



Odeeokaa Journal of English and Literary Studies

Local Imagery and Meaning in the Asinilu of Owerri – Igbo People of Eastern Nigeria.

Abara Chukwuebuka .J.

Department of English and Literary Studies
Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examines Asinilu, a sub-variety of the Igbo proverb from the pantheon of short forms of the Owerri Igbo oral literature. It investigates local imagery and meaning in the five samples of the form collected from a qualitative field investigation of the Owerri nchi ise area of Imo State, Nigeria. The theoretical framework adopted for analysis of primary data in the study is Dell Hymes' theory of ethnopoetics, which accounts for the aesthetic and peculiar 'shaping' and 'making' of language particularly oral art to depict how folks and native users interpret aspects of their world, and which equally advocates that researchers should go into the field to experience the performance or use of the oral text. The spread of the harvest at the field was structured in a way as to have a representation from the sober and mournful as in the funeral reception for the dead and the joyous and triumphant as in the traditional weddings and the obscene and vulgar typical of debauchery at relaxation spots. In its analysis of the oral data, the study discovers diverse local images of variegated sensory appeal conveying specific meanings fitting to the contexts of the individual asinilu's use. The study concludes by underlining the fact that local imagery is integral to meaning formation and actualization in every asinilu used by the Igbo in general and the Owerri Igbo people in particular.

Keywords: Asinilu, Wellerism, Imagery, Meaning, Oral Literature

Background and Introduction

Man is endowed with the intrinsic ability to produce and appreciate art, societies all over the world, no matter their level of sophistication or lack of it, share one thing in common which is the innate ability to produce and appreciate art and aesthetics, of which literature is a significant component (Okoh 26). Literature has existed as unwritten texts thousands of years, before the discovery of writing. With the advent of writing, some of the oral texts were now written down. For example, it is well known that Illiad and Oddyseey existed orally for hundreds of years before Homer who

*Odeeokaa Journal of English
and Literary Studies, Vol. 1 No.
1. July, 2024*

wrote them down was born. Ruth Finnegan's seminal and foundational work, in 1970 Oral literature in Africa entrenched Oral literature and boosted its study in Africa and western world. The establishment of the International Society for the Oral literature of Africa (ISOLA) and the Nigerian Oral Literature Association (NOLA) lend credence to the thriving nature of oral literature in Africa. Like its written counterpart, oral literature boasts of the same three major genres of prose, poetry and drama and a multiplicity of sub-genres. In this study, prose is the genre of concern, while *asinilu*, a sub category of the Igbo proverb identified by its quotation format is the specific focus.

As a concept, *Asinilu* emanates from a combination of words – namely *asi* and *ilu* with the former representing speech, speaking, saying or even gossip and the latter, proverb, while the 'n' in – between stand for 'in' or 'and'. Hence, *asinilu* signifies "speaking or speech in a proverb" or 'speaking/speech and a proverb'. As a subtype of the Igbo proverb, it is more likely to mean the former rather than the later. *Asinilu* is different from other types within the proverbial family by having a speaker or subject to whom the provocative and highly imaginative expression is ascribed as in the following example:

“Nkita si na ihe ya ji eso onye afo ukwu bu na// ma o gboghi agbo, o nyuoo anyuo”

The dog says that the reason why it trails the bloated, bellied person is because// if he does not excrete, he will definitely vomit.

In this very imaginative piece of oral literacy art, the physical interlocutor distances himself from the utterance by attributing it to another who is part of the internal world of the expression and who does not have to be human, but could be a personified part of the human body, animal, object or even an abstract phenomenon. The charm of *asinilu*, thus rests on this introduction or identification of an internal speaker and of course, the array of literary devices and figures of speech that it embodies and which make it not just pleasurable to the ear but also highly informative and hence alluring to researchers.

In spite, however, of its clear affinity with *ilu* the (Igbo proverb) and perhaps because of its peculiarity in comparison to the other varieties within the proverbial family, some scholars have classified *asinilu* as a form of Igbo oral literature different from the proverb (*ilu*). Scholars have

also identified and described *asinilu* as the Igbo equivalent of the English Wellerism popularized by Charles Dickens. Because this ‘welleric’ attribution has gone unchallenged, *asinilu* appears to have assumed the tag of “Igbo wellerism”. This study has no intention of challenging that. Hence, it shall use both terms interchangeably.

Like several other Nigerian cultures, the Owerri people boast of a rich cultural heritage and are particularly reputed for their impressive verbal inventiveness and oral expressiveness. Their spoken exchanges are variously and effortlessly laced with vestiges of that communicative ornamentation by which gifted native speakers and users of the Igbo language are known. *Asinilu* happens to be one of such specialized codes of rhetorical verbal communication common to the people, hence this scholar’s desire to re-examine the intricate network of local imagery usually deployed in its diverse samples to enhance the appreciation of its contextual meaning.

For this to be achieved effectively, it would be appropriate to throw light on the culture, language, oral literature and other aspects of the total make-up of the people under investigation. This will take us to a cursory look at the Owerri Igbo from the perspective of their geography, brief history culture, language and oral literature.

The Igbo People in Brief

Efforts to trace the meaning and origin of the ‘Igbo’ through historical times have not yielded the deserved positive results. It is also not quite certain how and when precisely the Igbo came to occupy their present geographical area. Onwuejeonwu describes the Igbo cultural area as “an area enclosed by an imaginary line running outside the settlement of Agbor, Kwale, on the West of the Niger, Ahoada, Diobi and Umuagbani in the Port Harcourt area and finally, Enugu Ezike in the Nsukka area”. They are one of the largest and most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Igbo occupy the South-Eastern part of Nigeria, states that make the South-East include – Imo, Abia, Enugu, Anambra and Ebonyi state. Remarkably, some parts of Rivers and Delta states are also Igbo speaking. These states are primarily situated in the Niger Delta.

Brief History of the Owerri People

The history of the Owerri people is a victim of raging controversies radiating many inconsistent accounts of migration and settlement. One of such accounts, though popular among Owerri people yet highly susceptible and still controversial among scholars and specifically scholars of Igbo

history is that Owerri was founded by a legendary hero called Ekwem Arugo whose original home was Uratta. The history of the founding of Owerri centers around a quarrel over who should rightfully take the heart of a cow used for the funeral ceremony of Arugo, father of Ekwema, founder of Owerri.

The account has it that a wealthy man called Arugo had two sons Ndumoha and Ekwema. Ndumoha who was the older of the two could not afford to finance the funeral of his late father, and this consisted of goats, and cow among other items. The younger brother, Ekwema who had the means bore the cost of the funeral. When the cow was slaughtered, Ndumoha claimed the heart by virtue of being Arugo's first son. Ekwema refused, saying that since he brought the cow, he was entitled to its heart. This caused a quarrel between Ndumoha and Ekwema. The people including the elders went into the quarrel and decided in favor of Ekwema on the ground that he brought the cow. This judgement did not go well with Ndumoha, so he planned to kill Ekwema. In a later incident, Ekwema and his followers killed a large bush pig during a hunting expedition. When the bush pig was brought home, Ndumoha ordered that it be slaughtered at his obu ozuzu (ancestral tree) but Ekwema resisted this order and rather slaughtered the pig in his own Obi (entrance hut) in defiance of Ndumoha's. As was customary, Ekwema shared the meat among the town's people including Ndumoha who bluntly refused his own share. Seeing that Ndumoha the older son did not accept the meat, the town's people returned their shares. Ekwema accepted all the meat returned. This act of Ekwema became the talk of the town and anyone who met the other would ask the question 'Owerela' (has he taken the meat?) and the general answer was Owerela! (he has taken, he has taken) and this earned for Ekwema the nickname, Owere (the taken).

Geography, Land and People of Owerri.

Owerri is located in the South western part of Imo State. Owerri shares boundary on the North and North East with Mbaise and Ikeduru local governments, on the south and south east with Ngor Okpala, on its west end with Ohaji/Egbema and Oguta local government area. It includes the five original people of Amawom, Umuororonjo, Umuonyeche, Umuodu and Umuoyima.

The entire area of Owerri capital territory was fifteen kilometers radius beginning from Owerri Municipal as its core. In terms of geography and climate, Owerri capital territory has boundaries with Owerri North and Owerri West Local Governments. The area has two major seasons which are the dry and wet seasons. The area's texture type varied from the plain land to hills, and wet

land around Nworie and Otammiri river which flowed across Owerri municipality through Nekede and Ihiagwa. These two rivers are important land marks of Owerri. Through the Owerri man does not enjoy the luxury of large yam barns because there are no enough arable lands to till but he feasts on assorted delicacies, he believes in enjoyment which is supported by such sayings as “*anyi taala ugba nuola mmii, nde agbagba na kuruma*” “if we take our ugba (African salad) and drink to our fill, the builders of zinc roofed houses can go on to build”.

However, it is important to state that this is not the philosophy of the contemporary Owerri man. Owerri people cease every available opportunity to showcase their eager beaver life style, this is evident in their unbridled love for ceremonies. They have a flagship festival known as ‘Oru Owere’ a carnival like celebration of the historic movement of their forebears to Ugwu Ekwema. Generally, festivals are known to be a social institution by which men satisfy their fun-seeking instincts. For the people of Owerri, there is a festive dimension to every auspicious event. In support of their core tradition of sitting out after a hard day’s toil, they have sayings like “*uwa mgbede ka mma*” or in local parlance, “*Odu ezi*” A past time of sort in the evening.

The Owerri-Igbo Oral Literature.

An attempt to highlight the cultural life and performative attribute of Owerri people inevitably presents the temptation of endless writing. This is because the cultural lives of Owerri people, unlike some other Igbo collectivities, have allure that set them apart and fundamentally constitute attraction to migrants and serve as soothing balm for its inhabitants. These attractions are not limited to their socio-cultural lifestyle; their mannerism and dialect also possess the same magic wand that is hardly resistible.

The Owerri people are a very affable and expressive people, this is in tune with the truism that every society is sustained by the interaction of its members. Schram (1964) maintains that “a society will cease to exist if the members do not interact” (4).

In their oral engagements, Owerri people are known for resorting to figurative devices like inuendos, sarcasms and masking meaning sometimes with such expressions as “*shikwa a gi shi*” before actually stating their observations.

The above gives a clearer background to the highly cherished ‘speech as art’ attribute of the typical Owerri people and their predilection for highly coded forms like *Asinilu*. There is a strong indication

from close observation that the peculiar verbal interest and ingenuity of the Igbo is coterminous with the Owerri people's predilection for verbal embellishments. According to Chinua Achebe, "among the Igbo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". In a similar manner, Emmanuel Obiechina (1975:27) states that traditional Igbo culture embodied its value and traditions in its proverbs and fossilized sayings, its beliefs in its myths and religion and its consciousness of its historical collective outlook and ethics, in its legends, folktales and other forms of oral literature.

Nwachukwu Agbada concurs on these positions in the enormity of the treasures known as proverbs and proverbial forms pointing out that "the Igbo revel in connotative and subterranean meaning which is akin to philosophical prevarication. The essence of mature exchange of ideas in Igbo culture is to sound a bit distant and uncommon so as not to appear ordinary" (5). From the foregoing, proverbial forms are regarded as variable and uncommon means of relaying common messages and a reservoir of the rich socio-cultural tapestry of the African nay Igbo people.

Statement of the Problem

The Igbo proverb and related forms within the gnomic category have been studied extensively. Incidentally, very little attention has been paid specifically to the subtype or variety of the Igbo proverb designated as *Asinilu* or Igbo wellerism. Moreover, none of the few existing studies seems to have focused on local imagery and meaning in individual samples of *asinilu*. Herein lies the gap which this study seeks to fill.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate local imagery and meaning in the *asinilu* of the Owerri-Igbo people. This study is thus, expected to achieve the following objectives:

- Establish the roles of the intricate network of local imagery in the realization of the meaning of the individual *asinilu* examples investigated.
- Underscore the rhetorical implications of *asinilu* among its Owerri-Igbo owners and users.
- Contribute to the debate in support of *asinilu* as a variety or subtype of the Igbo proverb rather than a distinct form of Igbo and literature.

Significance of the Study

This study is relevant in theory and practice. In theory, it would serve as a major reference point or basis for future studies in the nature, varieties, functions and meaning of Igbo proverbs. In practice, the study shall serve as a veritable tool for entertainment, environmental education, language training, the inculcation of critical thinking and transmission of cultural norms.

Scope and Delimitation of Study

This work focuses on examining local imagery and meaning in the *Asinilu* of the Owerri-Igbo people of eastern Nigeria. It shall therefore, not concern itself with studying the *ilu* as a whole or major form, analysis shall be based on five samples of *Asinilu* collected, transcribed and translated into English for the purpose.

Conceptual Review

Wellerism

The etymology of the concept of Wellerism took its name from Charles Dicken’s main protagonist, Samuel Weller in the posthumous papers of the Pick Wick Club. It is essentially a form of humorous comparison in which a familiar saying or proverb is identified with something said by a person in a specified but inapposite situation.

Some of the examples are as illustrated:

“Don’t move, I’ve got you covered” said the wallpaper to the wall.

“Everything should be done measuredly” said the tailor and he hit his wife with a ruler.

Conceptual Clarification: Wellerism and the Igbo Wellerism (*Asinilu*)

Two notable scholars have taken positions on Igbo Wellerisms. Nolue Emenanjo the earliest and Nwachukwu-Agbada the latest. However no further studies have enunciated Owerri-Igbo Wellerisms and that is what this work sets out to accomplish.

Nolue Emenanjo’s earlier treatise on *Asinilu Are Igbo Wellerisms Proverbs?* contained in *Anu A Journal of Igbo Culture* 1989 began as a contemplation and with strong, illustrious examples concluded in proving a merited distinction between Igbo Wellerisms and Proverbs. His submission as a sequel drew Nwachukwu-Agbada’s attention in a response “*Yes, Igbo Wellerisms are*

Proverbs” where he used the end goals of utility in meaning communication to oppose the views of structural and ontological difference. First according to Emenanjo,

literary critics often observe gross relationship and then tend to lump genres together especially under an established genre, as seen in the orthodox western procedure but linguists with literary backgrounds go beyond surface structure relationships to show that verbal art forms which were once thought to belong to one macro-genre really belong to different micro-genre which may be related but not identical.

Emenanjo’s strong concern here is the prevalence of micro genres inside macro genre, as in the case of *Ilu* and *Asinilu*-Proverb and Wellerism. He makes a case for difference consequent upon the inherent features of the two, this distinction in his opinion is nuanced as opposed to straightjacket, orthodox, western procedure. Proverbs are the popular macro genre and wield domineering influence especially in Igbo over the other micro genre, Wellerism.

Emenanjo further clings on to the ‘word picture’ created by Igbo Wellerisms in the Noun Phrase Complement (the bearer of the information content) and its interplay with the apocryphal speaker in the matrix sentence to justify his position on difference.

Later after Nolue Emenanjo’s seminal contribution in the way of properly delineating Igbo Wellerisms from Proverbs, Nwachukwu-Agbada disagrees with him by advancing a debate on the uniformity of their utility to insist on their sameness. He contends that the Igbo are not very rigid in the structure of their oral literary forms but more deeply concerned about achieving communication and promoting social harmony. According to him;

Are there functions which proverbs can perform which wellerisms cannot?
Are there moments when one can be used and the other disallowed,
otherwise, to simply limit the basis for their assumed separateness on the
syntactic tadpolish tails wellerisms bear in their structure is to take variety
for a distinction.

Nwachukwu-Agbada’s focus is on the general usage function and not on structural components. However, in the field of linguistics and literature generally, structure and structural components are not merely decorative, the taxonomic differentiation of Igbo Wellerisms from their broad Proverb family is informed by the unimpeachable difference in structural component noticeable between the two. Emenanjo’s discovery of this feat especially in *Asinilu* the Igbo wellerism is salutary;

Wellerism is different from proverb which is usually a direct, meaningful and witty observation. This is not of course saying that some proverbs may not have first originated from Wellerisms, the major difference is that the matrix sentence is optional in Proverbs but obligatory in Wellerisms’

The kernel of Emenanjo’s submission is that the matrix clause and the information content carrier in the Noun Phrase Complement are sine qua non. The Proverb unlike the Wellerism can stand by itself as a complete and meaningful statement with universal application and implication, but the same cannot be said about the second part of the wellerism.

Imagery

The term imagery is used to describe and capture a mental picture of a representation or likeness of somebody or something seen, heard or produced. The Merriam Websters Encyclopedia of literature defines imagery as the literal or figurative representation of objects, feelings or ideas. Images are crucial components in literature. Rather than mere decoration or elaboration, images are often the means through which literary art comes alive, in appealing to the readers sense, images evoke the feeling and impression of the world of that particular art. Virtually everything in a work of literary art is an image produced in the way language creates the scene, although the visual image is the most common and widely acclaimed, images may refer to sounds, smells, tactile sensation and gustatory. In all, imagery is the connection between art and life.

Local Imagery

Local imagery can be used to refer to mental pictures evoked by the various verbal and even non-verbal dimensions of culture such as styles in clothing, village lay-out, architecture, furniture, food and cuisine, music and dance, physical gestures, pastoral attitudes and so on, organized in patterned set as to incorporate coded information.

Local in the use here is not some exotic traits but a given people’s particular, self-organizing transgenerational cultural trademark. In the words of Theophilus Okere(3) “the whole wellspring of that given people’s endogenous ability to shape and manage their world, generation after generation in line with their own genius”.

Meaning

Meaning is one concept in life that is always in a state of flux. It is mainly concerned with an investigation into the reality of truth. In unraveling meaning, especially linguistic meaning, one

major question semanticists who are specialists in the field of theory of meaning concern themselves with is “how does the ‘meaning’ of a sentence emerge out of its parts”. To this the principle of compositionality which asserts that a sentence can be understood the basis of the meaning of the parts of the sentence (words) along with an understanding of its structure.

Oral Literature

Oral literature has stamped its feet as the undeniable precursor to the written counterpart. Nandwa and Bukenya (1992) define oral literature as “those utterances whether spoken, recited, sung whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree, an artistic characteristic of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expressions (5).

Theoretical Framework: Ethnopoetics

Ethnopoetics is one of the few theoretical frameworks that are deployable to the study of a kind of literary arts as asinilu. Hence, its adoption as the theoretical framework for this study.

As a term, it is made up of two key words- ‘Ethnos’ which means nation, tribe or race and ‘Poetics’ which connotes ‘making’ or ‘shaping’ in any or all aspects of cultural life. Here emphasis is on only shaping of language. One kind of shaping of language has to do with ‘fashions of speaking’ what this entails is that a peculiar or characteristic way of naming, predicating and interacting in one language may differ from those in another, and suggest differences in the way users of the languages interpret aspects of their worlds.

Ethnopoetics focuses on the aesthetic and poetic structuring of oral art. According to Anttonen (113), its methodology and theoretical foundations lie in pragmatics, phenomenology, sociolinguistic, ethno-methodological conversation analysis, the ethnography of speaking and the performance approach in American folktale studies.

This Ethnopoetic approach (which was an offshoot of ethnolinguistics) was developed by Dell Hymes, and is based on the idea that works of verbal art are subtle organizations of lines and verses. Therefore, these expressions are founded upon a socially constituted poetic structure that is presented both in the organization of reports and on that experience. The lines and verses are organized in ways that are not only poetic, but also are a kind of rhetoric of action in that they embody an implicit cultural scheme for the organization of experience.

These are two major exponents of Ethnopoetics. These are Hymes and Dennis Tedlock. Each of them places emphasis on a different but related strand of the theory.

Tedlock for example, stresses the oral and aural that is (speaking and hearing/understanding synchrony) qualities in utterances as being central to the organization of speech, especially in the patterning of the texture of speech which must be shown in transcription. To him, the aural qualities in performance which are essential to the organization of speech convey to the listener, a sense of the relative importance of propositions and their connections with each other, which are essential aspects of meaning. in sum, Tedlock's Ethnopoetic emphasis is on the:

- >Oral nature of texts and the dependence of the organization of the texts upon lines
- >Transcription of texts as heard on performance
- >Emphasis on fieldwork.

On the other hand, Dell Hymes places emphasis on:

- >The notion that things in narratives revolve around a culture-specific pattern number that brings rhythm to a story.
- >The analysis of stylistic and grammatical features in order to find the formal poetic structure of a text, the underlying rhetorical form in the texture, employing a structural method, within the ambit of structural linguistics, based on the pragmatic study of language in which songs and texts are studied in terms of their use in communication.
- >Texts analyzed are made available only as written documents.

Methods of Data collection/Instrumentation.

The researcher went to the field using an audio tape recorder with which he recorded the interactive sessions in the stated occasions of *Owanjeje* (funeral reception for the dead), *Ipammi ukwu* (traditional marriage ceremony), and *Odu ezi* (an evening sit out) and thereafter transcribed the recorded material to text. Furthermore, this data obtained and their sampling were done by a Purposive Sampling Method.

In this method, all the samples of the Owerri-Igbo *asinilu* collected were categorized into five reflecting five broad subjects and images - the *asinilu* on humans, animals, human body parts,

objects and abstract phenomena. Furthermore, one sample was exposed on each of the chosen sub-categorization. For example, in the human *asinilu*, the madman. For the category on body part, the vagina and the penis were chosen; for the animal category, the Tortoise, for the Phenomenon/Abstract category, Death and for the Object category, the mature palm frond.

The samples of the *Asinilu* are highlighted and discussed on each of these chosen categories to show an agreement in the referential meaning to the “subject-speaker” This is done in a way that reveals a message-semblance or meaning-commonality in each of the two sampled *Asinilu*. This method further elaborates Speare’s (1966) observation that “great art prefers to deal not with easily identifiable personalities but with emblems, with allegories”

Human *Asinilu*

In this category, we have the character of the madman. In it, the expressive actions of the lunatic comes into play. We see a conformity between the actions of the individual and the credited utterance in the *Asinilu* that reveal meaning.

The ubiquity of mentally deranged people littering the markets, junctions, and those who lurk around burial and wedding venues informed the saying among Igbo that there is a lunatic in every town. Some of the lunatics are not ‘lunatics’ in the strict sense of it, some are just eccentric individuals could not put their eccentricity to check and do not conform to the acceptable societal standards, it also gave rise to another saying that it is good to have a lunatic in the town but the big question is, from whose homestead shall it emerge?. The Igbo people do not believe that mental depravity is after all outrightly negative because some mentally depraved people are blessed with visionary and oracular powers of clairvoyants. In a way, they believe that the greatest blessing granted to mankind comes by way of madness, which is considered a divine gift. Madness in this sense is about spirit possession known in local parlance as ‘agwu’ Francis Cardinal Arinze identifies ‘Agwu’ as a deity capable of twofold predilections, observing that he is capable of being both extremely capricious and also enriching his devotee(23) He calls Agwu “the spirit of giddiness, rascality, discomposure, confusion and forgetfulness” similarly, Emefie Ikenga-Metuh identifies recklessness, wastefulness and madness as manifestations of Agwu possession and explains that the afflicted could harness the power of Agwu for divination and healing by propitiating the deity(96). In all, though Agwu is associated with divination, prophesy and inspiration, it is equally linked with lunacy and aberrant behaviors.

In the *Asinilu* of the madman, their typical mannerism and lifestyle, delights, accomplishments, worries and anxieties are depicted in the pictographic manner in line with their confession.

Original; *onye ara si ebe ya ga-agba oso bara uba tinyere okwute yaga-atu n'isi ahia.*

Translation; the madman said he has a lot of distance to cover, apart from the numerous targets of throwing stones at the market center.

Original: *onye ara si isi di ya mma, kama obu ya choo ikwu ozo, ozo abanye ya n'onu.*

Translation; the madman said that there is nothing wrong with his common sense, except that when he wants to say one thing, another slips into his mouth. The image that stares at us from these depictions of the madman is Achebe's madman in his short story *The madman* contained in his collection, *Girls at war and other stories*. The madman who rambles as he rants coupled with his unintelligible utterances.

Human body part *Asinilu*

This category epitomizes the natural biological activities of the body. The human body function is that of biological composition. Some of which include courtship behavior and display, sex and sexual behaviors, hormonal responses and others. When critically examined, all of these biologically related activities of the body embody a lot of meanings. The human body consists of the brain and a network of nervous systems that receive and perceive sensory messages and interpret them to the brain for optimal functioning of the human person. The two selected 'fleshy' reproductive human parts presented in this category are exemplary as two mutually complementary parts for pleasure and reproduction. In unity of function and commonality of meaning, the both emphasize amicability and compatibility.

Original; *Utu si ihe mere ya ji ata ahu bu oria eri agbo ya na-aria*

Translation: The phallus said the reason it becomes lean is its peculiar affliction of eating and vomiting.

The image presented here is the erotic picture of the male genitalia that has innate capacity to become turgid at the behest of coitus and also relapse into flaccidity after ejaculation during bouts of sexual intercourse. It bears a veritable message on the permanence on impermanence.

Phenomenon/Abstract concept *Asinilu*

Original; *onwu si a gbara ohu nye y ana ya makwa onye ya ga-egbu*

Translation; death said even if one buys and bequeaths him a slave in exchange, he still knows and chooses whoever he likes to kill.

The above *Asinilu* presents us with the harrowing and mournful image of death as a merciless sickle with which humans are mindlessly harvested. In a much cited and influential passage in *Pensees*, the French philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal likens the world to a prison and men to shackled inmates of the prison yard, where each day, the prison warder chooses arbitrarily one of the inmates and slits his throat, with the others watching in impotence, the fate that awaits them also. This is essentially, the image of the human condition. We are brought to a confrontation with the helplessness of mortal condition as well as death and its ineluctability.

Animal *Asinilu*

The hen shall be used for illustration in this category. This is predicated on its peculiar perception and representation among the Igbo in south eastern Nigeria. This bird from the evidence in the *Asinilu* presented are ‘signs’ and ‘emblems. It is a common practice in African folklore especially the Igbo to have certain animals associated with particular attributes which clearly distinguish them from all other characters in stories. Nkeita Kwabena points out;

There are norms of behavior expected of the sheep, the dog and the elephant and so on in stories. The stereotypes are, therefore, formed through observation of the habits of various animals, their appearance and the kind of response they usually make in particular situations (748)

The above observation is true of a number of animals featured in the samples collected for this study. The way the hen pecks on debris with determination as well as sips water and looks up at the same time, the way the sheep gawks with recklessness, among other observable mannerisms of other animals.

Original: Okuko si na ya a naghi eti ka ihe ji ya hapu ya kama ka oha nuruolu ya.

Translation: The chicken forcefully whisked away by the hawk said it is not crying so that the flying (hawk) carrying it would let it go, but so that the public would hear its voice and bear witness.

In the *Asinilu*, the reader is shown a vivid image of a person victimized and oppressed by a superior authority, and who resigns to complaining to elicit pity and public outcry. This tragic plight and

perpetual fate of the chicken to be occasionally swooped on by the malicious hawk in a Gestapo style rings out again. The *Asinilu* deploys the images of sound-particularly the fear-stricken coo-coo sound of the terrified chicken to whip up pity from the crowd of helpless on-lookers therefore subtly injects the instruction that although an oppressed person may not be able to do anything about the oppression he suffers, he can at least complain about it.

Okoh further agrees with the position above by picking on the tortoise. In his words;

Such symbolic representation finds its utmost fulfillment in a highly popular and controversial character, namely Tortoise. No character or figure in the tales is better equipped than tortoise for illustrating the irrationality, viciousness, vindictiveness, and meanness of man. To the audience, tortoise thus symbolizes the negative, innermost and darkest side of some of its members, even of humanity in general.

Summary of Findings

This study highlighted *Asinilu* as a subtype and variety of proverb as a gnomic category that espouse cultural naturalism and linguistic nationalism. From history, it has been observed that human existence is shaped by a number of related phenomena, part of which are language, culture and the literature that arises from them. To a large extent, a people's behavioural pattern and progress are inseparable from their linguistic, cultural and literary heritage as these help to construct their peculiar identities and shape their destinies. *Asinilu* has been discovered as a repository of the mores, lores, ethos, norms, myths, legends, culture of Owerri people, however, the advent of writing and telecommunication gadgets such as e-books, radio, T.V sets, smart phones have made their everyday usage almost moribund and unpopular leading to a linguistic and culture dearth in Owerri and Igbo land by extension.

Conclusion

This study was carried out to illustrate local imagery and meaning that inher in *Asinilu* as well as the aesthetic devices – metaphors, sound patterns all of which unite to play ornamental purposes and enhance meaning and clearer understanding of a discourse. The worldview of the Igbo people is steeped in proverbial forms. Peculiar proverbial forms like *Asinilu* not only make points clear but perpetuate them on our minds through the abundant use of some of these aesthetic devices.

Works Cited

- Agbada, Nwachukwu “Yes, Igbo Wellerisms Are Proverbs” *Anu. Journal of Igbo Culture* Imo State Council for Arts and Culture, 1990.
- Anttonen, P. “Ethnopoetic Analysis and Finnish Oral Verse” Sikala & Vakimo (eds). *Songs Beyond the Kalevala: Transformations of Oral Poetry*. Tampere, 1994.
- Arinze, Francis A. *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*. Ibadan: Ibadan Up, 1970.
- Brunvand, J.H. *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1968.
- Chukwuma, Helen. *Igbo Oral Literature: Theory and Tradition*. Port Harcourt: Pearl, 2002.
- Emenanjo, E.N. *Atumatu Agumagu na Atumatu Okeru*, Lagos: Longman, Nigeria, 1989.
- Emenanjo, Nolue E. “Are Igbo Wellerisms Proverbs? *Anu Journal of Igbo Culture Fifth Issue*, 1989.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literatures in Africa*, Oxford U.P.1970
- Hymes, Dell. “In Vain I Tried to Tell You”: *Essays on Native American Ethnopoetics*, Philadelphia.1981.
- Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie. “Ritual, Dirt and Purification Rites among the Igbo”. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 15:1.1985
- Maduakor, Obi. *Introduction to Poetry*. Nsukka: Fulladu Publishing Co., 1991.
- Maduka, C. & Luke Eyoh. *Fundamentals of Poetry*, Uyo: Scholars, 2002.
- Mieder, W. & Kingsbury, A.S. (Eds) (1994). *A Dictionary of Wellerism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mieder, W. *Proverbs: A Handbook*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004.
- Nandwa Jane and Bukenya Austin. *African Oral Literature for Schools*. Pearson Education Company, 1983.
- Nkeita, J.J. Kwabena, “The Linguistic Aspect of Style in African Languages” *Current Trends in Linguistics VII*: 732-57.
- Nwachukwu, Agbada, JOJ. *The Igbo Proverb: A Study of its Context, Performance and Functions*. Enugu: John Jacob’s Classic Publishers Ltd., 2002)
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West Africa* Cambridge: Cup, 1975.

Ofomata Chinedu. Ndezu Uto Asusu Igbo, 2007.

Ogbalu, Chidozie. Ibo Institution and Customs, Onitsha: University Publishing Company, 1979.

Okeke Theophilus, Chukwudi Anthony Njoku & Rene Derisch (eds). Africa Development “All Knowledge is first of all local knowledge: An Introduction”. *A Quarterly Journal of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa*, 2005.

Okoh, Nkem. Preface to Oral Literature. Pearl Publishers. Port Harcourt, 2010. .

Onwuejeogwu, M.A. An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony, London: Ethiope, 1981.

Onyeocha, Izu Marcel. Philosophy of Language. Austus Press Owerri, 2004.

Pascal, Blaise (1995). *Pensees*. Trans A.J. Krailsheimer, London: Penguin.

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature*. Harsmondsworth, Middlesex, Pengium Books 1948.

Schram, W. *Mass Media and National Development*. Stanford: University Press Cal, 1964.

Sturrock, J. *Structuralism* paladin books. The University of Michigan, 1986.

Taban Lo Liyong. *Popular Culture of East Africa Oral Literature*.

Taylor, A. *Wellerisms*. Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, Maria Leach ed 1169, 1170. New York: Funk & Wagnall, 1950.

Tedlock, Dennis. *Towards Oral Poetics*. New literary history, Philadelphia: Jovanovizh, 1983.