". Two moral summits have

already been held in South Africa (Oct. 1998 and April 2002) to address the moral decay. At the last meeting a Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) was established.

One way to describe the present situation of moral degeneration is to contrast it with the values or virtues appreciated in traditional African society. Limited space does not allow us to discuss the religious, social, educational and other structures which form the basis of these values (cf. Motlhabi, 1986:92-93).

(A). The virtues and values of traditional African society in traditional Africa a shared morality was the cement of society. It is clear from the agreement in the following lists of traditional values mentioned by different authors: Charity, honesty, hospitality, generosity, loyalty, truthfulness, solidarity, and respect for nature, elders and God (Kinoti, 1992:84). Elsewhere she distinguishes between *personal values*, which helped individuals to be integrated people, like honesty, reliability, generosity, courage, temperance, humanity and justice and *social values* that helped society to remain integrated, like peace, harmony, respect for authority, respect for and fear of supernatural realities (Kinoti, 1992:80). Mojola (1988:30) adds: harmony, peace, friendliness and decency. Apart from those already mentioned, Gyekye (1998:324) mentions the following traditional African moral ideals or virtues: kindness, compassion, benevolence, concern for others – in short, any action or behaviour that is conducive to the promotion of the welfare of others. Elsewhere he gives the following list which imposes on the individual a duty to *B.J. van der Walt In die Skriflig 37(1) 2003:51-71* 53 the community and its members: interdependence, co-operation and reciprocity. (See also Gyekye, 1996.) Motlhabi (1986:91, 95) draws attention to the fact that equivalents of the Ten Commandments, like prohibitions to steal, murder, commit adultery, tell lies or deceive, are encountered in the traditional African concept of a virtuous life. Gelfand (1987:65 ff, 82 ff) not only provides a description of the cardinal values or virtues of the Shona people, but also of the bad qualities. The most important *virtues* are: respect, love, compassion, kindness, generosity, truth, rectitude, humility, self-discipline, forgiveness, mercy, pity, sufficiency, repentance, trust, giving, strength, patience, courage, hard work, unselfishness and the willingness to share whatever one has, no matter how little it may be. The *vices*, rejected by traditional society, were: abuse, lying, deceit, stealing, adultery, drinking, violent quarrelling, pride, jealousy, covetousness, hatred, ingratitude, anger, negligence, weakness, assault, provocation and selfishness. Geldfand also mentions different types of sanctions designed to ensure proper behaviour. One of them is public ridicule to cause shame, guilt and fear and to prevent antisocial behaviour. Kudadjie (1983:171-173, cf. also Motlhabi, 1986:96) discusses the question how morality was enforced in detail, and distinguishes between two main types of sanctions: religious and social.

Religious sanctions included the practice of cursing through magic and the fear of punishment by the ancestors and the gods – the “policemen” of traditional Africa. *Social sanctions* included the following: (1) praising and honouring the good and brave; (2) parental gifts to good, reliable children; (3) confidence between parent and children. Apart from these *positive* social motivations, the following were *negative* social sanctions: (1) Family or clan renunciation; (2) disinheriting; (3) swearing of oaths and curses; (4) ostracism; (5) public disgrace or scandalizing; (6) execution, in the case of notorious criminals, adulterers, seducers, etc.

(B). The present moral crisis: uncertainty and confusion The present situation contrasts sharply with the previous (cf. Mugambi & Nasimiyu-Wasike, 1992). Elderly people lament daily that they are meeting behaviour that shocks them: sexual immorality, dishonesty, corruption, crime, violence and many other things which hasten the old to their graves. Middle-aged people lament about children they fail to *Morality in Africa: Yesterday and today. The reasons for the contemporary crisis* 54 *In die Skriflig* 37(1) 2003:51-71 control. The youth complain of a lack of example from the older members of society. Eitel (1986:1) describes the present African as someone between two worlds: unable to part with the old and not yet of the new world. In a limbo between these two worlds a dichotomy permeates his moral behaviour. Kinoti (1992:73) draws attention to the same phenomenon by way of the following folk tale. A hyena was following the general direction of the smell of meat. But when his path forked into two he was not so sure which one would lead him to the meat. In his uncertainty he put his legs astride the two paths and tried to walk along both. He ended up splitting in the middle! Many other people have written in similar ways about the “divided soul” of Africans.

This uncertainty is evident when Oruka (1990:105, 106) lists the types of values which form the roots of contemporary Kenyan culture: (1) the pure traditional; (2) the pure Christian (or Muslim); (3) the traditional-cum- Christian; (4) the secular West; (5) the secular traditional and (6) the unspecified culture in transition.

The first is a cultural root which results in a cultural attitude which does not go beyond the values of a given ethnicity. The second is a commitment to Christian values ... in defiance of any other values. ... The third is a category which caters for those who believe partly in African traditions and partly in Christianity. The secular West is an unreligious attitude ... The secular traditional is an unreligious and unmagical belief in traditional culture. The unspecified culture in transition is the culture of the urbanised youth in Kenya today – it is what others have begun to refer to as the *sheng culture*.

From the discussion from various authors in African Ethnic groups, it clear that nothing or little is said about language. In most African indigenous towns youth shy away from their indigenous dialect. Religion and culture is better expressed in the indigenous dialect. Until Africa begins to appreciate her heritage moral decadence will be on the increase. Most especially reviving proverbs, which is the epitome of wisdom in Africa. Besides, the holy books of Islam and Christians are full of proverbs. Even a book is captioned the book of Proverbs in the Christian Scriptures.

African Religion, Proverbs, Riddles and Wise Sayings

We have said that proverbs provide us with a rich source of African wisdom. Some of these proverbs are religious. They contain religious beliefs, ideas, morals and warnings. They speak about God. The world, man, human relationships, the nature of things and so on. They are set within a cultural and social environment of the people who have produced them and use them. Because proverbs are short, it is easy to remember them. Many people know a lot of proverbs and are skilled in using them at the right moment for the right purpose. Since proverbs are easily passed on from person to another we find that many of them go back several generations.

Riddles are used mainly for entertainment and stimulating people are thinking. Some of them also contain religious ideas. Wise sayings are often about the world on general, viewed from the religious and moral perspective (Mbiti 1978:24).

Conclusion

Proverb is the savour is an indigenous language of a people, Esan people, Esan people inclusive. The work is done among the Esan people of Edo state to fill the miss gap of the dwindling of proverbs and also serves as a preservation of knowledge Esan proverbs and their morality implication. The paper clarify, proverb, morality and also discussed the relationship between morality, proverb and religion in African. The fact is to show that they flow together in the economy of their effective communication and expression.

Nevertheless the work is not an exhaustive attempt on the subject matter but a jingle for revitalization. Since proverbs are wise sayings anyone who loves wish and be pride of his origin must articulate his people proverbs. Hence the Esan people in particular and Africa in general should revival her heritage all ethnic groups language most especially proverb in order to be firmly rooted as Africans.

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