



THE DIDACTIC ROLE OF IGBO PROVERBS IN CHILD UPBRINGING AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

By

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Abstract

Language plays significant roles in human society. People's way of life is handed down from one generation to another through language. The Igbo language is very rich in the use of proverbs as part of its oral tradition and cultural heritage. For cultural transmission and preservation in Igbo land, proverbs remain powerful and veritable tools. They are believed to provide channels for the intergenerational transfer of moral values from older to younger members of the society. The motivation for this study stems from the growing concern over the gradual erosion of moral values and cultural identity among Igbo children in contemporary society. Anchored on the theories of Didacticism and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the study examines Igbo proverbs in relation to cultural preservation and their pragmatic force as didactic instruments in child upbringing. Data were collected from oral speeches in both formal and informal settings, as well as books and radio broadcasts on proverbs. Proverbs that center on teaching morals were selected, categorized under targeted moral lessons, and then translated into English. The moral lessons were carefully matched to social contexts, with each explained in detail. Findings reveal that proverbs are the bedrock and potential means of inculcating in younger generations the moral lessons that would make them responsible individuals in society. Based on these findings, the study recommends that proverbs be meaningfully employed by all concerned stakeholders in fostering good parenting in Igbo children, thereby sustaining Igbo cultural heritage.

Keywords: Igbo, proverbs, Didacticism, Sociocultural Theory, child upbringing, culture preservation

Introduction

Language has remained a very important instrument in the building of human character. This notion is acknowledged by Nwankwo (2015), who states that language plays a vital role in the formation of human character and child upbringing. Language transmits societal norms and values from one generation to another by inculcating into the child the mores of the people. One of the ways of transmitting these societal values is through proverbs. Proverbs have been identified as a powerful means of inculcating moral values in younger members of society. They constitute a rich linguistic heritage of a people, and the Igbo are no exception. The Igbo largely employ proverbs in their various traditional settings to communicate, educate, and preserve their cultural heritage. According to Nwoga (1976), "a proverb is the wisdom of many and wit of one," suggesting the experience and wisdom of several ages summed up in a single expression. The Igbo love proverbs as a sign of the socio-cultural and historical dignity of their people. For them, proverbs are a way of life, and the force of persuasion and encouragement they embody goes a long way in impacting morals in children. This study is driven by the urgent need to re-evaluate the educational and cultural significance of Igbo proverbs as didactic tools for child upbringing and as mechanisms for safeguarding the continuity of Igbo heritage. It seeks to analyze, and highlight how proverbs function as instruments for moral instruction and how their revival can contribute to sustainable cultural development and value reorientation in contemporary Igbo society.

Nwachukwu-Agbada (2002) observes that the didactic force obviously gives strength and direction to the imaginative construction of proverbs. The imagery evoked may come from everyday life, but it is designed to reflect society's accepted norms in the form of advice, warning,



instruction, or caution. Against this background, the concern of this paper is to explore Igbo proverbs that are designed to teach morals, examine how they are used in context, and demonstrate their contributions to the preservation and promotion of Igbo culture.

Literature Review

Several studies have examined the roles of proverbs in African societies. Egenti and Okoye (2015) investigated Igbo proverbs in conflict resolution and reconciliation, showing their significance in crisis management. Mmadike (2014) analyzed sexist proverbs and noted how they reinforce male domination. Oha (1998), Meshesha (2016), and Chikwelu (2019) explored cultural stereotypes ingrained in proverbs, especially those signaling prejudice against women. Beyond Igbo, scholars such as Falade, Akinlola, and Adejube (2009) studied Yoruba proverbs as instruments of moral and social learning, while Turkur and Hayan (2009) recommended Hausa proverbs for moral inculcation. Oyinloye (2009) further stressed the integration of proverbs in counseling and value transmission.

Despite these contributions, few studies have provided a detailed account of how Igbo proverbs specifically function as didactic tools for raising responsible children with a direct link to cultural preservation. While Oboko (2020) examined proverbs that teach respect and honor from a pragmatic point of view, this study goes further by identifying, categorizing, and analyzing proverbs under targeted moral lessons. It therefore fills the gap in scholarship by explicitly connecting the didactic role of proverbs in child upbringing with the broader project of cultural preservation.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Didacticism and Sociocultural Theory. Didacticism, which dates back to classical antiquity and is associated with Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and Horace, emphasizes that art and literature must not only entertain but also instruct and morally guide. In African oral traditions, this principle is reflected in the use of proverbs, which are concise, memorable sayings employed to transmit ethical standards and social values. Igbo proverbs are not mere linguistic ornaments but instruments of correction, persuasion, and moral guidance (Okoroafor, 2016; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2002).

Sociocultural Theory, propounded by Vygotsky (1978), complements this view by emphasizing that learning is socially mediated and culturally situated. Vygotsky holds that children acquire higher mental functions through interaction with more knowledgeable members of their community, with language serving as the mediating tool. Within the Igbo cultural context, proverbs are such mediational tools. They enable children to internalize societal norms and values, thus becoming culturally competent and morally responsible individuals.

Didacticism and Sociocultural Theory together explain how Igbo proverbs function as both didactic instruments and sociocultural artifacts. They teach morals while simultaneously preserving and transmitting the cultural identity of the Igbo people.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is built on three interrelated pillars:

Proverbs as Didactic Instruments: Proverbs guide behavior through lessons on humility, respect, diligence, and caution. For example, the Igbo proverb “*Nganga buru ụzọ ọdịda esoro ya n’azụ*” (Pride goes before a fall) discourages arrogance and promotes humility.

Child Upbringing as a Cultural Process: In Igbo society, child upbringing is communal. Proverbs are employed as tools for correction, encouragement, and discipline, enabling children to learn morals in dignified ways.

Culture Preservation through Oral Tradition: Proverbs serve as cultural archives that safeguard Igbo philosophy, worldview, and moral systems. By learning and using proverbs, children acquire linguistic competence and inherit the epistemological foundations of their culture.

These three elements are cyclical: proverbs instruct moral lessons → moral lessons shape child upbringing → child upbringing preserves culture → preserved culture sustains proverbs. Proverbs



serve as didactic tools that shape moral upbringing, which in turn ensures cultural continuity, sustaining the proverbs themselves. This framework highlights that proverbs are not mere sayings but dynamic instruments for moral development, cultural identity, and heritage preservation.

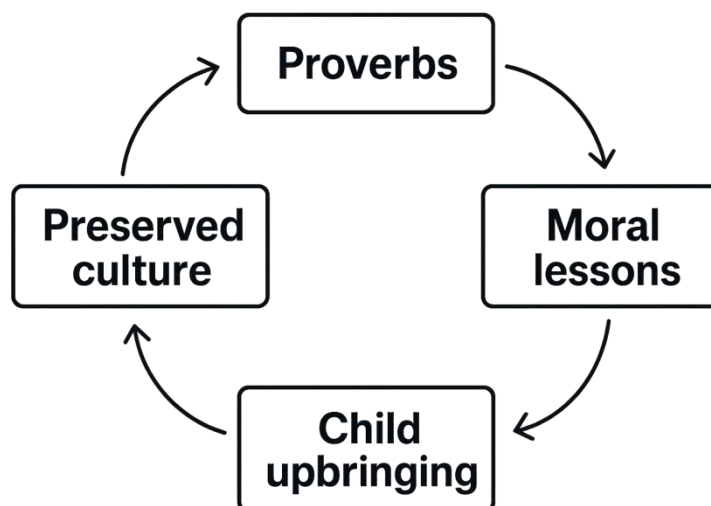


Figure 1: Diagram depicting the cyclical relationship among proverbs, child upbringing, and cultural preservation.

Methodology

Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources, and the choice of data restricted to proverbs that have didactic function. A total of thirty proverbs relevant to our topic of study were collected and strategized under various moral lessons meant to be achieved. Information was extracted from the speeches of elders in Onitsha and environs both in formal and non-formal settings. A famous radio programme on “Igbo proverbs” by Rev. Fr. Dr. F.O.F. Onwudufor (Okenye) in Radio Sapientia, Onitsha between 8.00pm and 9.00pm every Sunday was constantly listened to, and the presenter also visited in person and interrogated.

Books on Igbo proverbs; Onwudufor, (2008) and Onwudufor, (2018) were also consulted including other Igbo texts that focus on teaching morals to children, and vital proverbs that are relevant to this study such as Onyekonwu, (1980) were collected. The data so strategized were translated into English and their literal and intended meanings given too, including their contextual applications. Each of the moral lessons assigned to particular strata is clearly explained before the listing of other proverbs associated to it.

The Didactic role of Igbo Proverbs in Child Upbringing

In literature and language studies, Didacticism is both a theory and a function. As a theory, it posits that all forms of communication, including stories, proverbs, poems, and songs, should serve to teach or reinforce moral and social values. As a function, it describes the role of texts or expressions that instruct, advise, warn, or correct behavior. Didactic options can come in different forms such as flogging, apprenticeship or proverbs. Behaviour of a child determines the didactic option to apply. Proverbs as a didactic option can come in the form of admonition, praise, scolding, warning, instruction etc. Igbo as a people has a special way of using proverbs to achieve a particular purpose in their everyday life. Below are some Igbo proverbs categorized under the appropriate targeted ethical values with their literal and intended meanings given in both English and Igbo: Here, special attention is paid to the context where the proverbs are applied.



First Moral Lesson: Advice against Pride (*Mpako/Nganga*)

One displays pride when he places himself higher above what he actually is.

An Igbo adage goes, '*Nganga buru ụzọ ọdịda esoro ya n'azu*' which means that pride goes before a fall.

Pride attracts many vices like disrespect, excessive quest for possessions etc.

Igbo people discourage children not to be excessively proud in order to avoid its dangerous result.

They advise children against the unhealthy attitude with proverbs such as:

Igbo Proverb: *Hapụ mkpị ka o soro onye nwe ya na-agba afụ ọnụ, e mechaa ka a mara onye ga-akpụ ibe ya gaa ahịa.*

English Translation: Let the he-goat continue to grow beard alongside his owner, on the market day, it shall be decided who will drag the other to the market place.

Intended Meaning: *Mgbe ihe mmadụ ji karị ibe ya dapụtara, onye ọbụla aghaghị imata onye ọ na-eso na onye ọ kwesiri inye nsopuru.*

English Translation: There are different occasions for one to really know who is more capable than the other.

Context: It can be applied in a situation where a son is neglecting the father either because he is not educated like himself or that he is more buoyant than the father.

Second Moral Lesson: Caution/Warning (*Idọ aka na ntị*)

Caution/Warning helps one to maintain good behavior as well as being careful in doing some things.

With caution one can avert an impending trouble.

Caution and admonition is left for elders and those who have more experience than others.

In Igbo, parents and elders adopt proverbs that give warning when a child or less experienced person is derailing from the right part.

They use such proverbs as:

Igbo Proverb: *Onye atụ gburu nna ya adighi ekwe eji mpi atụ anụ mmanya.*

English Translation: A person whose father was killed by a buffalo does not accept to drink with buffalo's horn.

Intended Meaning: *Ọ bụ naanị onye nzuzu na-ekwe ka ihe butere ọdachi na mbụ mekwaa ya nke ugboro abuo.*

Context: This proverb can be used in situation whereby children that have not experienced a war are warning up to drag for a community land that caused war in the past, the elders can use it to warn and admonish them against the impending destruction.

Third Moral Lesson: Respect and Honour (*Ugwu na Nsopuru*)

Showing respect and honour for the elders is a good virtue.

It is quite beneficial to the society at large when this attitude is inculcated in children.

In Igbo communities, parents and elders make sure that the younger ones learn this moral value. This is actualized using proverbs such as:

Igbo Proverb: *Onye fee eze, eze eruo ya.*

English Translation: If one worships a king, he will definitely become a king.

Intended meaning: *Onye ọbụla na-asopuru okenye ne-enweta ugwu na nsopuru n' aka ndi ọ toro.*

English Translation: One who shows respect to elders will equally receive respect from others.

Context: It can be used when a child is not obedient and respectful to the parents.

Fourth Moral Lesson: Diligence and Slot (*Igba mbọ na adighi ike ọrụ*)



An Igbo adage says, '*Aka aja aja na-ebute ọnụ mmanụ mmanụ*'. This means that diligence puts food on the table.

There is no dignity for lazy man in Igbo community because they believe strictly that it is when you work that you will eat. Equal position is given to a foolish man and a lazy man in Igbo community. To raise responsible children in their community, Igbo people make sure that children are taught that hard work brings success and honour. The following proverb is such that can be used to inculcate this moral value in them:

Igbo Proverb: *Ọ bụ naanị ụkwụ gbara apitị na-eri ihe gburu ya.*

English Translation: It is only that leg that is soiled with mud that enjoys whatever it likes.

Intended Meaning: *Onye tara ahụhụ kpokoba akụ mgbe ike di ya, o nweghị mgbe nri na-akọ n'ụlọ ya.*

English Translation: There is great reward for hard work.

Context: It can be applied to a situation where a child chooses to be idle and likes eating from other people's proceeds.

Fifth Moral Lesson: Praise and Encouragement (*Otito na Igba Ume*)

In Igbo community, it is said that when a hero is praised for his great fist, he sets to do more (*e too dike na nke o mere o mee ọzọ*).

When a child does what is right, he deserves to be praised and encouraged to do more.

Igbo people can use proverbs such as the one we have below to praise and encourage good performance in children:

Igbo Proverb: *Ọ gbọrọ ihe ewu na- eri.*

English Translation: He gathers the right grass for the goats.

Intended Meaning: *O mere ihe n'usoro o si kwesi.*

English Translation: *He performed excellently well.*

Context: It can be applied where a child does something exactly the way it should be.

Findings

The analysis shows that proverbs remain central to moral upbringing in Igbo society. They serve as figurative but persuasive tools for transmitting values such as humility, caution, respect, diligence, and encouragement. Proverbs also reinforce communal responsibility for child upbringing, where every elder plays a role in moral instruction. Ultimately, proverbs serve as cultural archives, ensuring that Igbo values, philosophy, and traditions are preserved for future generations.

Conclusion

Igbo proverbs are more than linguistic embellishments; they are cultural instruments for moral development and social continuity. Anchored on the principles of Didacticism and Sociocultural Theory, this study demonstrates that proverbs play a dual role: they instruct children in ethical behavior while also preserving Igbo cultural identity. By categorizing proverbs into moral lessons, the study highlights how proverbs function systematically in child upbringing and cultural preservation.

Families, schools, and religious institutions should deliberately employ proverbs in teaching morals to children. Scholars should further investigate proverbs across other Nigerian languages for documentation and cross-cultural comparison. Radio and digital platforms should be used to popularize Igbo proverbs among younger generations.



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