

PROVERBS IN THE CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION OF CHILDREN IN EBOM COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Proverbs are an essential part of African oral traditions, serving as vessels of wisdom, cultural norms, and moral instruction. This paper examined the role of proverbs in the cultural identity formation of children in the Ebom community, a rural settlement in Cross River State, Nigeria. It sought to ascertain how proverbs could be used to convey wise sayings, educate, and develop the children's intellectual capacity. It also highlighted the declining use of proverbs among younger generations due to the erosion of traditional practices and the impact of modernity. The study was anchored on the sociocultural theory. Qualitative descriptive research design was used for the study. Data were collected through interviews with 10 elders from Ebom community. Secondary sources of data from existing literature and cultural documents were also in used. The study revealed that proverbs were used directly or indirectly as tool for bringing out inherent traits that runs through a particular group of people; the Ebom people were culturally unified with such traits as hard work, tolerance, perseverance, politeness, ethical norms and common sense. It recommended the revitalization of proverbs in family settings, schools, and communal gatherings to restore and reinforce indigenous identity among young people.

Introduction

The Bahumono tribe is one of the ethnic groups residing in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Within the Bahumono communities, there are variations of language, with the Kohumono language being the most prominent. Proverbs are succinct, metaphorical expressions that convey collective wisdom, social values, and life philosophies of a people. They are pivotal in communication, especially in African societies where oral traditions are predominant.

Cultural identity formation in children begins early and is influenced by language, traditions, and communal interactions. Proverbs serve as linguistic tools through which cultural expectations are internalized. As children grow within the Ebom community, exposure to proverbs not only sharpens their cognitive abilities but also instills a sense of belonging and cultural pride (Achebe, 1958; Finnegan, 2012).

However, there is a noticeable decline in the use of proverbs among the younger generation. Many children and even youths in Ebom today can neither interpret nor apply indigenous proverbs in communication. This decline is attributed to the erosion of cultural practices, westernization, formal education systems that neglect indigenous knowledge, and reduced interactions with elders who traditionally transmit such knowledge orally. Ong'onda (2016) observes a significant decline in the use of Proverbs among the youth in Kenya, and attributes this to factors such as westernization, modern education systems that marginalized indigenous language and oral traditions, and limited interaction between youth and elders.

This oversight presents a research gap that this paper aims to fill. Proverbs play a vital role in shaping children's cultural identity by transmitting values, Morales and traditions. In Ebom community, proverbs have historically been used by elders and parents to instill discipline, respect, communal consciousness, and moral responsibility. However, the influence of modernization, formal education, globalization, and the rise of social media have contributed to a decline in the use and understanding among the younger generation. Today, many children in Ebom rarely hear or use Proverbs in conversations, as English expressions, social media slangs, and popular culture dominate communication. The younger generation often perceives proverbs as outdated, complex, or irrelevant to contemporary life. Consequently, this has weakened cultural identity and created a gap in intergenerational knowledge transfer. While some scholars and cultural activists have attempted to document proverbs from the region (Okolo, 2007; Effiong, 2019), their works did not specifically address how these proverbs function in the cultural identity formation of children in the Ebom community. They focused more on linguistic and literary analysis rather than sociocultural impacts, hence, the need for this study.

Research Questions

1. What roles do proverbs play in the cultural identity formation of children in Ebom community?
2. To what extent have modernization and changing cultural values influenced the decline in the use of proverbs among children in the community?
3. What strategies can be adopted to revive and sustain the use of proverbs as a tool for cultural transmission among children in Ebom community?

Review of Related Literature

Proverbs are brief traditional expressions that convey wisdom, guidance, or universal truths concerning life or human behavior. These expressions are frequently handed down through generations and embody the cultural beliefs and experiences of a specific society. Mieder (2014) describes proverbs as succinct and memorable phrases that encapsulate wisdom, advice, or universal truths about human behavior or life. Proverbs reflect the basic truths of life that embody the ethical and moral principles of a community (Taylor, 2003, p.18). The truths found in proverbs are not necessarily logical, a priori, or intuitive: they often stem from tangible experiences based on people's interactions with life, their relationships, and their engagement with the natural world (Yusuf, 1997, p. 120).

Proverbs are concise expressions that carry their own distinct meanings. While they are grammatically structured as sentences, they function as utterances in a semantic sense. They can also be considered cultural texts that embody a universality of meaning and interpretations,

resonating with both individual and collective awareness of their users, and thus serve as signs from different cultures. To facilitate a meaningful conversation about this topic, it is essential to grasp the other crucial concepts of culture and identity.

According to Krefting (1991), culture encompasses the norms, values, and behavioral patterns that guide individuals in their interactions with others and their surroundings. Esimaje, Masagbor, and Ezirim (2014) characterize culture as a spectrum of human activities that are acquired rather than instinctual and are passed down from one generation to the next through various learning methods. It is also viewed as the foundation of connections arising from all socially constructed elements, such as practices, competencies, ideas, customs, values, norms, institutions, objectives, and the fundamental rules of specific members within a community. These points suggest that the culture we are part of significantly shapes our perspectives on life, which in turn influences the types of proverbs used in different situations.

Cultural identity can be understood as the connection with and perceived acceptance into a community that shares common symbols and meanings (Collier & Thomas, 1988). This indicates that cultural identity develops through communication, allowing individuals to learn, affirm, and reconfigure their sense of belonging. From this viewpoint, cultural identity is not solely inherited but is actively shaped through interactions with family, peers, and broader society (Moscardino et al., 2025).

Proverbs are an important means for the transmission of culture, which reflects much of people's varied attitudes towards their surroundings. (Finnegan, 2012). In African societies, proverbs are not mere stylistic elements but are integral to the transmission of indigenous knowledge. They are often used in oral storytelling, conflict resolution, instruction, and rites of passage. As Achebe (1958) famously noted, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten," which makes them indispensable in African communication. Akanbi (2015) observes that proverbs not only reflect the linguistic richness of the cultural but also serve as powerful tools for teaching morality, respect and communal ethics. Thus Akinmade (2012) surmises that proverbs are potent vehicle for culture dissemination from one generation to another. In his opinion, it is difficult to find any human situation, agony, sorrow, joy, behaviour or distress that a research proverbial saying would not offer solutions to.

Within the community, there is always a shared understanding that comes from the combination of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours that have provided the foundational base for such a unique heritage that has to be jealously guarded. Hence, the elders, who are the custodians of proverbs in Ebom, do not shy away from using proverbs and at when due. The Ebom people are culturally conscious of their norms; hence, at every gathering and situation, the elderly ones do not hesitate to ditch out norms and ethics that would help impart virtues in to the

younger ones who are believed to be leaders of tomorrow, hence this axiom: *Ebom: Fun bhara wor doh refed Eng: Children are leaders of tomorrow.*

Most of the proverbs are culturally laden with advice, information and warning and which are easily understood by the hearers even though they are said in a disparaged manner. The cultural lesson is taught in an ironical way so the nonspeakers of the language would be at a loss in understanding the messages contained in the proverbs. Esimaje, Masagbor and Ezirim (2014) confirm the above that the boundaries of one's language are the boundaries of one's world; hence, proverbs reflect cultural meanings and reality and are therefore revelatory of the society's culture.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Sociocultural Theory. Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) is a framework that emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction and cultural context in the development of cognition, language, and identity. According to Vygotsky, children do not develop in isolation but through active engagement with their environment, particularly through interaction with more knowledgeable members of society such as parents, elders, teachers, and peers.

At the core of this theory is the belief that language is a primary tool for thought and cultural transmission. Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - the range between what a child can do independently and what he can achieve with guidance. Proverbs, as part of a community's linguistic heritage, function within this zone when elders use them to instruct, guide, or correct children during their formative years.

Vygotsky emphasizes that learning occurs through the use of cultural tools. In the Ebom context, proverbs are cultural tools that encapsulate the community's wisdom, values, and norms. Through repeated exposure and guided use, children begin to internalize these values and adopt them as part of their cultural identity.

Proverbs are traditionally passed down by the elders during storytelling, folktales, communal gatherings, or moral instruction. These are all forms of social interaction that are central to Vygotsky's theory. The decline in these interactions due to modernization and western influence explains why many children in Ebom today are unfamiliar with traditional proverbs and, by extension, disconnected from cultural norms.

According to Vygotsky, language shapes thought and self-perception. When children engage with proverbs, they not only learn moral lessons but also begin to see themselves in relation to the collective values of their community thereby developing a sense of identity rooted in culture.

In Vygotsky's view, learning is most effective when adults provide "scaffolding" support that helps the child move from dependent to independent use of knowledge. In this study, elders

using proverbs act as scaffolds, helping children to understand complex ideas, social expectations, and cultural roles.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory aligns perfectly with the aims of this study, offering a robust framework for understanding how proverbs function as tools of cultural education and identity formation. The decline in the use of proverbs among children in the Ebom community can therefore be seen as not only a linguistic loss but also a disruption in the cultural scaffolding process that supports identity development. Reviving this process requires intentional reintroduction of proverbs within meaningful social contexts that engage children actively.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. The population of the study comprised members of Ebom community in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Especially elders who are custodians of indigenous knowledge. Ten elderly participants were purposely selected from the ages of 40 and above who were members of Ebom Community and were knowledgeable in the use of proverbs. A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit elders' view on the role of Proverbs in identity formation and the decline in usage. Data were analyzed thematically. The transcripts from interviews were read repeatedly to identify patterns and meanings related to role of Proverbs in cultural identity formation, decline in the use of Proverbs and strategies for revitalization.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Ebom proverbs are rich sources of philosophy, principles and concepts that speak of people's world view and belief systems. These proverbs seem to have been derived from everyday human experiences including family life, culture, hunting, animal husbandry, social interactions, health and disease, religious life, festivals and other experiences which provided many of the settings from which the raw materials of Proverbs were obtained.

The Ebom people have managed to sustain their culture including the use of Proverbs even in the face of the massive onslaught of globalization. Proverbs therefore still features in the daily lives, interaction and communication. During important occasions such as marriage ceremonies, community gathering such as festivals and in conversations especially involving elderly persons in the community, Proverbs are taken as a mark of wisdom and evidence of good speech making. Below are examples of Ebom proverbs:

Advice

Ebom: *Etan gwoh zereh rhetor ikperezuma enam bhah isah a iyoho*

English: The disobedient grasshopper usually ends up in the gizzard of a fowl

Implication: It is the parent's responsibility to advise their children on how to live useful lives for their benefit and that of the society. A child who refuses to heed advice will end up in danger.

Ebom: *Itum gi inam bhah izoi onor ozeng Guah remai emamaior*

English: All lizards lie prostrate; no one knows which of them suffers a bellyache.

Implication: This proverb tries to show that sometimes it may be difficult to establish a casual connection between physical characteristics of an individual and his psychological dispositions. Again, the proverb appeals to caution in decision-making as physical appearance sometimes leads to deception.

Unity

Ebom: *Iwah sievuna vune ovavoi ama atang azirikpe.*

English: When broom sticks are put together, they sweep the environment better.

Implication: When people are united, their solutions are one and brings out a good result. This also means that together we will succeed. It also shows that when people come together they can move mountains and that a single person cannot decide over a group when a decision is to be taken. With such proverbs, children begin to ponder on what the proverb is all about and since the truth is evident in them, they live with these words of wisdom and grow up to become useful members of their various families and community.

Ebom: *Onor a efad emevoi ota rehonor.*

English: *A one man squad cannot win a battle.*

Implication: This proverb encourages children to work together to achieve results.

Respect

Ebom: *Gwan gwan evoiibor oyai ekhaha oroh oshi ara bhanohum.*

English: Any child that knows how to wash his hands clean, will eat with elders.

Implication: If a child knows how to behave and respect elders, will definitely eat with elders. This implies that, if any child is obedient and cooperate, he should then be treated with honour, made to sit in the council of elders, and made to enjoy what they are enjoying. The elder will guide the younger person in avoiding pitfalls in life and also assist him to succeed in life. The act of submission and humility is needed by the present-day youth.

Ebom: *Guaguane oguoma ozeng, onotum baozeng etoh.*

English: A child may walk fast but the elders know the way.

Implication: This means that the wisdom of the elders cannot be compared with the actions of the youths. This proverb portrays respect in such a way that if the youths cannot respect the elders, one day their assistance will be needed by the youths because they have the wise ideas.

Morals

Ebom: *Guah guarah remare odam; ova obah Oro ozep obasi anta orom omoyina.*

English: A lady lacks good character; she claims that destiny avoids her of a husband.

Implication: This implies that moral uprightness and character soundness is the chief determinant of success in life. It underscores the importance of morality to individual and the polity.

Ebom: *Ikoh etoto itama bhah remar adonoh*

English: It is from the home that we take fashion and trends to the town

Implication: What this means is that behaviour (good or bad) is learnt from home. Worthy of home is that Ebom people have clear idea of a difference between house and home, as home is taken to be synonymous to family. The proverb is usually said for people to shun bad habit from home. It shows the kind of emphasis that the Ebom place on the importance of family institution.

Warning

Ebom: *Sa aku bhah ohoroze kasen izen o wonoh*

English: If a person stays too long on faeces, he/she will be harassed by flies

Implication: This proverb derives its meaning from the traditional concept of village latrine as a dirty place where a person is confronted with and harassed by different types of flies. The relevant meaning, therefore, is that if anyone has a prolonged stay at home, or over stay in a situation, that same situation will make him vulnerable to various assaults and insults especially from other people and inconveniences just like a person who overstays in a dirty latrine. The proverb therefore warns children of idleness and procrastination.

Ebom: *Gwan sa osedu otah bhah rosok, onotum sa osedu otah kpeizuma.*

English: When a child falls, he looks at the front; when an elder falls, He looks at the back.

Implication: The above proverb shows that when the child falls, he actually seeks for a helper to raise him up; but when the elder falls, he considers and ponders on what made him to fall. This proverb shows that elders are guided by experience. They are wiser than children by reason of their experience. Elders actually live by experience.

Ebom: *Emankpa a guan san eyeh, ere eyeh ivon oh.*

English: We don't see the lips of a child but the leg.

Implication: This proverb portrays children as gossip, as agents of errands running, talkative and have no secrets or do not keep secrets. The proverb warns against children interrupting adults speech or revealing or talking about anything they see or hear. It addresses that a child should be faster in running errands than in interrupting adults speech.

Tolerance

Ebom: *Ewuneh oji omor rajuno.*

English: Silence brings peace

Implication: This means that when you tolerate one another, peace is restored but where there is intolerance there will be quarrelling and fighting.

Ebom: *Ewuneh oji odam ota rehonor.*

English: Silence is better than war or tolerating one another brings harmony.

Implication: When one refuses to react to issues but holds tight to himself it ceased war. Through this proverb, children imbibe at the early stage of their lives the need for tolerance in order to live in peace with one another. From the above proverb, Ebom children are expected to be well behaved in the society because of the experiences passed to them from their forefathers.

Obedience

Ebom: *Guan eteagueh bhah eyong San obana ntaraoyeng evons giekue bha rosoh.*

English: A child does not lift the father up to see herds of animals from afar.

Implication: This proverb makes children objects of obedience, weakness, and submissiveness. It means children are to remain mute and commit to all what the adults are saying. Children are also not strong enough to lift an adult up.

Laziness

Ebom: *Ekpevem enang onor oyusu*

English: Laziness causes stealing

Ebom: *Ekpevem ovonoshi omoyie*

English: Laziness cannot put food on your table

Implication: This means that when one is lazy, he or she cannot achieve success. This proverb is applied during planting season and it emphasises the need to be hardworking when one is young in order not to beg or steal.

Hardwork

Ebom: *Guan guan okpah rofem Oro ashi renendeme.*

English: A hardworking child eats the best.

Implication: A hardworking child that is always around the mother eats the best part of the meal. The mother reserves the best for him/her.

Ebom: *Sara otom Anang oven ama shi.*

English: If you do not work, you cannot eat.

Implication: This proverb explains the cause of hunger to be laziness. This proverb challenges the youth to work hard in various endeavours by eschewing laziness and other crimes. When one is lazy, he/she can never achieve success.

Discipline:

Ebom: *Sarah ejah afah apawah ofuneh.*

English: If you are not discipline, you are bound to make mistakes

Ebom: *Sa akpeh oven bha okpara guoapa ayena enendeme.*

English: Learning from your mistakes makes you succeed.

Implication: This proverb explains that every child should be disciplined because if they are not disciplined they will grow up to know nothing. This means that a child should not be unguided but should be controlled in order not to be useless in life.

Proverbs express the collective wisdom of a people, reflecting their thinking, values and behaviour. According to Ogundokun (2015) all proverbs share the wisdom of previous generations; they help to classify and recognize culture as it relates to a people. In Ebom culture, certain proverbs are used to inculcate social and moral values to regulate relationships in society. Examples could be selected for children's lessons on various topics targeting virtues like respect, unity, tolerance, determination, honesty, honour, self-control, cooperation, hard work, discipline, forgiveness, truth and appreciation for one's family.

Ebom children can become active participants in events in their community through creative oral and literary activities because proverbs are useful in shaping young minds and cultivating the use of spoken words to recapture and preserve the history and culture of the people. They learn about the environment through the contents of proverbs as indigenous knowledge sources and they play a vital role in the preservation of the people's history and culture.

Discussion of Findings

Interviews conducted with elders in the Ebom community reveal deep insights into the traditional role and current status of proverbs in cultural education and identity formation. Data obtained revealed three major themes:

The role of Proverbs in cultural identity formation

The elders unanimously emphasized that proverbs were historically central to child upbringing, moral instruction, and the reinforcement of societal values. According to them, proverbs serve as a cultural compass used in disciplining children, advising youth, resolving conflicts, and communicating wisdom in indirect yet powerful ways. One elder explained, "In our time, you couldn't grow up without knowing proverbs. Even before a child knew how to speak properly, they already heard these sayings in stories and from parents correcting them."

Another noted that proverbs were not just linguistic expressions but tools for shaping behaviour and instilling communal identity. This aligns with Finnegan's (2012) argument that African oral traditions, particularly Proverbs, act as moral compasses and reinforce community identity.

Similarly, Yankak (2012) underscores that proverbs embody cultural wisdom, which, when taught to children, nurtures a sense of belonging and continuity.

Decline in the use of Proverbs due to modernization

A dominate concern raised in the interviews was the declining use of Proverbs among young people. The elders expressed concern over the drastic decline in the use and understanding of proverbs among children and youth today. They attributed this decline to several factors, most notably modernization, urban influence and growing dominance of Western education and media. One elder remarked, "Children now spend more time on phones and social media than with their grandparents. They hear English stories, not our own"

The decline is further worsened by the reduced use of the native language at home, as many parents now communicate with their children in English or Pidgin. The elders observed that children often regarded traditional expressions as outdated or irrelevant, a mindset reinforced by school environments that prioritize Western content over indigenous knowledge. This finding resonates with Olatunji (2020) and Eze (2021), who observe that globalization and urbanization disrupted the oral transmission of indigenous knowledge systems, thereby eroding children's cultural identity. This also corroborates Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1968), which emphasizes that children learn cultural tools, including language and symbolic systems, through guided interaction with "more knowledgeable others". When these knowledgeable others abandon or reduce their use of proverbs, children lose access to the cultural scaffolding necessary for identity development. The weakening of this Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) leaves children culturally detached, thereby confirming earlier studies that found diminishing oral traditions among African youth (Nyoni, 2019).

Strategies for Rivival and Cultural Transmission

Despite the decline, the elders emphasized that proverbs still hold strong relevance, especially in promoting values such as respect, humility, honesty, and responsibility. They expressed a strong desire to see efforts made to revive the use of proverbs in children's upbringing. Participants suggested introducing proverbs into school curricula, embedding them in storytelling practices and encouraging parents to use them in family conversations, and promoting them in cultural events, festivals and even digital platforms. One elder noted.

"If we don't pass our proverbs to children, tomorrow they will know only foreign sayings, and we will have no cultural language left."

This resonates with Nwachukwu (2021), who stresses the need for deliberate integration of indigenous communication forms in cultural education to strengthen children's identity. UNESCO (2019) also emphasizes safeguarding intangible cultural heritage such as oral traditions to ensure intergenerational continuity.

Therefore, the findings point to a broad consensus that revival is both necessary and possible if proverbs are institutionalized in family, educational and community structures. These findings align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which posits that learning and identity formation occur within a cultural and social context. The absence of proverbs in the daily interactions of children effectively limits their exposure to cultural tools that are essential for developing a sense of belonging and moral understanding.

Conclusion

From the findings, it is concluded that proverbs play a central role in cultural identity formation among children in the Ebom community and they are tools. They are tools of education and identity formation.

Recommendations

Schools in the Ebom community should incorporate proverbs into classroom instruction, especially in language, literature, and civic education. Teachers can use proverbs to teach life lessons and encourage cultural appreciation. The community should organize periodic cultural nights or storytelling sessions where elders share folktales and proverbs with children. This fosters both entertainment and learning in culturally meaningful ways.

Parents should be encouraged to speak the local language at home and use proverbs in everyday correction and advice. This helps children to internalize values in natural settings. Community-based media, such as local radio programs or WhatsApp storytelling groups, can be used to share proverbs and their meanings. A compiled booklet or digital archive of Ebom proverbs could also help preserve them.

Youth organizations in the community can hold competitions or drama presentations centred around proverbs to promote learning and creativity while preserving tradition.

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