

A SOCIO-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S IGBO BIRTH SONGS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines women's language use as custodians of culture as exemplified in Igbo birth songs which are repositories of culture as well. Marriage among the Igbo is seen as a sacred union. The birth of children accords fulfilment to marriage. Fecundity also gives women root in a patriarchal society. Women celebrate their fulfilment, potentials and cultural values in birth songs to establish their relevance and worth. This paper assesses birth songs with socio-cultural values and implications. It highlights the birth songs as directive speech acts. It also examines birth songs as expressive speech act. This study is hinged on Austin's (1962) Speech Act theory. Ten samples of birth songs constitute data for analysis. Many features of speech acts are adopted to indicate the mother's role in inculcating the right and proper values. The interpersonal metafunction of language is employed as the mood and feelings of women are demonstrated. The directive and expressive speech acts are predominant in birth songs. Some are entreaties that money should not be placed above the child. The child must be appreciated irrespective of the sex. It is discovered that generosity, good-will, benevolence, patriotism and appreciation are some of the virtues stressed by the birth songs. Most of the songs are also entreaties for the parents to invest on their children irrespective of sex. This study concludes that birth songs teach morals, educate the young and old to refrain from evil and also do good. The songs can bring positive attitudinal change. This study suggests that teachers of English as Second Language and Igbo as Second Language can use birth songs to prevent the indigenous languages from being pulverized. This can also be adopted to inculcate the values and virtues approved by the communities in our youths for attitudinal change.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines women's roles as culture transmitters through Igbo birth songs. Oral tradition which is information passed down to generation through words of mouth help in keeping a culture alive. However, traditional values are fast eroding with advancement in technology, thus, turning the world into a global village resulting in clash of cultural and intercultural perceptions. The African traditional values which are stored in the memories of the recantours suffer neglect and near extinction in the wake of globalization and technology. Many individuals now are ignorant of the cultural patterns that characterize the society they live in. They are also ignorant of the influence of their respective cultures on habits and values. To a large extent, people's behaviours are greatly influenced and moulded by their interactions with their cultures. Women, in many Nigerian societies have helped to keep alive many traditions, norms and values that would have been dead like the birth songs. Birth songs have continued to live on because women have continued to give birth on a daily basis. The birth song like soccer has continued to keep the women together and helped them assert their importance.

Women are known as custodians of culture and their traditional roles help a lot in sustaining traditional values. Zuofa, (2006, p.81) asserts that in terms of the culture of the people, "the women are security officers guarding the entire fabrics of their respective cultures." This role is very significant when they teach recommended traditional habits. Women in this vein help the younger members of the society to live in accordance with the dictates of the culture. The position of women has been acknowledged at both local and international levels due to the vital roles they play in transforming the home and the entire environment. They are the custodians of social, cultural and fundamental values of a society and permanent change is often best achieved through them" (UNESCO, 1984).

Before, children are culturally taught among other things in the use of indigenous language and they grow to appreciate the value and worth of life. The reverse is the case with globalization. “Globalization has brought new ideas and values, introducing various uses of electronic devices and faster ways of doing things and achieving quick results, quick money, quick certificate and so on” (Zuofa, 2006, p.81). Morals have been buried in the mud and anything goes in the society because other cultures have been adopted. The use of indigenous languages is under serious threat of being pulverized as parents no longer use the mother-tongue to communicate with the children and even people from their tribes. The use of English language is preferred and in most cases the adulterated English language form. If a child does not understand and speak his indigenous language, how then would learning of his culture be possible?

This paper therefore, examines among other things how traditional values are reflected and sustained through birth songs. It also investigates how these birth songs can help in resuscitating the Igbo language which is feared is getting pulverized in the wake of globalization. The primary medium of expression of these songs is the indigenous languages. It is hoped that the pedagogic relevance of these birth songs will be laid bare by this study and adopted by teachers of English as a Second Language to help students appreciate the values of these birth songs as well as the high premium placed on worth of a child especially now that many mothers sell their children to make wealth. It is hoped that teaching students of tertiary institutions these birth songs will bring positive attitudinal change.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study sets out to:

- assess birth songs with socio-cultural values and implications.
- highlight birth songs as directive speech acts.
- examine birth songs as expressive type of speech act.

THEORETICAL CLARIFICATIONS

This study is hinged on Austin's (1962) Speech act. The six speech acts that have received particular attention include:

- 1) Representatives which represent the state of affairs: assertions, statements, claims, hypothesis, descriptions, suggestions. Representatives can generally be characterized as true or false.
- 2) Commissives commit a speaker to a course of action: promises, pledges, threats and vows.
- 3) Directives are intended to get the addressee to carry out an action: commands, requests, challenges, invitations, entreaties, dares.
- 4) Declarations bring about the state of affairs they name: blessings, hirings, firings, baptism, arrests, marrying, declaring mistrials.
- 5) Expressives indicate the speaker's psychological state or attitude: greetings, apologies, congratulations, condolences, thanksgivings.
- 6) Verdictives make assessments or judgements: ranking, assessing, appraising, condoning. (Finegan, 2012, p.304).

Finegan (2012, p.305) maintains that in discussions of speech acts, it is common for the illocutionary act itself to be called the speech act. Austin (1962) again identifies three principal components of speech act that can be performed by a speaker in uttering a sentence. They are:

- locution
- illocution and
- perlocution

This study maintains that these songs perform some of the functions of utterances since songs are aspects of poetry.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Birth songs are songs that women sing to herald the birth of a baby as a sign of thanksgiving to God, the giver/creator. Women use these songs to express their excitement and to welcome the new baby. They

do this because during this period, both the mother and the women around her receive special treatment from the father of the new child.

Birth songs are traditional and value laden rendition designed to herald the birth of a new baby. They are pleasurable forms communally and orally shared. Birth songs celebrate the essence of the child being. "Every great event such as the triumphant return from battle or other cause of public rejoicing is celebrated in public dances which are accompanied with songs or music suited to the occasion" (Okoh, 2002, p.12). These songs are didactic, they help the growth of the young one's cognitive aesthetics and moral values increase as they stand around and appreciate these songs. These songs are repositories of culture. Knowing the expressions, meanings and messages that are part of our cultural heritage enshrined in these songs make us culturally literate. Birth songs are the prerequisite of legal marriage. Birth songs are not rendered for any birth outside wedlock. Birth celebrated in many traditional communities are for only those that are legally married. Consequently, it is the pride of any woman who is traditionally married. In this instance, illegitimacy in child bearing is frowned at by this tradition as the birth of any illegitimate child is not heralded and celebrated as the legitimate ones, the sex of the baby notwithstanding. By so doing, the values of morality are inculcated in our youths. Birth songs constitute an avenue through which Igbo women find expression. The art of oral rendition has been popular among the Igbo and seeses as a means of cultural transmission through the performance of oral arts forms of particular occasions. Akpoorbaro (2006,p.32) authenticates this view asserting that:

verbal forms of oral communication existed long before the advent of writing in 1945 which made possible the tradition of forms of printed literature. Man therefore from his origins up to the time of printed literature resorted to the spoken words, - songs, narratives and recitations for the exercise of his creative impulse abilities.

Okoh (2002, p.49) explains that oral forms as tales, epics, varieties of songs, lullabies, riddles, proverbs, tongue twisters, anecdotes and jokes are literary forms transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation and constitute traditional materials from which many of the early African writers tapped the wealth of materials for their works. This being the case, varieties of songs, of which the birth songs constitute a section should be treasured and preserved by all means so as to ensure longevity in constituting data for future researchers and usage. In terms of classification, Finegan, (2012, p.24) asserts that songs feature in all aspects of African life and are therefore known in terms of the social occasions they are associated with.

Structurally, the Igbo songs fall into one homogeneous pattern. They are made up of few lines each consisting of verses and chorus. The lines are repeated and enacted. The Igbo birth songs are not sung or rendered for the fun of the singing. Rather, their renditions are carefully thought-out compositions of ideas intended to communicate messages to the society in the guise of entertainment.

These songs are rooted in the culture of the people as relevant images are drawn from the immediate environment and directed towards the advancement of the society. The art of composition of these songs is stored in the memory of the artist who recalls as occasion demands. Consequently, songs generally are bound by the primary occasions of their performance from where they derive their names.

Birth songs are the exclusive preserve of women through which they celebrate the awareness and fulfilment of their dreams and hopes. Women come together at the birth of a baby to celebrate their felinity and the superiority of motherhood as can be seen in the name *Nneka* which is proudly translated as mother is supreme. The themes and techniques of these birth songs enhance and empower the women who are suppressed and relegated to the background in a patriarchal society (Ifi, 2011).

For the purpose of this study, the birth songs that constitute data for analysis are classified under:

- Songs with socio-cultural values and implications
- Songs exploring the importance of children
- Songs of thanksgiving
- Songs that inspire moral values.

Songs of Socio-cultural Values and Implications

O nuru akwa nwa eee aa ee

O nuru akwa nwameengwangwa

O bughi ofu onye mu nwa.

He who hears the cry of a child e e
He who hears the cry of a child should hurry
Because a child doesn't belong to one person.

This particular birth song conveys the Igbo's world view of the extended parenthood. Child rearing in Igbo culture does not rest on the shoulders of the child's parents alone. Every adult in the community is an extended parent to that child. It conveys the concept of shared responsibility in child's upbringing. It is seen as a neglect of duty and responsibility for any adult not to correct an errant/erring child or youth. The 'cry of a child' is also extended to the financial support to the child's educational requirement. Any man or woman that defaults in making contributions towards any child's social, cultural, moral and educational needs and growth is seen as selfish, an enemy of progress. This heeding to cry of the child be it social, educational and otherwise accounts for why many communities institute:

- Communal scholarship to take care of the educational needs of their brilliant but financially handicapped sons and daughters.
- a central purse to take care of funeral rites of financially handicapped kindred member.
- stop kindred members from plucking their palm fruits for specific number of months to raise money to build a house or marry for a handicapped kindred member.

This particular song emphasizes the need for *kindred spirit*. There are also intra-textual elements in the song like the use of repetition. The social relevance of this linguistic choice lies in its didacticism. Repetition is for emphasis. "He who hears the cry of a child" is repeated to show the need for prompt attention to a child/kinsman's needs. There is no place for selfishness in Igbo culture that is why even an orphan can live by mercy of every woman in the kindred. Every woman is compelled to give food to the orphans. This also calls out for spirit of magnanimity. Generosity is one virtue that is passionately appealed for by these songs as part of cultural demand. Communal effort in attaining to one another's needs is advocated. This is designed to inculcate positive attitude and attitudinal change in members of the society.

This song encourages the virtue of kindness which is "the extension of benevolence not only to some one in need but also to one who does not deserve it. This virtue is necessary in the society in order to combat acts of wickedness. The virtue encourages people to avoid hurting or injuring the feelings of other members of the society. This helps to reduce friction and enables people live amicably with each other as one must be kind to those who are poor and needy, weak and sick. People contribute for the treatment of sick people in the hospital especially those who cannot pay their hospital bills. When this kindness value is inculcated, one extends it to people from other parts of the nation or countries so that when for instance one hears in the radio or television of sick people who need help, one can willingly contribute to the cost of treating such people.

Another birth song that manifests socio-cultural value is

O muru nwale bara ya anya
Nwabuwaoma e ee
Nwanyi muru nwale bara ya anya
Nwa kariri ego igwe.

Whosoever has a child should look after him well
A child is a good fortune e ee
A woman who bore a child should look after him well
A child is greater than money.

This song reflects the directives speech act as an entreaty. This particular song portrays one major responsibility of African women – ordering a society. The training of the child is the sole responsibility of the woman. The birth of a child empowers and uplifts the woman to become one of the custodians of the most valuable asset – the child – in the society, thereby placing the woman's role in child rearing above that of the man. The neglect of this role is the problem with the society today. Where there is lack of parental/maternal care, the resultant effect is having too many restive youths. When mothers instead of taking

care of the children like the traditional women leave the child's care in the hands of maids, what we have are children without any knowledge of the required values. The song **warns** that money should not be placed above the child, Nwa kariri *ego igwe*. But the reverse is the case now. Some mothers indulge in the abominable act of selling their children; they make wealth with their children which in their old age will not be answer to their problems.

For the society, the child is more precious than anything else, so, there is the entreaty to rear the child well since the child is more precious than money. This entreaty "a woman who bore a child look after it well" reflects the illocutionary point of language as an entreaty. It is the directive speech act which is intended to get the addressee to carry out an action – devote time training the child. The intention is persuasion, advice for mothers to devote more time in the up bringing of the child. The woman is the custodian of societal most valued asset – a child. That is why any childless woman is restless feeling that nature has deprived her of life's most precious gift.

Birth Songs as Directive Speech Act

Another birth song that stresses the value and need of training the child is *nwa lee, nwa bara uru*. Child e e e, child is important.

Nwa lee, nwabara uru

Ma a zuo nwa na akwukwo

Nwa nwoke bu ukwu oji m doron'ezidi m lee

Nwa Nwanyi bu afia m gara na nke di m oo

Child e e e a child is important

Let me train my child in school

For a male child is the iroko tree I have planted in my husband's house

For a female child is the market I went for in my husband's house.

This song is also a directive emphasizing the need to give qualitative education to every child. The 'Iroko' tree is an economic trees of very great value. Metaphorically, the birth of a son establishes the feet of every woman firmly. She is enriched and this makes her an umbrella to members of her society. The female child's relevance is equated to that of the market where one finds every item of necessity. Another song that emphasizes on the relevance of a child is:

Eji nwa eme ihe ooo

Ma nwoke, ma nwanyi

Eji nwa eme ihe

Nke mara ihe.

A child is used for something

Whether a male or female

A child is used for something

Especially the reasonable one.

This particular song calls for every child to be cherished irrespective of sex. It demands equal training of both sexes as they will be useful.

The importance of a child is seen in yet another song.

Onye nwere ihe kariri nwa

Ya enye kwala m

Asi m onye nwere ihe kariri nwa

Ya enye kwala m

One who has anything more than a child

Do not give it to me

I said, one who has anything more than a child

Do not give it to me.

The measure of a man's wealth in the traditional society is measured by the number of his children. In that society, the children complement farm lands and help parents to have bumper harvest.

Birth Songs as Expressive Speech Act

Another song that highlights the importance of children is *Omumuerichila ego m ya do na*, this child birth has exhausted my wealth let it be.

Omumu erichala m ego ya di ba
Omumu nka erichala m ego m yadi bankuru mu nwa

Child birth has exhausted my wealth, let it be
This child birth has exhausted my wealth, let it be
Let me carry my baby!

This song is expressive. The feeling of absolute joy and contentment is communicated here. It does not matter if the celebration for the gift of a new born eats deep into a man's wealth. The important thing is to have a child. This communicates the relevance of child in the African/Igbo Society.

Another birth song that highlights the importance of the gift of a child is entitled *obughi ma nwa*, if not for a child.

Obughi ma nwa, onye g'enye m?
Obughi ma nwa, onyeg'enye m?
Okporoko, onye g'enye m?
Akwajoji, onye g'enyem?
Goludwochi, onye g'enye m?
Mbalari, onye g'enye m?
Akpukpu ukwu, onye g'enye m?

If not for a child, who would have given me?
If not for a child, who would have given me?
Stock fish, who would have given me?
George wrapper, who would have given me?
Gold watch, who would have given me?
Umbrella, who would have given me?
Shoes, who would have given me?

This song which is expressive, philosophical, and a reflection of life catalogues the gifts a wife receives at the birth of a child as compensation. This goes a long way in establishing the woman's newly rooted status. The presence of a child in any marriage is believed to help stabilize the relationship between the man and his wife. Chukwuma (2000, p.61) commenting on this song asserts that:

Fecundity gives women placement and prominence in the society, especially in a patrilineal system. In celebrating this feat of womanhood, the woman reduces all humanity to a fetus, and so all humanity and society could offer to the woman is reenacted in the above song.

Viewed from another perspective, this particular birth song is satirical. It satirizes stingy husband's who do not give their wives presents except when their wives have children. *Obughi ma nwa, onye g'enye m?*, if not for a child, who would have given me? The song is expressive. It reflects the woman's psychological state or attitude. Invariably, the song condemns a husband's stinginess. Another song that subtly condemns a husband's stinginess is *Di m naraasi onwe ya onwe ya*, my husband that used to say himself himself.

Di m nara asi onwe ya onwe ya
Di m nara asi onwe ya onwe ya
Ma ugbu anwa abiala
Di m si m ma nyeaka n'igbe
Kporo ego out m choro ooo

My husband that used to say himself, himself
My husband that used to say himself, himself
But now that a baby has come
My husband has authorized me to dip hands into his box
And collect as much money as I want ooo.

Furthermore, **good-will**, and **benevolence** are some of the virtues stressed by the society as portrayed in the birth songs. New born babies attract gifts. The society expects friends and well wishers to give gifts to the mother and baby. This way, the value of kindness is inculcated even in the young as the Igbo proverb says “a child is not seen without anything”.

Songs of Thanksgiving

The world at large believes that children are gifts from God. This accounts for the names that parents give their children like *Chinenyenwa*—God gives a child, *Chinyere*— God gives, *Ifunanyachukwu*— God’s love, *Otitodirichukwu*—May God be praised, *Chukwuemeka*— God has done well, and so on. One of the virtues that the Igbo culture emphasizes is appreciation/thanksgiving. The Igbo believes that when even a mere mortal does a favour for one, one must be thanked or appreciated. The thanksgiving songs express gratitude to God for a successful natal and post-natal periods. God is extolled for the miracle of bestowing a crown of glory on the woman *Ugochinyere*. Child birth brings special joy of fulfilment and beauty to every family and the society at large so God is appreciated in songs like:

Anyigakelechukwu
Anyigakelechukwu
Chukwunyereanyinwaa
UmunwanyiChinemere
Anyiomanauwarara ahu o o?

Let’s go and thank God
Let’s go and thank God
God who has given us a child
Women whose God favours
Do we know that life is difficult?

The song combines many features of speech acts. It is directive as an invitation to do an act of thanksgiving which is an expressive. It reflects the interpersonal meta-function of language as it expresses the feelings and mood of the singers. At the same time, the act that deserves the action as well as the actor are communicated.

Another song of thanksgiving is:

Chineken’enyenwa Imeela
Ekele diri gi, mmamma

God that gives child, thank you
All praises be to you.

The conscious attempt at thanking God is communicated in the Igbo names such as *Ekene dirichukwu*, *Chinweotito*, *Kelechukwu*. The Igbo believes that when you praise God for one favor, He extends others. So, the sustaining power of God as well as his wonderful gifts are appreciated.

Birth Songs that Inspires Moral Values

Some birth songs are employed to provide moral values by which people live. Such moral values portrayed in birth songs include what is good or evil, otherwise referred to as virtues and vices. The essences is to enrich people’s morals for the welfare of both individuals and society at large.

Iheoma me nga a o!
Erim ebele m ee
Nwoke mere ihe a bu nwoke n’ezie
Iheojoo e mekwalinga a o!
Maka o gu m ozo
Nwoke newulo anyi ekpupurula gi okpu.
Let good things happen here
I have not yet started eating

The man who did this is a man indeed
Let evil not befall here
For I long for more
The man of the house, we doff our hats for you.

The semantic import of this song among other things rests in the emphasis on the legality of marriage union. People must be traditionally approved as married before living together, that is why the father of the child is acclaimed as 'man indeed'. The society determines her goals and values and fashions out ways of attaining them. The marriage institution is one of the ways Igbo people re-enact them. Marriage among the Igbo is seen as a sacred institution. The fulfilment of the union comes with the presence of a child. This song helps to stress the relevance of a moral environment which will discourage immoral behaviour among youths. Illegitimate children (births) are not celebrated. These songs are employed to teach morals, educate and encourage the younger ones to refrain from evil and become good. No matter the high premium placed on the gift of a child, a bastard is always frowned at. These songs can bring about positive change in our society.

CONCLUSION

Birth songs are integral with life in the African culture. Thus songs are culture bound like the language with which they are expressed, and reflect man in his specific environment. Culture to a large extent depends on man because it is 'human environment' that it thrives and man propagates culture. These songs serve as means of cultural transmission. Birth songs extol the importance of life. "A man's life is his most precious earthly possession given to him by God". His right to enjoy it must be protected. Murder in any form, be it abortion, violates the dignity associated with human life. Society abhors moral laxity and insists on positive values that will make members of the society live harmoniously. This study has highlighted the various themes of birth songs like songs of socio-cultural values and implications, songs extolling importance of a child and those that inspire moral values. The study also concludes that such values as goodwill, kindness, thanksgiving, virtue and morality are emphasized in these songs. These can help bring attitudinal change in our youths as they appreciate the value of life and being there for one another. This study also concludes that most of these birth songs perform illocutionary act as directives and expressives.

Fecundity places a woman's role in child bearing above that of a man. Metaphorically, the woman becomes an umbrella to members of her society. The virtue of generosity of kindness is emphasized as a new born child must in Igbo land be visited with a gift item – "A naghiagba aka ahu nwata". "A child is not seen without anything". Birth songs are designed to inculcate values of appreciation as seen in songs of thanks giving. The directive and expressive speech acts are deployed to stress the need for the virtue. The moral values of virtues and vices (good or evil) are portrayed in birth songs to enrich people's morals for the welfare of both individuals and society at large. The legality of marriage union is asserted, that is why the father of the child in song is acclaimed as "Man indeed". The society determines her goals and values and fashions out ways of attaining them. Illegitimate births are not celebrated.

The songs are also context sensitive, teaching them in various classes as songs and part of poetry can help resuscitate the indigenous languages and culture.

RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends that teachers of English as second language and Igbo as second language can use birth songs to prevent the indigenous languages from being pulverized. Teaching and emphasizing the values contained in the birth songs can help students develop interest in the indigenous languages. Furthermore, keeping our youths/students abreast of the demands of their traditional values will help them grow up patriotic citizens who should be concerned not just with their affairs but with the affairs of others.

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