

# Class, Social Status and Power Relations in Death Proverbs of Nsukka Igbo

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on class, social status and power relations as seen in proverbs on/about death among the Nsukka Igbo of South East Nigeria. The proverbs are collected from two communities in Nsukka: Edem and Obollo. It investigates these proverbs as sites of power, domination and control. The research is anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) because of the theory's interest in discourse, domination and power asymmetry. The relations of class, social status and power manipulation are undertaken without ignoring their place and function in the system within which they operate. The study discovers that death proverbs contain ethical values with which these communities are guided away from chaos, but some of them legitimize domination, the most common being in terms of age and social status.

**Key words:** death, proverbs, Igbo, Nsukka, discourse, power, class, social status, CDA.

## 1. Introduction

Concerns about class, social status and power relations have been shown in death studies in areas relating to mourning, burial practices, funeral rites, etc. A majority of this is seen in feminist and gender studies on the issue. Scholars have also focused on childhood deaths and the burial/mourning practices allowed in such situations in different cultures (Scheper-Hughes, 179) and on the strategies of coping (Walter and McCoyd, 34), while there is also abundant literature on how dead bodies serve as symbols of political order (Verdery, 306), for example. Among the Igbo also practices surrounding death, mourning and funerals, no doubt, offer a space for reading, class, social status and power relations. In addition to other possibilities, Opatá's classification of death among the Igbo indicates a divide along socio-economic line. For instance, *onwu ekpazi* stands in contradistinction to *onwu nwunwu* (good death), the like of which Achebe offers a fictional example in *Things Fall Apart*, where Ogbuefi Ezudu is wished back in the fullness of his past life. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to investigate class, social status and power relations as seen in the proverb lore of Nsukka Igbo. Thematic studies on death as well as proverb scholarship have essentially neglected death proverbs. Specifically in Africa, death studies is one of the most neglected areas of scholarly inquiry.

Yet, death generates the deepest emotional response from humans. Its occasion offers moments of deep reflection on the nature and purpose of existence as well as an attempt to come to terms with the meaning of life. Among the Igbo, as among many other cultural groups, death is not an end but a transformation and a continuation of life, hence the elaborate ceremonies and rituals during burials and funerals intended to secure a dignified place for the departed (Nwala 47). Opatá refers to these efforts as the 'graph of existence' and states that:

Among the Igbo, the occasion of death offers opportunity for people to interpret this graph of existence, and philosophize not only about death, but also about the general nature of existence and the ultimate meaning of life. Statements made about death/the dead do form a type of philosophy of existence among the traditional Igbo (172).

Among the Nsukka people of South Eastern Nigeria, death proverbs constitute one of the deeply profound statements made about death and life and which not only provide significant insights on the people's attitude to and understanding of death but also serve as a window into the nature of class and power relations. In other words, they constitute one of the structurally organized rhetorical modes of giving expression to the social and emotional impulses relating to the deepest concerns and aspirations of the people. Perhaps, this explains why E.N. Obiechina states that the fact of death as a vital unit of human experience provides one of the major impulses toward literary creativity within the Nsukka environment (187). He further argues that the Nsukka area of Igbo offers the best opportunity for cultural/artistic retrieval to anyone who intends to document the dying cultural and artistic traditions of Igbo land (183).

However, in spite of copious scholarship on Igbo proverbs (Joyce Penfield 1983; Austen Shelton 1971; Nwoga 1975; Egudu 1972; Emenanjo 1972; Nwachukwu – Agbada 2002, etc), there is a dearth of paremiographical and paremiological scholarship on the phenomenon of death not only among the Igbo but among Africa generally. Therefore, this study is a response to Wolfgang Mieder's call for paremiologists to undertake studies of obscure regional and dialectical proverbs (135). As will be quite evident in the examples

provided below, death proverbs among Nsukka people are used to philosophize about other areas of life not directly connected with death. They not only provide the basic emotional matrix for coping with the inevitability of death, the fears and trauma generated, but also are used to articulate social and class tensions in this society, tensions that ultimately give an insight into the people's attitude to death and the meaning of life. The study will also show, as Jean Deriche writes, that "the proverb in Africa is a highly valued mode of discourse that functions as an indication of cultural status" (374).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a tool. The reason is not far-fetched. CDA is interested in asymmetrical power relations in discourses, in dominations as well as in ideology in its implicit form where beliefs and practices common to a cultural group 'appear disguised as conceptual metaphors and analogies' (Wodak, 8). This latent expression of ideology results from 'assumptions that are treated as if they were common sense' (Agbedo, 1); but which goals are geared toward 'the service of sustaining unequal relations of power' (Fairclough, 84). About ideologies, Fairclough opines that they are

representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation. They may be enacted in ways of interaction (and therefore in genres) and inculcated in ways of being identities (and therefore styles). Analysis of texts... is an important aspect of ideological analysis and critique... (Fairclough, 218; Wodak and Meyer, 9)

Embedded in and disseminated through discourse, ideologies influence the way individuals make sense of their world, the way they act and interact. The centrality of power in CDA stems from the latter's interest in the discourse of domination, where power undergirds social structures and clearly manifests in social action lopsidedly. Thus Wodak argues that 'In texts, discursive differences are negotiated' and 'governed by differences in power' (10).

CDA's interest is in social power, i.e., 'power belonging to people who have privileged access to social resources' (Mayr, 11) and not power that is distinctively attributive to a specific individual unless such is 'enacted as an individual realization of group power, that is, by individuals as group members' (van Dijk, 254). However, critical discourse analysts understand power not so much as imposed but as being 'jointly produced' by both the dominated and the dominating. This is what makes Gramsci's concept of hegemony—people consenting to domination—crucial in CDA. Once this willingness is established, dominating institutions tend to perpetuate their hold 'through the discourse of their members' (Mayr, 1). Feminists and gender theorists find CDA attractive owing to the shared border with issues of common interest among them. Thus, Michelle Lazar argues 'that many studies in CDA with a gender focus adopt a critical feminist view of gender relation' and among other reasons, makes a case for a feminist CDA. Because CDA understands discourse as 'a form of social practice', the implication of which entails 'a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s), which frame it' (Fairclough and Wodak, 258; Wodak and Meyer, 5), it is linked inextricably with power within the space of which it engages in a dual role: 'sustain[ing] and reproduce[ing] the social status quo, and ... contribut[ing] to transforming it' (Fairclough and Wodak, 258; Wodak and Meyer, 6).

In her investigation of the role of proverbs in defining women's status in sub-Sahara Africa, Asimeng-Boahene argues that African proverbs relating to women highlight very prominently the subjugation of women (123). In some cases, according to her, 'some men use proverbs to justify and foster their hegemonic masculinity and practices in terms of legitimization of the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious, and military institutions' (124). Bode also discovers not only that in Kuria proverbs are embedded 'low social status of women and attitudes towards them' but also that these proverbs emphasize 'the necessity of male control over women' (242), thus pointing to the asymmetrical power relation and social control seen in African proverbs. This research, however, is not necessarily about gender issues or the woman question, though such a research may be fruitful in the proverb lore of Nsukka Igbo. This research is aimed at investigating dominance and power presence seen mainly across social line, age and class in proverbs on/about death among Edem and Obollo peoples of northern Igbo in Nigeria. In the next section, we shall present twelve (12) death proverbs collected among these people.

## 3. Some Death Proverbs among Edem and Obollo People of Nsukka

Below is a sample of death proverbs (rendered in the people's dialect but with English translations) current among Edem and Obollo people of Nsukka and collected during various contexts of performance.

**Proverb 1:** *Ge Onyene ha bu ge uzu ekwa ya ha.* (A man's status determines the degree of grief upon his death).

**Proverb 2:** *Agbenu nwuhu onwu, onwu gigde Ogbenye* (when a rich man dies, the poor hunger for death).

**Proverb 3:** *Onwu dike di ehuke uma ma ne mgbe iye dike ne-eme futar ndurunye kwagide onwu*



resources to perform all the rites associated with full and decent burial and funeral so that the deceased is assured of a peaceful, hitch-free journey to the ancestral world (Opata, 177).

However, proverb 4 indicates that not all (rich) people who die may be celebrated. The moral and egalitarian world of most African societies of which the Nsukka Igbo is a part regards the individual as part of the organic whole, and moral living is emphasized at every life stage. T. U. Nwala writes that 'in the Igbo world the moral principle is seen to control both physical and human events. And this moral principle is an integral element of their world view' (87). Thus what could demean a corpse and render it evil would come from certain terrible moral lapses that rank among the worst in the world view of the people. D.U. Opata discusses the range of such *ajo onwu* (bad deaths) to include persons under any type of interdiction, death by fire, suicide, etc (179-83). Deaths arising from circumstances itemized above are always considered evil and affect the quality of burial/mourning no matter the social standing of the deceased. But not all deaths in this category are demeaning to the extent that the corpse of the deceased becomes a deity's property. Such a situation arises when such a death results from an individual's action such as stealing something dedicated to such a deity or when such a person steals from someone else who, after a series of efforts to recover what is stolen, appeals to such a deity to haunt the thief. In a case like this, the relatives of the deceased feel terribly shameful, and if they intend to bury the deceased they are required to consult a diviner who will outline the processes involved for the corpse belongs to the deity. Suicide cases are very similar. The bereaved are forbidden from touching the corpse or even weeping until elaborate rituals and sacrifices are performed by those whose duty it is. In such cases too, friends and well-wishers are not allowed to mourn the deceased or support the bereaved with food items or even money until the necessary rituals are made.

Proverb 3 is related to the second in its emphasis on the desire for death, especially by one of a low social status in respect of another of a better social standing. The distinction between *agbenu* (the rich) and *dike* (the brave) need not be exclusive. The shift from traditional society to the contemporary space has placed the man of economic-cum-political power at the centre of decision-making where also opportunities exist for a show of bravery. Thus even though the terms are not synonymous, they are not totally exclusive. But why should the lazy (*ehuke*) be happy at the death of the brave without, as we see in Proverb 2, desiring to die the brave's death? *Ehuke* is the laziest of the lazy, and in traditional society, is the butt of many social jokes, jeers, ridicules, and satiric songs. His foil is usually the brave and the prosperous. Nwabueze brings this out in his study of Igbo masquerade drama where he discusses how the characters of the *efulefu* (*ehuke*) and the brave are delineated in Igbo masquerade performances (117-25). So the *ehuke's* wish for the brave's death becomes a desire to free himself from the social stigma and the psychological trauma emanating from the presence of one who has become a social terror for him.

But the proverb's second segment indicates how excruciatingly painful the exit of the brave (*dike*) and/or the prosperous is in the life of the lazy and the poor. The latter remember the former when the occasion for what the former is known confronts them. At such a moment, they are left helpless, totally devastated, and endangered. We find a good example of the impact of *dike's* death in Kofi Awoonor's "Songs of Sorrow" where the living mourn helplessness as those who could not stand their forebears now threaten them: "And Kpeti's great household is no more,/Only the broken fences stand;/And those who dared not look in his face/Have come out as men". This is when '*ndurunye*' mourn the exit of the brave and remember the brave's duty to their own existence.

Proverb 5 portrays a complexity apparent in power shift. Among Nsukka people, as in other parts of Igboland, elders are the repository of traditional wisdom and knowledge; thus, the death of an elder creates a huge vacuum in the socio-cultural and political consciousness of the entire community. When the deceased is the eldest man in the community/village, the processes of succession may unveil some lacuna in the successor's knowledge of the intricacies and dynamism of power use. Thus, he, i.e. Ogbuebo, is in a quandary as he, either through inexperience or lack of diplomacy, begins to confront the challenges of a new office or in the process creates administrative tension between him and his people. Though underscoring the limits of human imagination under certain exigent situations, the proverb makes subtle distinction between the experienced and the inexperienced, the young and the old, and the obvious power relations between them. It was the presence of the one who just passed away that had provided a shield protecting the next in command from the critical gaze of the people.

This distinction plays out in another form in Proverbs 6 and 7 when the child-adult relation is indicated in the form of a transition from one class to the other. In many societies, children's deaths 'are regarded as "minor" losses or they are completely disregarded by society, and sometimes parents themselves' (Young and Papadatou, 194-95). Among Nsukka people, the death of a child is abhorrent and seen as against the natural order since life is expected to terminate at a very ripe age. But when there is a premature death such as that of infants, all efforts are made to downplay the physical loss and the emotional trauma in a way not seen when an adult or elderly person dies. It is in this belief that the death of a child is a minor loss that Proverb 6 is anchored,

its use being to encourage the bereaved to see such a death as insignificant and to continue with life's struggles. Be this as it may, it is also common knowledge that the child would have grown into adulthood and become a more meaningful member of their society. The distinction is also seen in metaphors indicating sustenance. Traditionally, what the child feeds on is liquid (breast milk, water, *akam*), captured in the metaphor of *miny* (water) as opposed to the saying that 'one has refused food'—a euphemistic way of announcing the death of an elder. The dichotomy between child and adult, young and old, is cast by considering their forms of sustenance: liquid and solid.

Proverb 7 indicates a problem associated with the time of death, whereby an elder's death at noon links the deceased with the death of children. Young and Papadatou write that 'throughout most of the history of humankind, the death of infants and children were common events' (192). Most of these deaths were sudden and occurred in the day time or at noon. In the case of *onwu ogbanje* to which the proverb alludes, such a death is the most unpredictable and the most frequent as the spirit-child makes a pact to die young in its almost unending cycles of birth, death and rebirth. And as dying young is not a good death among the Igbo, and worse when associated with *ogbanje*, such a death of an elder at noon challenges the status of the deceased and casts doubts on his ability to reach the ancestral world. Perhaps, another way to understand this is to be seen in the belief among the Igbo that it is a sacrilege to bury the dead, especially an elderly person, at noon for fear that their spirit may not have a smooth journey to the ancestral abode. Such a practice now suffers strict adherence following Christianity and the evolving influence of modern living.

Class distinction in Proverb 10 is understood at the level of implicature. *Usebo* is evil as seen in the expression *usebo nwa*: an evil child. Thus we understand evil in this proverb in two ways at least. One is as evil (death) omen. The belief in death signs, that is, precursors to impending deaths—the sudden appearance of certain animals (e.g a hare), the hooting of an owl, etc—exists in the folk belief of many cultures. The absence of these signs 'which bridge two time dimensions, the present and the future, the natural and the supernatural' (Badone, 65) results in the suddenness of death and therefore in the rich's/great's inability to ward it off, or at least to fight it bravely. This proverb is really paradoxical, considering the strong belief among the people that the death of the rich/great is prefigured by great signs. The second which is more relevant to death practices in contemporary time and which offers a social situation for the use of this proverb is the belief that the rich/great almost always die a good death, that there is no form of stigma attached to their life or death, even where this is obviously not so. In such a situation, some customs are relaxed and the deceased receives full burial/funeral rites, the occasions of which are marked with great celebrations and attract many 'sympathizers'. The contrast is seen at the death of one from a lower class. In short it is usually the death of the poor that has ugly stories surrounding it.

The first insight in Proverb 10 above can help clarify Proverb 8. Why the death of the rich/great is painful is because of the important place, usually political and socio-economic, which they occupy in their community. The suddenness of their death creates a terrible shock, a gap so difficult to fill, and a memory filled with irremediable loss; death has really reaped an enormous harvest, and can make a boast of its triumph. However, Proverb 8 indicates that such a boast is not necessary, the contest having been unequal. The trophy is nothingness. This sense of inequality is conveyed in the choice of lexical items: *urioto/ukpara* (the poor, the wretch) versus *oba* (the rich/brave/mighty). The proverb is therefore used to warn against undue exploitation and oppression between the classes. There is another proverb among Nsukka people, though not related to death, which can help to give more insight into this idea: "*Uma buru mpoto adigi nko*", meaning that a knife that severs a coco-yam leaf cannot boast of sharpness. It suggests that people should not demonstrate their superiority, physical prowess, or strength over those who are apparently less-privileged, weaker and less-fortunate. It is a traditional power dynamics embedded in the social structure of the Igbo as a means of ensuring harmonious and stable society and meaningful co-existence.

The dyad, the oppressed and the oppressor, is at the core of Proverb 9 where the sphere of influence is the polygamous family. The intricate power game among co-wives to gain undue advantage for their own children or to secure the sole attention of their husband is well known. The proverb indicates that the first wife's show of grief at the occasion of a co-wife's death may be mere charade. But it does not take a long time to discover this, as her relationship with the children of the deceased, especially with respect to feeding, soon after the mourning period will give her away. This is underscored in the proverb where '*mgba-ekwu*', the tripod-support, becomes an instrument of justice or a disclosure of oppression. Thus the genuineness or otherwise of the feeling of loss at the death of a co-wife is demonstrated in the acceptance and accommodation of the children of the deceased by the surviving co-wife.

Proverb 11 makes a distinction not based on physical wealth like Proverbs 2, 8, and 10 but on wisdom and age; and therefore, establishes the divide between the aged and the young captured in the terms, 'spirit' and 'human'. In Igbo cosmology, the aged are associated with spirit by virtue of their closeness to the ancestors and command respect and reverence for this as well as for their wisdom. That the spirit begins to emit the smell of

humans (*madu/mmadu*) indicates a loss of its spiritual essence, that very ingredient that makes it an object of reverence. This loss is therefore a fall in status and a neutralization of the already established difference between the two classes, resulting in a challenge of authority and power and the consequent waning in deference.

Among the Igbo, *onwu nwunwu* is a 'fulfilled' death, i.e. the death of one who has lived a fulfilled life as adjudged by the people; thus, such a death is characterized as good, and calls for celebrations. It is an occasion during which children and relatives of the deceased show appreciation to the dead. For those who can afford such glamorous celebrations, nothing is spared. It is an occasion to showcase wealth, and it comes with so much fun and fanfare. Usually such celebrations are the talk of the community for years thereafter. Proverb 12 relates to Proverb 2 because of its allusion to elaborate celebrations that come with the death of the wealthy or of one with wealthy relations. The woodpecker makes the boast of how colourful activities marking the death of his mother would be, thereby alluding to his access to social resources as a way of emphasizing distinction and inequality. This indicates that death occasions are also occasions to announce and emphasize class. For the wealthy, the occasion usually attracts many people: sympathizers as well as those who 'come to feed their eyes' and behold the power of wealth, usually the less privileged. This also points to what we have seen above in Proverb 1: A man's status determines the level of grief upon his death. In a place where poverty is high as it is always the case, this occasion polarizes the classes further along socio-economic line.

But the proverb also underscores a kind of arrogance where one's behavior and utterances betray a sense of confidence even about the unknown and things one has no control of. Nturuokpokpo fails to acknowledge eventualities in his boast. Thus, he thinks that the future belongs to him as the present does. The metaphoric boil which he develops at the most vital source of his strength—the mouth—is cautionary. It is a warning that life is always about change. Hence, the unforeseen mishap has marred his mother's burial/funeral rites, which are now to be conducted in a manner beneath his class and his expectations.

## 5. Conclusion

What emerges so far from our analysis of class, social status and power relations in death proverbs among Nsukka people is that though certain basic distinctions are made on the basis of class and social status, the tension between the classes need not be destructive, the ethical values enshrined in the proverbs acting as a check on human excesses and abuse. Each proverb is anchored on a strong ethical value common among the Igbo and seen in their belief in the sacredness of life, in the spirit of cohesion and cooperation, in the value of positive living, etc. Though some indicate subtle power relations and exercise of authority, they also present a space where everybody is in the know and hence aware when a situation becomes tense and requires a radical change like in Proverb 11. But, no doubt, there are others that may be really repressive, especially to the poor. Some are quite evaluative and project ideologies that show 'well-groundedness rather than truth' (Fairclough, 18). A majority of the proverbs reflects power relations and domination along the line of age and social status and not gender. This paper, therefore, has amply demonstrated that death proverbs among the Nsukka Igbo offer a site for reading differences in status, class, and power relations.

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