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## **RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE OF ANNANG PROVERBS**

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### **Abstract**

Proverbs (*Ufied*) provide an understanding of the way of life in Africa because historical materials are inferred from it. It is a window into the cultural values of a people. In time past as well as in contemporary times, proverbs have had a great influence on the lifestyles of many people mainly through religion and culture. One of the problems is that uncertainty surrounds the process by which *ufied* (proverbs) was created. Therefore, the aim of this work is to assess the religious importance of Annang proverbs as a life force in spoken and written dialects of Annang people of contemporary times. The historical phenomenology method was employed in order to achieving the aim of this study. It is therefore recommended that the print and television media are educative channels and as such should be made to feed from a reservoir of a well established and documented Annang literature.

## Introduction

In all parts of the Continent and the New World, numerous collections of proverbs indicate how important an element it is in Negro folklore (Simon & Ottenberg, 1975:452). In Old Testament times proverbs was extant, hence Okwesili & Ume-Okoli (2006:30) note that in the “Old Testament Wisdom Literature or Books like Job, Proverbs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, do contain synthetic poetry and wise sayings”. To this end, Hornby (1974:684) defines proverb as “a popular short saying, with words of advice or warning”. The fact remains that for a proverb to become popular, it must appear outstandingly wise and to remain popular, it must in truth contain enduring wisdom. In fact, Nwadike (2009:4) simply put that “proverb is a form of speech which is pregnant with meaning. More often than not, it confounds the unintelligent and even the intelligent who is not used to the form”.

*Ufied* (Proverbs), tales and fables which already exist by hundreds and even thousands are also continually produced by the young and old (Burton, 1969:xi). According to Burton (1965) “in 1865, a collection of 2,268 proverbs abound from various ethnic groups in Africa, including the Ibibio, Ewe, Ga, Twi and Yoruba”. To buttress this fact, Noah (1994:65) states that, “Akwa Ibom feature among the earliest collections of the genre in Africa”.

In Annang traditional society, the origin of proverbs is said to have been bequeathed by known persons who were often quoted by their contemporaries (Anthony, 2014, Personal Communication). Consequently, with the passage of time, it became impossible for successive generations to recall such names. Given this fact, nearly all the proverbs are used without reference to the contributors. In other words, most of the proverbs have now existed for so long that their authorship can no longer be ascertained and thus have become the property of the community. Proverbs were drawn from the wide gamut of Annang cultural experience such as: attitudes, values, emotions, perceptions natural elements, thoughts and feelings (Umanah, 2014:114). Again proverbs originated from true manifestations of repeated actions of persons, animals and the natural environment carefully observed by the sane and insane.

The mentally deranged made statements that were very meaningful and such statements were incorporated by the community as proverbs thus:

- i. *Irad akewo ke anenem agwo iramma ade ke akpon isang.*

(A mad person said that it is sweet to be mad but that it entails much walk).

This means that with all the liberty a mad person has in going to places, there are hurdles of inability to cover all distances. Therefore, in life there is a price to pay in order to realize one's dream with all the lofty ideas that one may have.

ii. *Irad akewo ke iko arisuk ibaba ke arorobot.*

(A mad person said that there would continue to be conflicts and problems in the world).

This followed the fact that even at the lunatic state of a mad person people still in one way or the other give him/her trouble. This proverb informs people that no matter how they try to live in peace with others, there would continue to be misunderstandings and conflicts.

Therefore, there is a degree of moral light observable in Annang proverbs rendering them peculiarly interesting and gives them real value in connection with the inquiry into the moral government of Annang people. Annang people value the ability to speak well and oratory ability, and also using proverbs is highly desirable especially among the leaders (Farb, 1974). These proverbs were taught by the older generations of the family or community who, by reason of age and long experience could remember seemingly endless numbers of these expressions and sayings. Thus, the folk wisdom, social skills and moral codes of the community were transferred in easily digestible doses to the younger generation through *ufied* (proverbs) which they received and learnt pleasantly. Hence, proverbs are therefore applied in various spheres of human existence and endeavour. Proverbs portray wisdom and in our society as in all Africa, this attribute is closely associated with old age and they tend to be considered the apanage of the elders. The use of proverbs is applicable to women and the younger generation as they also exercise the virtues of the veterans.

Uncertainty surrounds the process by which *ufied* (proverbs) was created, or the various hurdles through which each had to pass to gain acceptability as "wise-saying", and a place of immortality in Annang culture. Undoubtedly, not all the old *ufied* have survived to this day. This being so only the wisest and the best brains of the community must have positively contributed to the remnants of the parts that are valued, which have survived to revive the Annang language. Also, which proverbs are still in use or gone out of use and the inability of people to have an

accurate acquaintance with the verbal forms in which its ideas find utterance, is another problem. The matter of utilizing proverbs equally brings up the problem of understanding their meaning.

Therefore, the task of this work is to examine proverbs as a life force in spoken and written dialects of Annang people of contemporary times, show how proverbs of a people reveal their attitude towards the various stimuli in their world environment and how the ancient perceived order in nature. The structure of this paper is arranged thus: a general introduction, brief historical background of the people of Annang, religious proverbs, importance of Annang proverbs, recommendations and conclusion.

To pursue and achieve this goal, constructive oral interviews and references to written and existing works on the subject were used. The historical phenomenology was used since it is a written description of a particular culture, its customs, beliefs and behaviours which statistical analysis would fail to measure, as it involves descriptions, views or opinions of the people.

This work would help the reader to really understand the application and usage of proverbs in the right situation. It would further contribute a bulk of knowledge to scholarship, provide useful information and open grounds for further research on Annang proverbs.

### **Brief Historical Background of the People of Annang**

Annang land forms a significant cultural presence in South Southern Nigeria. It is one of the indigenous ethnic groups of this geo-political zone found in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The 2006 census estimates their population at 1.1million (Census, 2006;1). The Annang ethnic group is divided into eight grass root political entities called Local Government Areas. They are: Abak, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Ika, Ikot Ekpene, Obot Akara, Oruk Anam and Ukanafun Local Government Areas (Essien, 2005:13). According to Ekanem (2006) & Enang (1982) “situated within the Cross River basin, between latitudes  $4^{\circ}.25^1$  and  $7^{\circ}$  North and longitudes  $7^{\circ}.15^1$  and  $9^{\circ}.30^1$  East, Annang is bounded on the North and West by the Igbo while the Ibibio make up its Eastern and Southern neighbours.”

However, “for some the Annang people have always lived where they are living now from the beginning of time” (Ekanem, 2006:26). Others contend that they migrated from somewhere to their present homeland (Essien, 1990; Udondata, 1993). In fact, Ukpong, Akpan & Akan

(2001:12) notes that “they migrated with their Ibibio brothers from Southern Sudan to Southern Cameroon and later to Ibom village in Arochukwu”. Hence Noah (1980:5) is of the opinion that “from Arochukwu, they further migrated to the different sub-culture areas of Annang which they have found themselves today”.

Annang is ethnically homogenous and as one travels across Annang land, one is shaded by canopies of palm oil, palm wine and coconut trees in a sea of green lofty tropical vegetation (Udondata, 2006). Thus, their economic system was principally based on agricultural subsistence and exchange economy.

They have great tradition in music and are renowned in arts and sculpture. As a people, they are very religious, generous, determined and honest, simple and sincere. Annang social unit consists of the *Ufok* (family), *Irib Ete* (household/patrilineal relatives), *Ekpuk* (groups of patrilineal relatives tracing their genealogy to a common ancestor or fore-father), *Awio* (village), *Imaan* (clan) (Ekanem, 2006 & Meek, 1937).

Like other Africans, religion cuts through the whole life of Annang people. Thus, the people believe in a Supreme Deity called *Awasi*, *Nnem* (intermediary deities and spirits), Ancestors, *Aruru* (invisible and unidentifiable force) (Parrinder, 1969; Enang, 1982; Idowu, 1973; Enang, 1975). Therefore, social and religious concern is seen in a single oneness in Annang community.

### **Religious Proverbs**

In the Holy Bible, proverbs have an important place. Both folk and literary proverbs are found in it (Wood, n.d:81). Proverbs occur throughout most of the Bible. Except for those compiled in the book of proverbs, the number of instances in the Old and New Testaments where short sayings are explicitly identified as proverbial material, not specifically identified, is considerable. In other words, the occurrence of genuinely proverbial material not specifically identified in other portions of the Bible is also extant. The proverbial mode of expression in the New Testament reaches its height in the words of Jesus. The greatest of all teachers, He is the incomparable master of proverbs both in its strict sense and expanded form as parable (Cf. Matthew 13:3, 19:23-25, 20:1-16; Mark 4:1-34; Luke 10:30-37, 13:18-30, 14:16-24, 17:20-21; John 16:17-33).

Religious proverbs in Annang community invigorate the belief in the Supreme Deity and His duty in the working of the universe. It also reminds the Annang of the role played by the Supreme ordainer in creation and this is in the proverbs about man's origin and creation. These proverbs also comforts and directs the Annang on how they should strengthen their relationship with the supernatural through their religious beliefs and rituals. They were conscious of their moral rightness since man is a moral being. By this they avail themselves of the opportunity of being abreast of the fact that failure to live rightly would eventually affect their chances of coming back to this world through re-incarnation, one of the core belief systems of the Annang people. Again, religious proverbs unfold certain mysteries which defied their human senses and consciousness as well as transcending their human understanding.

It is at this juncture that certain category of religious proverbs must have to be treated. They are: proverbs about man's origin/creation, God/man relationship and death.

### **Proverbs about Man's Origin/Creation**

- i. *Awasi abot ntan, abot udara ikpat.*  
(God created sand and created a foot cleaner).

This proverb explains the fact that God has made provisions for whatever He created. This proverb clearly shows there are means to solving any kind of problems that one may have and explain that things are created in pairs.

- ii. *Abot inamma ndudue.*  
(Nature makes no mistake).

Times without number people complain about the unfriendly situations they pass through in life without really understanding the reasons. This proverb reiterates that nature knows more than people do and that there are no mistakes in the workings of God.

- iii. *Awasi uno mfat, uno ubok se akpeke mfat.*  
(God gives you pimples and gives you the hand to cut pimples).

During creation God gives people the zeal to tackle whatsoever thing and condition that they may find themselves. For instance, if God gives people children, He will also give them the

ability to cater for the children. Also, when people are elevated to a position, He will also give such persons the wisdom and guidance which will see them through.

- iv. *Mmamana ndikut inuho ebot, ideghe mmamana ebot anuho.*  
(I was born to see the bending of goats, not after I was born that goats bend).

This gives a Supreme hand in the working of nature. It explains that a lot of things take place before the creation of man. Also, that the universe is the work of an unmoved mover. Even the order and perfection in the universe is attributed to a supra-human being.

- v. *Ke 'ditono, awasi anam anyong nne isong.*  
(In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth).

The Annang people believe that the world was created by god as the supernatural being that controls the activities of the universe. The Annang people knew that the world did not form or begin on its own and that is why they repeatedly reverence God through worship which they believe live in the sky.

### **Proverbs about God/Man Relationship**

- i. *Agwo akot ufok amo ntagha awasi asin ikang.*  
(If a man calls his house tattered, God sets fire on it).

There is power in the tongue and so people must be careful of what comes out of their mouth so as not to be detrimental to their well being. Also, people should not try to destroy their house by any means else, God will help them to make it to be in a worse state.

- ii. *Akpon efud abo ke awasi ino urien.*  
(Man with a fat bottom may think that God has given him fortunate gift).

There are unpleasant situations that people find themselves and they believe that it is God that has agreed to that. This does not give them the opportunity of pondering over their situation to see whether truly it is a good state or at the verge of dying or even becoming a disease.

- iii. *Atimme amatot awasi anye atuak isong.*  
(After *atimme* (dibbler) has paid deference to God, it pounce the earth).

God deserves every respect from human beings for the task of controlling the universe and regulating human conduct. As the common belief that *Awasi* (God) has a permanent home in the sky, *atimme* points skyward before striking the earth. It teaches that there is nothing that a person does, with hope of success, without first of all consulting God in the sky.

iv. *Ese Ebenghe Awasi s'isip.*

(In requesting from God, it is advisable to start with the least).

This proverb hints on the assumptions of Annang theology of approaching God with caution. There is no harm in speaking but demanding too much from a benefactor is like daring the person. In recent times, this theology has changed as people are seen enriching themselves and prospering in their endeavours by the doctrine of new spirituality with the belief that God is the custodian of wealth.

v. *Awasi isinoho idiok unam nnuk.*

(God does not give horn to a vicious animal).

This proverb reminds people that they are in the protective hands of God from their enemies. It explains further the care which God extends to the innocent ones as a shield. This form of protection and care signifies love. Again, there are things that God deny some people and has the liberty to give to others as he so desires.

### **Proverbs about Death**

i. *Mkpa ideghe mmbem mmana.*

(Death does not occur in a first born basis).

This proverb shows that death is a necessary end and that people must pass through it, but that it does not happen on the basis of whoever came to life first must die before others who came later.

ii. *Adukaha itie mkpa agwo, usen mkpa uka afo nim adaha.*

(If you refuse to go to people's burial, you will vertically position your mother when she dies).



It is good to go to people's burial and witness how things are done. Failure to do this could lead to lack of understanding of most of the procedures and intrigues that are associated with burial obsequies, whenever death knocks at one's door.

iii. *Anyen amakut akpo atua.*

(A man cries when he sees the corpse).

In Annang land death is a necessary end. This does not mean that the Annang people view death with joy. It is only when the corpse of a person is seen that people are really poised and touched to cry the more. Another point made here is that, whenever a person sees something with his/her eyes, they stand a good chance giving an account of what is demanded of them.

iv. *Mkpa ajaiya ke udim*

(Death is enjoyed in groups).

Death is the termination of life and is mostly enjoyed when it does not select whom and where to visit. In Annang traditional community, the death of a child is frowned at, welcomed with cold shoulder and is not seen as a good death. Therefore, this proverb specifically talks about death at a ripe old age in which people are capable of returning to the world, particularly, as it touches all and sundry most especially on the basis of how old a person is.

v. *Mkpa amaboyo uwem mmode.*

(After death there is life).

In Annang land, there is a firm and strong belief that there is life after death. Therefore, the Annang people believe that a dead person is expected to come back to life as the world is cyclical in nature either to complete or continue where they stopped in their previous life.

vi. *Ekpo akpa anyen ikpaha utong.*

(The dead ones can also hear).

This proverb reiterates the Annang people belief in ancestors as part of the living members of their lineage who take active part in the affairs of their community. Offerings are made to them in form of food items, palm wine, fowls, libations of wine and water, and daily prayers and

invocation. This proverb teaches that people should be mindful of how they communicate with the dead because a wrongful communion could result in sickness, misfortune and death.

vii. *Agwo amakpa anyong ekpo, anyong abine awasi ke 'nyong.*

(When a person dies, he goes to his ancestors and to God in the sky).

This proverb shows the intimate relationship between man and his creator. It shows that when a person dies his soul and spirit returns to his creator. This further sounds the need to live right while on earth because people would be judged based on the kind and type of life they lived.

### **Importance of Annang Proverbs**

Annang proverb (*ufied*) has its specific function to perform. This means that they are not cited for the sake of nothing, rather to underscore a thing, condition, situation like: self-control, hardwork, encouragement, children's upbringing and caution. Annang proverbs are concerned about creating knowledge for the common good of human existence, convey wisdom, truth and a discovery of ideas as well as life lessons. They are the distilled essence of many previous life situations, the lessons drawn from the experience of generations, and they look ahead to the many life experiences and stories yet to take place. In this way, Annang proverbs share with the world the practical wisdom the people have learnt in their ways of life. For instance, "*Ukemeke ijire edop iba akanked*" (You cannot chase two antelopes at once) developed when Annang people found out that they could only capture one animal at a time because trying to focus on more than one could make the animals they hunt for to all flee or run away. This practical wisdom of tackling one thing at a time applies to people all over the world not just those chasing after wildlife.

Further, the significance of proverbs could also be felt in its elaborate form thus:

- i. Proverbs intervene not only in counseling, conversations and speeches, but also in tales, stories, songs and their poetic qualities furnish valuable insights into the culture of the people (Esen, 1982; Finnegan, 1970; Talbot, 1968).

In view of this, commenting on the reason why death does not select who it visits in the world today, Imoh (2013) states thus:

When death (mkpa) visited an old man, the old man pleaded that he needed time to attend his daughter's marriage and to receive the staff and towel given to a father. It left and visited a pregnant woman who gave her reason that she had suffered for nine good months and needed to give birth first. Death also left and visited a young man who pleaded that he had just started life and needed to consolidate first, that it should go for the old and death left visiting a baby and the baby gave his reason of being fresh in the world as a new comer. Therefore, because of all these reasons given death was annoyed and then became deaf so that it could neither hear nor listen to anyone again. At this point, it visits anyone at its disposal without the ability to listen to anyone (Interview).

ii. The wittiness and piquancy of proverbs recommends it as a category of philosophy whose truism is undisputable (Akpabio, 1980).

*Uduk itie ukot amade afa, essien- emana ada k'isong asion idem.*

(When we take good care of what we have, we give no room for temptation).

Commenting on this Anthony (2013) explains:

Ichong Udoetok was a palm wine tapper who never took the advice of Clement Udom. Clement observed that his climbing ropes were old and needed to be changed and passed same information to him but he refused to listen. One day one of the ropes got cut and the tapper was suspended on air when he was about bringing down his calabash of wine until people came to his rescue (Personal Communication).

The situation could have been averted if the palm wine tapper bought new climbing ropes as was observed by his friend. This proverb informs every one to properly handle whatever we own as properties to avoid unwarranted disaster and to always heed to advice of others.

- iii. Proverbs mirror the African society, showing both the beautiful and the ugly, the ugly is brought to the fore in order for it to be dealt with and eliminated and the beautiful or good enhanced (Enighe, 2006:327).

*Jak agwo anam se ifon.*

(People should do what is right at all times).

In support of this Anthony (2013) asserts that:

A young man caught the village head committing adultery with a woman in the bush and was told by the village head to keep quiet with an exclamation of a shhhhh! Later, the young man was caught stealing a fowl and taken to the village head for judgment. On sighting the young man the village head recognized and recalled his previous act. All the young man could say to defend himself was a shhhhh! This made the village head unable to dispense justice and the case was dismissed (Personal Communication).

The village head became afraid that the young man would expose his act in the bush. This proverb instructs all to inculcate virtues and practice same at all times in any position that one finds himself.

## **Conclusion**

African utterances are full of proverbs which reveal a lot about African religious beliefs, especially ideas about God. Proverbs are based purely on the common experiences of people, facts and observations. A good number of Annang proverbs are statements of the truth or principles observed in the workings of the natural world as well as in daily living. This means they are drawn from the wide gamut of Annang cultural experience such as: attitudes, values, emotions, perceptions, natural elements, thoughts and feelings. Festivals, ceremonies,

agriculture, religious and family life also provided many of the settings from which the raw materials of the proverbs were obtained.

The Annang people expressed their belief in God and his rule over the universe by making religious proverbs one of the controlling motives in life and conduct in trying to understand their creator and the relationships with one another. Therefore, it is one of the basic foundations of Annang philosophy. However, some proverbs are quite elaborate in form, and occasionally are accompanied by song or are themselves sung. A great number of these proverbs possessed by certain people indicate their place in everyday life, and one hears them continuously quoted and it is true wherever African culture has become rooted. Thus, every situation had a matching proverb and what was needed was the ability to see the principles and relativities underlying man's activities, and to express same in words that would be easily discernible in similar situations.

A second look at religious proverbs shows that they were taken seriously by the Annang in a bid to understanding the universe and how best they should worship the creator. Lasting and far-reaching recommendations were also proffered in a bid to further strengthening, appreciating and encouraging the use of Annang proverbs in contemporary times.

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