

PETER-JAZZY EZEH

IN CAPSULE: SAWS AND SEX MORES AMONG THE
IGBO OF NIGERIA

Abstract: The study is a rare attempt to study proverbs and related forms as repositories of the traditional worldview of the Okposi, an Igbo of Nigeria's glottocultural group, on sex and sex-related matters. This effort has both academic and practical relevance. This is an under-explored area which should add to how much paremiologists know at present in this interesting form in the human speech art. At a practical level, understanding autochthonous sexual ideology of a group has important implications for reproductive health and appreciation of human sexuality in general. Igbo language is spoken indigenously by up to 40 million people. The lexicons of its 300 odd dialects can differ markedly in many respects. In an unhurried participant observation for the purpose of this study spanning five years (2005 to 2010) I collected 53 naturally situated utterances; 39 refer to sex and 14 were used for comparative purposes. It seems advisable to focus on proverbs and allied forms in this essay because of the audience. I am a native speaker of the dialect and a career anthropologist. I transcribe each utterance as collected before giving its English equivalent.

Keywords: African, African American, *dozens*, field research, folk speech, idiom, Igbo, morality, *ncha*, Nigeria, participant observation, proverb, ritual insult, sexual ideology, value system, women.

Introduction

Onyejekwe (2001) has studied proverbs that deal with gender relations among the Igbo but that study lacks the focus of my present effort. Another related study, insofar as it is about proverbs of the Igbo and gender relations is Oha (1998). But that study is cast in the feminist theoretical mould and has such wide macrosociological concerns that may allow for a close scrutiny of sexual relations as a free-standing social process. There are more closely related studies on this subject in another Nigerian group, namely the Yoruba, but it is impractical to conflate these on the Igbo case since both societies have their different cultures (Owomoyela, 1972; Ojoade, 1983). None of these studies nor any other one in

Nigeria has studied the formulaic category, *ncha*, which my present investigation includes. This category curiously seems to be related to a form the Americans call *dozens*. Burns (2006: 346) has described the American variety as “a game of ritual insult”, a description which with a small modification can fit the Igbo case just as well.

Idioms that make contain sex-related words in their structure or have words that in their ordinary meanings do not refer to sex but do so in their connotations are scarce in the dialect. I was only able to collect four during the period of the research.

I suggest that it is important to study the Igbo fixed speech forms relating to sex because of what language can reveal about norms of a society and the important position of sex in social life (Ukaegbu, 2006). Sex whether in small-scale societies or the contemporary large plural societies determines what humans do in practically all other social domains. Certainly without proper knowledge of how members of a group negotiate their sexual life it will be impossible to understand macro issues concerning their demography, and without such understanding it will be difficult to make policies that will be effective. It is for this reason that this study has a practical value besides its obvious academic relevance of adding to knowledge of this form of human speech form.

Methodology

The observation method that was used for this study was largely unobtrusive. When I became interested in this topic six years ago in 2005 I did two things. First I began taking systematic interest in speech acts that are likely to yield the type of utterances that were relevant to the topic. In an unhurried participant observation for the purpose spanning five years (2005 to 2010) I collected 53 naturally situated utterances; 39 referred to sex and 14 were used for comparative purposes. I am a native speaker of the dialect. I did not influence the use of such utterances, in the way that an interviewer would do. The idea was to allow such utterance where they were fitting to the speech acts to occur in the ordinary course of events; i.e. to be performed as the culture-bearer would normally do it in workaday life. Secondly I began recollecting and recording expressions that I had heard in the discourse community that were relevant to the subject I was investigating. Expressions

in this latter category were mainly of paremiological nature and the ones that have been listed as *ncha* in this report.

For the expressions that I encountered newly, I will record them as soon as practicable when the recall ability was highest. But I would do so discreetly without giving the clue that I was using the notes for a special purpose.

It emerged as I continued that four forms in the language were involved.

- Plain
- Proverbs
- Idioms, and
- *Ncha*.

It is helpful to explain each of these forms for ease of understanding of this report. I regard as **plain** any expression which while forming part of the repertoire of normal speech performance in the community is not used in a figurative sense. In other words, a form that carries its denotative meaning ordinarily.

Proverb has been glossed as a ‘concise statement, in general use, expressing a shrewd perception about everyday life or a universally recognized truth’ (Microsoft Encarta, 2008). Rey-Deborve (1975: 179) has described it as a coded or fixed sentence whose meaning cannot be determined by understanding the individual words that make it up. Paremiologists have noted its value as fossilised ideas of a society running into a distant past. This is true of all societies of whatever technological level. Wolkomir (1993: 270, 272) remarks regarding the American case, ‘My interest in proverbs centres on how we are ruled by traditional attitudes ... Proverbs are part of the country’s social glue.’ Anthropologists have long recognized that most African cultures that are nonliterate use proverbs as an economical way to store social knowledge (Beals & Hoijer, 1965: 670). **Idiom** is used here in the sense of a phrase or group of words that are not to be understood by understanding the individual words that constitute them.

Plain speech, proverb and idiom occur in most languages and in the other dialects of Igbo. I am not aware that other languages have *ncha*. The entries in each category are selected because they are recognized in Okposi’s lexicon. Put differently, nonce words, idiolectal coinages, or any usages that are peculiar to the individual are excluded.

It is advisable to begin with *ncha*. This is because of its peculiarity. In its pure form I do not know of its parallel in English or any other language that an American or European reader is familiar with, except insofar as there are now suggestions that the African-American insolent exchange, dozens, originated from it (Burns, 2006). Proverbs and idioms are figurative usages. Plain forms anticipate literal interpretations. However, while *ncha* is not a figurative usage as such, it is not an ordinary plain form. It is employed as either a word game or an invective. Yet some aspects of it are sheer fantasy embodying referents that are not possible in real life but nevertheless reflecting the worldview of the discourse community. Its usage is also age-grading, being ordinarily restricted to teenagers. *Ncha* is remarkable for its absence in nearly all other discourse communities. The context of the usage of *ncha* is also noteworthy for the purposes of this study. *Ncha* occurs only in the language game of youngsters. Game is used here more or less in the sense it carries in the sociological term, game theory. Youngsters employing *ncha* may be using it aggressively or playfully. The notable thing for the present purpose is that this form is used at a socio-psychologically important stage of the culture-bearer's life. I will compare it below with the form, dozens, that has been reported among African-American adolescents.

Ncha

Ncha untranslatable for the obvious reason that it is unattested in any other discourse community. Usually authors of *ncha* are unknown. *Ncha* is also known as *inu*, depending on the dialect and appears to have once been widespread. Indeed among the Okposi the preferred term is *inu*, making it polysemous with the term for proverb. But it has to be underlined that whereas as a rule proverbs appear in adult discourse, *ncha* is pre-adult. In a sense *ncha* can be regarded as the youngsters' foil for the adults' proverb. Evidence that *ncha* was once widespread among the Igbo is the fact that in some communities that no longer use it there is still the metaphorical exclamation, '*I kwuo ncha!*' ('You have uttered an *ncha!*') in reaction to someone whose speech is considered cheeky or brash.

Ncha in its literal form has been discontinued in most of the 300 odd communities that make up the Igbo culture area. It was popular among us youth in my own community, Okposi, as re-

cently as 1960s. No one performs it there anymore but I was pleasantly surprised recently to come upon a group of boys using it in a real-life roughhouse in another community not too far from my own. An *ncha* consists of two lines of statements. Both lines must be linked by a rhythm, which is truly *ncha*'s main claim to art. Performers cannot improvise, a major difference, as I will show, between it and the African-American dozens. Jemie, also an Igbo (but of a different dialect group) who has studied dozens, is impressed with the ability of its performers at improvisation. Indeed, he records that the form influenced some of the poems of Langston Hughes in whose works he is a specialist (Jemie, 1976: 31, 83-84; Burns, 2006: 348, 349).

In *ncha* the combinable lines are fixed, and can only be learned. It is amazing how antagonism is imbued with such beauty. I have not seen a report of an exact equivalent of it in the ethnological literature with regard to any other human group elsewhere in the world but it is noteworthy that some writers have speculated that the African-American dozens might have grown out of this sort of insult-strewn verbal play among the Igbo male (Burns, 2006: 347). Nor has this Nigerian case been documented previously.

Examples that I report in this essay are only those ones that have to do with gender or sex. It happens anyway that a good percentage of the entire corpus concerns these two social categories, gender and sex. Because it is inherently antagonistic and aims to hurt or shock the opponent, the butt of the attack is either one's putative wife or one's mother. In its playful version the former is usually the case. Ordinarily two boys will confront themselves in the bout. Occasionally a girl and a boy or a girl and girl will be the ones to spar. In its altercative versions, each side might get supporters among his siblings or cousins who might be of either sex. The parties will trade the invectives. It is considered smart to be able to think up more of these expletives and direct them at the opponents faster than they could do to you. A proponent must also be clever enough to sort his/her invectives according to their gender germaneness. For example, to propose to a female opponent 'to fuck' a female persona will expose the proponent as stupid or not bright. Usually it will draw derisive laughter from the posse.

I have collected 23 units of this rare form. Nine of these refer explicitly to sex. Out of the remaining 14, 11 refer to the opponent's self and three refer to opponent's father.

Table 1. Some gender-/sex-related *ncha*

<i>Ncha</i>	English translation
Okori Ogo nw'Idikariaogoęka, nye o ji atj kpakpaa nku n du n'ovja.	Okori Ogo the brat of Idikariaogoęka, your wife cleared the ebire fagots in the jungle with her vagina.
Chjta ękwinj ovu, raa Nkwọ nw'Ukpaa.	May you fetch the nestling of coucal ¹ , may you fuck Nkwọ nw'Ukpaa.
Chjta ękwinj enekakaka, raa Nkwọ nw'Ojukpakpakpa.	May you fetch the nestling of enekaka, ² may you fuck Nkwọ nw'Ojukpakpakpa.
Amasiri noje okompiti, ikpu nnye o duje mmsina.	May Amasiri ³ people keep lazing around, may your wife's cunt keep busy with a sewing machine.
Me ka anyi je n'ogo, rajaa okwunokwa.	Get set so we might hit the road, may the cutting board supporting the sex partner you are fucking split.
Isiekwu da kpil vokota eja, ikpu nnye o zi vaa pata une ji.	May the oil palmfruit bunch fall to the ground with a thud, may your wife's cunt zing through to grab a chunk of yam.
E see o egwo n'ireohu, sensen!.	May a strand of raffia be used in pulling your clitoris, senseni! ⁴
Kpirikoti, mua ge egu.	Kpirikoti ⁵ , may you spawn to the number of the tree grub.
Anigo egu kwu godo, m gbara e egbe, ikpu nye o me riwa m tieree utchu.	May an antelope gambol and so that I shoot at it, may your wife's cunt flash so that I insert my penis.

Source: author's field data

Some of the referents are impossible in the ordinary world, e.g. using the vulva to fetch fagot; or a vulva grabbing a chunk of yam ... nevertheless in the ncha's make-believe world all is possible. For our purpose, though, the important thing is that it is the female sex that is under attack. When the focus is on the opponent's self, the motif is misfortune or other rude wishes. When his father is the focus of the invective, it is on a part of his father's body other than his sex, or even to wish his father a violent death.

Table 2. Some ncha that are directed to an opponent's self or his father

<i>Ncha</i>	English translation
Tụe, m tụe, m tụe, nwuhụ, m kwaje ẹkwa. ⁶	Propose, so that I may propose, so that I may propose, die so that I may weep. ⁶
Tụe, m tụe, m tụe, nwuhụ, m chije ọchị.	Propose, so that I may propose, so that I may propose, die so that I may laugh.
O ji egbe e bebe e n'avia, ndakwukwu ụ tọ ọ n'ọkụ.	May he that carries his gun rest it in the marketplace, may your epileptic fit land you in a fire.
Gẹ m nẹ-eje ẹwụwọ nẹ-ajutu m, gẹ ị nẹ-amụ aganị nẹ-ekene o.	The grasses brush me as I move along, the variola greets the birth of each you're your child.
Oke nkita n dakara abọ, ji ọvuru ekpu a ọnu.	A male dog that broke the basket in which it lay, may you not eat the new yam.
Oke nkita ibirika ọjụ, ive ọjọọ juru u obu.	A male dog of a short strong tail, your heart is full of evil.
Nwoguduoteuvie, nwivuru-omenjo.	Nwoguduoteuvie ⁷ , (you) a great evildoer.
Kpirikoti, mua gẹ egu.	Kpirikoti ⁵ , may you spawn to the number of the tree grub.
Uvuzeneke, ọtaagbankita.	Uvuzeneke ⁹ , eater of dog's jaws.
Jee Ndiegu nẹ m nẹmawa o, vọọ mgboko ọgu ụ vuta o.	May you go to Ndiegu for I will soon return, pack the world on you hoe's blade and carry on your head.

Ọọ ive ị mọọ ne ọ dụ? Raa ewu Akpoke Nwigwe.	Must you always know everything? May you fuck Akpoke Nwigwe's goat.
Egbe bere ugo bere, e gbuo nna ọ ọgụ naa.	May the kite perch and the eagle perch, may the war end at the killing of your father.
Ukoro mgbingbi, nna ọ ọhụ ọcha.	The trunk of the papaya tree, your father the white anus man.
Ukoro mgbingbi, nna ọ ẹvọ ọcha.	The trunk of the papaya tree, your father the white tummy man ¹⁰ .

Source: author's field data

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the traditional Igbo society, not least the Okposi Igbo, demonstrate gender balance in nearly all social domains (Ezeh, 2007). Such is present here. To accommodate both sexes, there are propositions that are suited to the society's view of their functions. It is only peripherally that this might be counted against a society that managed its tabooing of birth control and absence of teenage pregnancy so effectively that incidents of accidental pre-marital pregnancy used to be zero in the entire community.

Peculiarity of Ncha as a Formulaic Folk Speech Category

It is important to compare *ncha* and the African-American *dozens* to bring out areas of similarity and disparity between the two forms. For readers who may not be familiar with the American form, a word should be said in terms of its description. To paraphrase Jemie (1976: 83), dozens is a form of verbal contest among African-American adolescents in which contestants trade, usually sexual, insults on, typically female, relatives. It may lead to a physical fight when a contestant has had more than his verbal resource can deal with. *Ncha* has both the playful and belligerent varieties. Dozens can only be bellicose. Burns (2006: 347) lists other terms for the form, depending of the parts of the US: sig-ging, signifying, capping, ranking, and sounding. Jemie (1976: 83) contains examples which he borrowed from an earlier study by H. Rap Brown, of which two are taken for illustrative purposes here.

- Your mother is a doorknob, everybody gets a turn.
- Let's get off the subject of mothers, 'cause I just got off yours.

Similarity

There are areas of similarity with *ncha*. As in *ncha* the performer aims to get at by saying something rude or insulting about his close relative; in this case his mother. Audience is also necessary in each case. In the last analysis, both are forms of public performance, what the sociolinguist, William Labov, has been reported as calling, if debatably, 'ritual insult'. In the Okposi Igbo genre there are usually supporters for each side. Also as in *ncha* the dozens' performer statement should not be prosaic. Even in its rudeness the statement must exhibit some ability at verbal art. Jemie (1976) has demonstrated the adaptation of this for poetry in the works of Langston Hughes, which fact demonstrates both the artistic quality of the American form but also its difference from the Okposi Igbo type. It may not be easy to adapt *ncha* for such a purpose, for the pre-eminent reason that it is rigidly a fixed form. Improvisation is typically impossible.

Disparity

The latitude for improvisation is the most conspicuous difference between the two genres. In dozens you can improvise. In *ncha* you cannot. There is also some thematic difference. While both targets close relatives of the opponents for attack, *ncha* performers may also direct the attacks at themselves. Some examples have been given in Table 2 above. "May you go to Ndięgu for I will soon return, pack the world on you hoe's blade and carry on your head." A wish of misery, rather like that of the Titan, Atlas, in the Greek mythology. "Must you always know everything? May you fuck Akpoke Nwigwe's goat." A demeaning of all demeaning wishes, for while normal humans will go for fellow humans as sexual partners the poor guy will be fit only for a goat.

There is a different category among the Okposi that is more closely related to the dozens. It is known as *ikwu ne* [pronounced, *ikwune*]. This is a hyponym under a large superordinate, *ikwu*, that will include any abusive utterance. *ikwu ne* may be translated as an abusive utterance against a mother. While adults may use other types of *ikwu*, *ikwu ne* is observed only among teenagers and ado-

lescents. Unlike *ncha*, *ikwú nē* has no playful version. As a rule, parties engage in it in an aggressive context. Often it may result in a physical fight. Again unlike *ncha*, it can be improvised. It is not formulaic although verbal skill is essential. The greater the ability of a party at skilful arrangement of his rude one-liners, the more his/her chances of overwhelming and therefore humiliating his/her opponent. At such a point the verbal bout can result in a physical combat.

I have also witnessed performers who started with the *ikwú nē* category and ended up with the *ncha* exchange in a single encounter. However, such is not always the case. Girls may also be involved in the *ikwú nē* exchange. In that case while she abuses the male opponent's mother, the male opponent may abuse her directly. The performer needs a good memory to excel in *ncha*. The more of the formulaic forms he can recall and hurl at his opponent the more successful he will be in the encounter. To succeed in *ikwú nē*, he/she needs a verbal skill of his/her own to improvise his/her insulting one-liners.

Burns (2006) speculates that dozens could be traced to insulting verbal performances among either the Ashanti of Ghana or the Igbo of Nigeria. I lack data that can admit reliable comments on the former. However, there is some evidence that the hypothesis of Igbo origin of the American variety is reasonable. Note that one of the synonyms of dozens is **signifying**. The Okposi Igbo's preferred term for *ncha*, namely *inu*, may also translate this alternative name of dozens, for *inu* means proverb or an expression that is not to be interpreted literally. But the application of the term, *inu*, to the bawdy bout of the Okposi Igbo youngsters creates a foil of the descent saws that is an important hallmark of descent adult speech. It is possible that the use of the term, **signifying**, as a synonym of dozens by the African-Americans is a calque or loan translation of the Okposi Igbo term. Burns' own account that links this to some of the psychological cruelties of the days of slave trade, the Igbo influence on linguistic practices of people of African origins is well documented. Louis Oraka has reported that in the 18th century the German researcher, G.C.A. Oldendorp, was collecting linguistic data from Igbo slaves in the Western Indies (Ezeh, 2012: 82, 83). Another researcher has also reported that up to 25 percent of African-Americans with slave ancestry have Igbo

roots (Nickerson, 1970). Dealers in the inhuman trade valued the Igbo human commodities for their acclaimed hardness.

There are two possibilities regarding the provenance of dozens that the Americans are familiar with, if its Igbo origins are established. One is that it seems to be related to *ikwú nē*; not *ncha*. The other possibility is that it is a reconstruction that seems to combine the two varieties in the foreign context. But more research is needed to be able to confirm either of these or any other possibilities.

Plain Speech

By this I mean speech that use words in their ordinary or denotative meaning. Heavy weather has been made lately by post-modernist or poststructural theorists about the status of denotative meaning in everyday verbal or written communication. But as writers such as Alvesson (2002) have observed, the issue of multiplicity of meaning tends to be exaggerated by such writers. Much as linguists have always recognized the problem of words having more than one meaning, such a phenomenon does not create the level of hopelessness or impossibility of communication as such extreme views, often unsupported by field-sourced investigations, might purvey (Anyanwu, 2008: 190 – 192). In the Okposi dialect of Igbo as well as other dialects of the language, it can be shown that speakers easily recognize the denotative meanings of words that have such (Mbah, 2007).

Belaboring the sub-topic of plain speech may only amount to unnecessary digression in this context. It seems advisable to focus on the remaining coded forms, namely proverbs and idioms.

The figurative genres; proverbs and idioms, provides insight into the ideology of the discourse community regarding coitus and associated biological functions. It seems that the agentive is always masculine.

Proverbs

The following are the related proverbs I collected and their English translations. Eleven (11) of these were collected in all. Each example is followed by its English gloss and finally by a comment on its implication to the coital worldview of the group.

Some Okposi Proverbs that are Related to Coitus

Utchu n jere iri eri ge gbonyi agbo.

Penis that sets off to enjoy a meal but ended up throwing up.

Comment: This seems to suggest that sexual activity is viewed here as demanding on the male partner in contradistinction to its touted status of being an enjoyable activity.

Iwo ive n ka ikpu kpee ikpu.

To pay for the vulva with that which is worth more than the vulva.

Comment: Vulva in this case is metonymical of sex or coition. This proverb is used in a context where someone ended up suffering greater consequence than the apparent advantage of an experience. For our purpose, it suggests that the group hold a low view of casual sex. It is not worth much trouble.

Ikpu nnye onye ozo a na-ara achu egwu.

One fucks someone else's wife's vulva in fear.

Comment: This proverb is used in contexts where one is functioning in a situation where one lacks confirmed legitimacy of status. For our purpose it suggests that rather like Macionis (2003: 228) has reported with regard to contemporary America, extra-marital sex is not unknown in this discourse community.

Ejere kahụ nẹ ejeo, nwanyị n jere ogori a pẹ ẹ nja akaja.

Venturing out no matter how modest the intension is better than idleness, for a woman had a fling and got a packet of salt to show for it.

Comment: This reinforces the claim for extramarital sex just mentioned. Besides, it also suggests that the woman's desire to earn money is an incentive for some of such experiences.

E nẹ-ekpenyara nwanyị ogori ye e kwoo, e seta utchu gosị ẹ.

To win over a hard-to-get potential extra-marital sexual partner you might have to expose your penis to her.

Comment: This proverb is used in contexts where soft-soaping is considered less effective than more determined bargaining strategy. Again, a reinforcement of the place of extra-marital sex in the social life of this group.

A roo ikpu, e je i voo e ji?

If the proper use of the vulva is not to fuck it, should it be treated to a meal of yam?

Comment: This proverb is always presented in this rhetorical question form. It suggests a down-to-earth attitude to matters of coition.

I je i no ikpu ne ndida eka me chi a boo?

Will you spend a whole amorous night merely stroking your partner's vulva?

Comment: It is used in contexts where an actor spends too much time on preliminaries rather than engaging the main act. Like the previous one, this proverb is also always presented in the form of a rhetorical question. It underscores the discourse community's view that coition is the ultimate objective of an amorous encounter.

Nwanyị onyeibi maara ajja di e.

The wife of someone with ascites of the scrotum will somehow find a way of making love with her husband.

Comment: In pre-contact days medicine men had no cure for this affliction. The proverb suggests that wives of anyone so afflicted had nevertheless to find a way of putting up with it. The proverb is said in contexts where a means has to be found in dealing with n intricate situation.

A ne-amajerị ne ikpu bu ikpu e tu e ehu nwanyị.

Although it is known that the real name of vulva is vulva nevertheless it is called the woman's body.

Comment: *Ehu nwanyị* is the euphemism for vulva in this dialect where descent diction is considered an important diacritic for good behaviour. The proverb is used in contexts where refinement or caution is required in dealing with a delicate social issue. For the purposes of this essay it underscores the decorum with which adult conduct must treat the subject of sex.

M me a jukanuụ mgbā agboo.

I don't refuse a nubile girl's offer of wrestling.

Comment: Said with regard to a man. The idea being that it is fun for the man whoever has the upper hand between the two. The proverb is used in a win-win situation. For the purposes of this

essay it refers to the felicity that is associated with sex in the speech community.

Èjọ ọdụ sere èjọ ẹnụ.

Improper sitting of the woman attracts lewd attention.

Comment: To understand this proverb one has to imagine what the situation was in traditional days when people were scantily dressed with only a loincloth without the equivalent of underpants or shorts. Society prescribed a sitting position for the woman that consisted in stretching her legs forward with one of them on top of the other. Sitting with the legs apart was considered improper. For the present essay, the social space allocated to the woman in sexual matters is protection of the morals by conducting herself in such a way as not to encourage tabooed coition.

Idioms

I collected four of these. Idiom is used in this essay in the sense Matthews (2002: 183) has defined it, namely, 'A set expression in which two or more words are syntactically related, but with a meaning like that of a single lexical unit.' He used the English example, 'spill the beans', to illustrate this. The Okposi dialect of Igbo has examples of this form, some of which concern sex. Among other functions, idiom is a convenient tool for euphemism which itself is crucial in discussing sex in some contexts in the Okposi discourse community. Decorum is considered essential in handling sex and fertility issues in respectable company and in most culturally defined relationships. A vulgar diction will almost certainly attract derisive laughter and is most likely going to expose the speaker as gross. Exceptions to this rule may be found in situations where youngsters engage in some amusement or quarrel among themselves outside the control of adults or where adults employ such coarse diction as a deliberate act of amusement, either in group or a more intimate engagement as a couple.

It seems therefore that idiom is an important medium for an insight into a group's worldview. More like the proverb, it uses what a group consider a settled fact of existence to make an appropriate statement in an unrelated area. I set out some sex-related Okposi idioms below; each followed by its translation in English and a comment on the context of its use.

Some Okposi Idioms that Are Related to Coitus and Associated Processes

igbaje oşo utchu gbakwuru nke okporokpo

to run into the real big penis while trying to dodge penis

Comment: Said in a paradoxical situation where one ends up in a complex situation in an attempt to escape a less complex one. In this study it is probably indicative of the fact that for some reasons some members of the female sex might be known to be frigid. For such it may as well happen that while trying to escape the experience of sex, circumstance might compel some of them to end up in it in a more unpleasant manner.

inabara madu n'uno

to go in to sleep in the house for someone

Comment: Used to say that a woman accepts freely to have sex with someone, usually her husband or any other culturally approved partner.

ékù madu n̄ nke madu ikokò

to co-hang one's cloth with that of another person

Comment: Usually said in the negative where the reverse of the previous example is the case. In a situation where the woman for whatever reason refuses to have sex as a sign of protest she might say that her cloth and that of the partner will no longer hang together. Other aspects of social life in the traditional society here must be understood to appreciate this idiom. Unhurried legitimate sex was made at night usually in the hut of the husband. In that hut there was usually a line to hang clothes so that the couple could make love staying naked.

íkpū okò

itchy vulva

Comment: Used to refer to a woman that is considered oversexed.

Discussion and Conclusion

We see in the case of the Okposi an ideology that allocates spaces on proper use of sex along gender lines. In the four linguistic forms that I have examined, coition is constructed as an act which the male partner is the agent. In the examples in this study, references to coition are such that only males are the grammatical agents and females are grammatical patients. A grammatical agent

is one that performs the act whether or not with the acquiescence of the patient. A grammatical patient is one on whom the act is performed. In the Okposi dialect the only word for coition in plain speech is *írā*. This word is used only to refer the act of the male partner in coitus. It cannot be applied to the act of the female partner. Strictly speaking it cannot, for example, translate the English expressions **make love to** or even **have sex with**.

Instead of being totally new, what has been found in the Okposi case rather seems to support a conclusion that is already familiar in recent anthropological literature, namely that much of sexual behaviour is cultural construct. Using variables other than language Seupin & DeCorse (2009: 280, 281) have cited ethnographies that revealed societies whose attitude range from keeping inhibitions to the barest minimum such as the Lepcha of Sikkim in the Indian subcontinent to those where inhibition to sex is a prized virtue such as many Arab communities and Beag Islanders of Ireland.

In the Okposi case, coitus protocol seems to be passed early in life to the young members of the community. This is evident in the terms for coition that are used in **ncha**, the word game used by youngsters in the speech community.

The passivity demanded of the female partner in matters of sex is paradoxical for a society whose structure is rooted in gender equity. But the situation becomes easy to understand when the circumstance of the period that produced these protocols is taken into account. I have pointed out elsewhere that the the Okposi, as most other Igbo groups, demonstrate gender balance in nearly all social domains (Ezeh, 2007). Such, closely examined, was also present in sexual relations. Both sexes were accommodated in consonance of the society's understanding of what was considered safe both for each partner and for the society as a group.

Acknowledgements

This is one of those articles where one ends up learning more from reactions of reviewers than one sets off to report. I send through this forum my sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers whose reactions opened my eyes to the possible relationship between one of the linguistic forms that I investigated, namely the *ncha* of the Igbo of Nigeria and the *dozens* of African-Americans.

This promises to be an important area of further investigations, however challenging. I have worked with no other editor that has the level of kind proaction of Professor Wolfgang Mieder. He sent some of the publications that were related to this subject that I otherwise couldn't have accessed in these parts. While debts of gratitude that I owe for these interventions are enormous, I am entirely to blame for any flaws the work may still contain.

Notes

¹ Coucal, a type of bird, *Centropus senegalensis*, that is common in these parts.

² A type of grasshopper that is common here.

³ A community neighbouring to the Okposi on the South-West.

⁴ Untranslatable ideophone imitating the movement of the pull.

⁵ Untranslatable ideophone peculiar to this form, probably suggesting a sense of horde in the manner of some tree-leaf-eating grubs that the statement refers to.

⁶ The first to start especially if this is in the game version of the encounter, must say this. His opponent will say the next.

⁷ Untranslatable name of a kind of bird found in the locality. Often it seems that the kickoff is chosen just for its suitability at provision of appropriate rhythm for the second and the offensive part of the structure in the dialect.

⁸ Name of a village's lineage.

⁹ Apparently a version of the previous one.

References

- Alvesson, M. (2002) *Postmodernism and social research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Anyanwu, O. (2008) "Essentials of semantics" (pp. 186 – 201). In: B. Mbah, & E. Mbah (Eds), *History of linguistics and communication*. Nsukka: Paschal Communications.
- Beals, R. & Hoijer, H. (1965) *An introduction to anthropology*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Burns, R. (2006) "Dozens" (pp. 346–350). In: A. Prahlad (Ed.), *The Greenwood encyclopedia of African-American Folklore*, Vol. 1. Wesport: Greenwood Press.
- Ezeh, P-J (2007) "Kinship and childrearing in two African societies: a comparative investigation of the Orring and the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria" (pp. 31–46). In: P. Liamputtong (Ed), *Childbearing and infant care issues*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Ezeh, P-J (2012) *Signs and society*. Nsukka: Great AP Publishers.
- Jemie, O. (1976) *Langston Hughes—an introduction to the poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Macionis, J. (2003) *Sociology*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall.

- Mbah, B. (2007) "Syntactic-semantic interface: contribution of B.O. Oluikpe to semantic theory" (pp. 2–14) . In: B. Anasiudu, G. Nwaozuzu, & C. Okebalama (Eds), *Language and literature in a developing country*. Onitsha: Africana-First.
- Mieder, W. (2010) "The world is a place: Barack Obama's proverbial view of an interconnected globe" (pp. 192–196). In: A. Aminova & N. Fattakhova (Eds.), *Sopostavitel'naia filologiya i polilingvizm*. Kazan: G. Ibragimova AN RT.
- Microsoft Encarta. (2008) Proverbs. Microsoft Encarta 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Nickerson, B.(Ed.) (1970) Chi: *Letters from Biafra*. Toronto: New Press.
- Oha, O. (1998) "The semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs". *African Study Monographs*, 19(2), pp. 87–102.
- Ojoade, J. (1983) "African sexual proverbs: some Yoruba examples". *Folklore*, 94(2), pp. 201–213.
- Onyejekwe, M. (2001) "Portrayal of women in Igbo proverbs". *Nsukka Journal of African Languages and Literature*, 2(1), pp. 128–134.
- Owomoyela, O. (1972) "The sociology of sex and crudity in Yoruba proverbs". *Proverbium*, 20, pp. 751–758.
- Rey-Debove, J. (1975) "Lexique et dictionnaire". In: B. Pottier (Ed.), *Comprendre la Linguistique*. Verviers: Marabout.
- Scupin, R. & DeCorse, C. (2008) *Anthropology – a global perspective*. New Delhi: PHI Learning.
- Ukaegbu, N. (2006) " Igbo aesthetics: the case of proverbs as key to Igbo worldview and culture". *Journal of Igbo Studies*, I, pp. 164–167.
- Wolkomir, R. (1993) "One proverb is worth a thousand words". *Reader's Digest* (Large-type Edition), March, pp. 265–276.

Peter-Jazzy Ezeh
 Department of Sociology & Anthropology
 University of Nigeria, Nsukka
 N-410001
 Nigeria
 E-mail: pitjazi@yahoo.com