

Pejorative referencing of short stature in Igbo proverbs and folk songs

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Abstract

This study examines the issue of pejorative referencing of short stature in Igbo proverbs and folk songs. It basically analyses the condition of short stature as existing in the culture of the people through proverbs and other expressions in the language. The study brings to the limelight the fact that in Igbo culture, short stature is pejoratively referenced. The descriptive model is adopted in the analysis of data collected. Data were elicited through different sources such as texts on proverbs and other expressions, interview of some elders and introspection as a native speaker of the language. The analysis features Igbo proverbs associated with short stature and other expressions in Igbo folk songs among others. The fact that in Igbo culture, short stature is pejoratively referenced is indisputable. Such referencing with Igbo proverbs are categorized under disadvantaged person, attention-seeking, easy identification and few number, incompetence, ominous signs etc. We recommend that more studies be carried out in this direction for enhancement of knowledge.

Keywords: pejorative, referencing, short stature, Igbo proverbs, folk songs.

1.0 Introduction

Short stature as used here refers to any diminutive condition in stature, especially in adult. Short stature is generally a term for people whose height is considerably below average compared to the height of their

peers. Apart from Republic of the Congo Country in Central Africa, where the pygmies of Congo are found in very large numbers, existence in many other parts of the world is highly limited and noticeable at the same time. This study sets out to discuss the issue of short stature as pejoratively referenced in the culture of the Igbo people in Southeastern Nigeria. People under such condition were not tabooed but are treated disdainfully sometimes, with uncomplimentary remarks. The word 'short' connotes negative in its usage when combined in the following forms: shortfall, shortcut, short-method, short down etc. it indicates that something is missing or not done the proper way. In relation to human beings, short stature simply put is the quality of being small in height or length.

Short stature though sometimes a health issue, is referenced in different ways in many cultures of the world. This short stature issue has attracted quite a number of scholarly attention especially from the healthcare angle. Their major concern is to determine the major causes of short stature condition as well as proffer solutions for its eradication by way of treatment where necessary (cf. Brazier 2017, Ha 2019). From the available literature, some of the people under this condition are as a result of inherited genealogy and growth retardation due to some medical conditions.

According to Ha (2019), short stature is a general term for people whose height is considerably below average compared to the height of their peers. It is also defined as a height more than two standard deviations below the mean for age (less than the 3rd percentile). The two notable common

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causes of short stature are familial (genetic) short stature and constitutional delay of growth and puberty (CDGP), which are considered as normal variant of growth recorded by medical history. For genetic short stature, it is as a result of both parents and grandparents of a child being short. This is referred to as familial short stature. Other causes of short stature are chronic diseases, growth hormone deficiency, malnutrition and psychosocial stress.

Short stature has been an age long phenomenon. From the Biblical point of view, God, the creator of the whole universe takes cognizance of the fact that short stature is pejoratively referenced. In the book of the Prophet Isaiah chapter 59 verse 1a, it is written *"Le, aka Jehova adighi mkpumkpu, kari izoputa; nti ya adighi kwa arọ, kari inu ihe"* (Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear). This scriptural verse attests to the fact that shortness is a negative attribute.

Again, in the gospel according to St. Luke chapter 19 verses 2-5, we read about the story of Zacchaeus, thus:

2. Ma le, otu nwoke anakpo aha-ya Zakios; onye ahụ bu kwa onye-isi-ona-utu, onye ahụ bu kwa ogaranya.

3. O we cho uto ihu Jisus imata onye O bu; ma o puhu n'ihu igwe mmadu, n'ihu na o toghu ogologo. O we ba oso ga n'iru, we rigo n'osisi sycamore ka o hu Ya anya: n'ihu na O gaje igabiga n'uto ahụ.

4. Mbe Jisus biaruru ebe ahụ, O we le anya n'elu, si ya, Zakios, me ngwa ridata; n'ihu na aghaghị m inodu n'ulo-gi ta.

2. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the Publicans, and he was rich.

3. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature.

4. And he ran before, and climbed up a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way.

5. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house.

People of short stature are looked down upon on matters pertaining to their social status. In the excerpt above, Zacchaeus was a rich man, yet, people did not make way for him to be at the forefront to enable him to see Jesus. The press could not let him through "because he was of little stature." He had to devise a means to achieve his heart desire by running ahead to climb a tree to see Jesus. Jesus gave him the recognition men denied him due to his stature.

In the world today, there are certain social positions people with short stature cannot attain due to their deficiency in height. Even when they get to occupy some sensitive positions because they are highly connected to the powers that be, people only give them respect not because of their person but in respect to the position of authority they occupy. Oftentimes, they are aware of this and tend to over stretch their authority to pressurize people to bow for them.

Furthermore, in our Sunday school days as growing children, some Biblical stories told to us were formulated into songs for easy memorization. So is the story above of Zacchaeus, the man of little stature in the Bible. The song goes like this:

Zacchaeus bu onye mkpumkpu, onye mkpumkpu ka o bu

O rigo osisi sycamore ihu onye nwe anyi Mgbe Jisus bjara n'ebe ahụ, o le anya n'elu si,

"Zacchaeus me ngwa ridata, aga m abia n'ulo gi taa, aga m abia n'ulo gi taa".

Zacchaeus is a short man, a short man he is He climbed the sycamore tree to see the Lord

When Jesus got to that point He looked up and said,

"Zacchaeus do quick and come down, I will be in your house today, I will be in your house today".

Our Sunday school teachers used the story of Zacchaeus to teach us that even if people despise us because of our deficiencies in life, Jesus is ever ready and willing to accept us the way we are created. The song, therefore, stamps it perpetually in our long term memory only retrievable when the need arises just as I have done now.

In the cause of our search for available

literature on this study, we discovered that to the best of our knowledge, no study has been documented about short stature people in Igbo culture when it is certain that for a fact, in Igbo culture, short stature is pejoratively referenced. In this study, our concern is not on the causes of short stature but the fact that short stature is pejoratively referenced in Igbo culture. Among the Igbo, reference to someone as being short is offensive whereas the opposite which is being tall is acceptable. There are certain expressions found in the language that can attest to our claim. This study is aimed at investigating the pejorative referencing of short stature in Igbo culture as represented in proverbs and folk songs. These expressions are seen in the Igbo proverbs and some satiric songs in the people's culture that have pejorative undertone to illustrate our claim.

Our major objective in this study is to establish the fact that in the Igbo culture, short stature is a condition with offensive reference term. For clarity sake, these pejorative reference terms drawn from some proverbs, other expressions and folk songs in Igbo culture are categorized. Those people affected in this condition do not swallow all the reference terms hook, line and sinker. Oftentimes, they react by making some utterances or act in a way as to attract attention to themselves in order to play down on the insignificance of their short stature.

To achieve this, we sourced out data via texts on proverbs, interaction with elderly people from the Igbo culture area as well as introspection as a native speaker who is conversant with the language. Data elicited were analyzed based on categorizing the pejorative reference terms. One notable characteristics feature of people under this condition is that some of them exhibit aggressive tendency to enable them maintain their ego in the society in order not to be deprived of their fundamental human rights among other things. People under this condition struggle to manage their emotions and at the same time look for a way to forestall future occurrences by mixing up the choice of spouse in marriage for those with genealogical traits. The study examines

the condition of short stature people in Igbo culture and at the same time explain the stand of the Igbo people towards people with such condition in their culture.

2.0 The pejorative references made to short stature people in Igbo culture

The proverb is an important oral formulation in Igbo culture. It is so important to the Igbo people that there is hardly any aspect of their world view that is not represented in proverbs. Some of the expressions with these proverbs have negative effect and project the individuals being addressed in demeaning light while at other times add positive value to the individual under reference. For the purpose of this study, our concern is to examine those proverbs in the Igbo culture used as pejorative terms to address people with short stature. We can categorize the pejorative references drawing on some proverbs and folk songs, for instance:

2.1 Reference to a disadvantaged person.

A short stature person is a disadvantaged person. We know that among the Igbo, reference to someone as short (*mkpumkpụ*) is offensive, whereas the opposite (*ogologo*) is acceptable. In the following proverb, particular reference is made to the short person and hanging of bag thus:

1. *Ebe aka ruru onye mkpumkpụ, o kowe akpaya.*

(Wherever the hands of a short person reaches, he/she hangs his/her bag)

Hanging of any object can be done by any person. One may ask, why is it that particular reference is made to the short person alone here? Possibly, the bag is meant to be hanged at a specific point but because the hand of the person could not get to the designated point, he/she hangs it wherever the hand reaches which is below expectation.

2. *Ekowe ụlọ, achọwa onye ogologo. Onye ogologo dị mkpa.*

(When the roof top is being hanged, a tall person is sought after. A tall person is important).

In the event of building a house in the Igbo culture, hanging of the roof is an important stage that needs the assistance of other people. The building has already gone high,

therefore, to place the roof, the assistance of those taller than the building will be needed to raise the roof high. A short person has little or nothing to offer at this point. All these submissions have pejorative undertone. This boils down to the fact that among the Igbo, reference to someone as being short is offensive, whereas the opposite, which is being tall is accepted and applauded.

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3. *lụ nwanyị alula akpuda, maka akpuda nwere obi n'azu.*

(He who wants to marry should not marry a dwarf, because dwarf is wicked/hard heartened)

In the proverb above, a short woman is believed to have been disadvantaged by nature and as such easily vents her condition on people around her to avoid losing her self-esteem completely. By so doing, she might over do things. This is the reason behind advising a man not to marry a dwarf. What she lost in stature, she desires to gain in having a strong heart.

2.2. Reference to attention-seeking

People of short stature oftentimes desire to be noticed wherever they find themselves. They do this to seek attention, that is draw attention to themselves thereby play down on the insignificance of their stature and size. The following proverb is a proof to our claim:

4. *Onye mkpụmkpụ mesuo ahịa, o kwurụ ọtọ.*

(If a short person disrupts the market, he/she stands up)

In the above proverb, reference is made here of a short person who possibly disrupts the peace in the market thereby causing pandemonium. Under such situation, people will be running helter shelter for their lives while the short person who caused the chaotic situation will stand up to watch the whole drama playing out. His major aim is to be noticed by all and sundry.

It is a common observation that people of short stature with economic affluence usually draw attention of the public in restaurants, shops or supermarkets. They usually announce to the waiter: "*Bịa nwa a kedụ ihe ego ole m zuru?*" (Hey! This boy/girl how much goods or items did I buy?). Also, in

public gatherings, they always device means of announcing their presence or arrival to attract people's attention in order to usher them in with a standing ovation to boost their personality.

2.3 Reference to easy identification and few number of short people

5. *A hụ ada, hụ ebi, ndi mkpụmkpụ ezuole.*

(if ada (a particular type of insect) is present and ebi (another particular type of insect)

is present, short people are complete).

In the proverb above, reference is made about short people in comparison to two different species of insects that are of short stature. It clearly indicates that short people are easily identifiable and recognizable anytime and anywhere due to the fact that they are not numerous in number. This is sequel to another Igbo proverb which says, *ezuo ka a ha eri udele, atotue ngiga* (if the number of people gather for the eating of the vulture, the basket is laid down).

2.4 Reference to incompetence

6. *Nwoke luru nwanyị mkpụmkpụ mara etuya naya si edina*

(A man who married a short woman knows how best to sleep with her)

The above proverb shows that reference to shortness or short stature as an aberration in Igbo culture pertains to both male and female beings. Some young ladies today are finding it very difficult to get married or even marry suitors of their choice due to their short stature. This has resulted to late marriage or not marrying at all. Peradventure, any man decides to take the bull by the horn by marrying a short woman possibly because of her facial and body beauty as well as good moral attributes, he knows how best to sleep with her. For the man who is short, when he is ready to get married, he will not go for a short woman like himself. He goes for a tall woman to compliment his deficiency in height so that their children will not be equally disadvantaged. However, some women are skeptical to marry a short man for fear of not being able to satisfy them sexually while

others damn the consequence as far as money is involved and at the same time available. As for sexual satisfaction, that can be fulfilled outside.

At this point, I recall vividly the story of a young lady, an undergraduate who was invited by one of her lecturers in his house to propose to her. Actually, the lecturer is dark and of short stature and needed somebody as huge as she is to compliment him. I cannot say for sure or remember what her reply was in his house but all I could remember as I write this paper was her sharp reaction showing outright rejection of whatever she was told from the entrance of her compound as she kept on shouting “*ekweghi kwa mu ooo*” (I don't agree oo) from the gate and was using her hand to demonstrate it all.

Finally, when I got the message and was trying to see if I can talk sense into her to accept his proposal, she vehemently refused shouting that “he is a short man”. Thank goodness the man knows exactly what he desires and got it from another lady while the undergraduate lady also got her own heart desire which is to marry a tall fair man. She will be ashamed to be made reference to by people as the wife of a short man. This is a clear evidence to prove that people of short stature are pejoratively referenced in Igbo culture.

2.5 Other expressions used to pejoratively reference the short stature people in Igbo culture

People with short stature sometimes quickly throw in a sharp remark, comment or counter expression at any given time a tall person tries to deride their insignificant stature. At a time like this, the person quips in the comment below:

! *7. ga-aka m ogologo kakwa m mkpumkpun'ụwa?*

(Will you be taller than me and also be shorter than me?)

In life, one must belong somewhere. You are either here or there and not being the proverbial *usu, nke na-abughị anụ elu, ọ bughị anụ ala* (the bat that is neither flying animal nor land animal). That's why the question above pops up. The taller person

should not brag or make mouth for the short person with his or her tallness. You will not be taller and shorter than someone at the same time. The shorter person poses this question to the taller person meaning that no one assumes same status in life. If you are taller than me, I am shorter than you. Even in that state of shortness, the shorter person advocates for contentment. People are encouraged to be content with what nature has given them. Little wonder a short person does everything with his/her power to resist being looked down upon by a taller person.

8. Onye mkpumkpụ bụ enyi ụmụaka.

(A short person is a friend to children)

This statement is usually made when somebody feels derided by another fellow who is lower in age, etc. The statement implies that people of short stature are categorized as infants based on their stature/size.

2.6 Reference to ominous signs

Onukawa (2018), in the study of ominous signs and events gives attention to the pygmy known as or usually called Akanshi/Akakpo/Nwaọhandende in Igbo. The study explains that a pygmy is a member of an ethnic group whose height is unusually short-adults are on average less than 4 feet and though found in some other parts of the world like- Australia, Thailand, Malaysia, Bolivia, Brazil, Indonesia and Philippines (Britannica Online Dictionary) are mostly found in Africa. African pygmies are commonly believed to be direct descendants of Late Stone Age hunter-gatherer of central African forest, who were partially absorbed or displaced by later immigration of agriculture peoples and adopted their Central Sudanic, Ubangian, and Bantu languages (Klieman 2003, Blench & Dendo, 2004). Although there has been proponents of various theories by scholars to bring to the fore the short stature of pygmies, some studies opine that it could be related to adaptation to low ultraviolet light levels in rainforests. This amounts to little vitamin D available in human skin, limiting calcium intake from the diet for bone growth and maintenance, and leading to the evolution of the small skeletal size (O'Dea1994).

In the traditional Igbo society, the pygmies (though not commonly found) are oftentimes treated with disdain. They are disdainfully referred to as *Akanshi*, *Akakpo*, *Umu oha nde nde* etc. due to their dwarfish nature. The term pygmy is sometimes considered pejorative. In some Igbo culture areas especially the Northern Group of Dialects-ENGD (Nwozuzu 2008), an informant from Nkanu community in Enugu State says that if a non- pygmy encounters a pygmy first in a place of sojourn, it portends bad omen.

Generally speaking, no pregnant women likes to have encounter with a pygmy for fear of giving birth to a baby of same stature. Literature serves as a mirror through which societal happenings are viewed and literature whether it is traditional/oral or written/modern has three genres namely- prose, drama and poetry. In the literary text, *Juọ Obinna* by Ubesie (1979) which is a prose narrative, Obinna, the straggler during the Biafra war first experience as he arrives Uli airport where he intends to make a living from the relief materials flown into Biafra was his encounter with a pygmy. To him, this is not a welcome development, rather spells doom for him as expressed thus:

Mgbe akanshi ji wee kpọọ Obinna ihu na njem Ọ b́jara n'Uli ka ọ nọ mara na egwu ọ gaje igba agaghị abụ ụdị nke ibe ya na-agba (p. 145).
(Obinna foresaw that his trip to Uli would be a different experience from that of others when it was the pygmy he first encountered on his arrival).

The excerpt above shows that if short stature is pejorative in Igbo culture, the case of the pygmy bears the greatest part. The sight alone portends evil. This singular experience summarizes all that Obinna encountered throughout his journey.

2.7 Referencing short stature in folk songs

A people's cultural belief system as regards nature, world view and existence are fully expressed in folk songs which is part of the oral/traditional poetry, one aspect of the three literary genres. In the Igbo culture, there are folk songs people sing to further

disdain people with short stature. Sometimes, it is very difficult to get the correct size of a short person in shoes or slippers. As a result of this, there is the tendency for them to put on oversize shoe just to make sure that they are wearing something on their feet. In the event of such, people sing this song to ridicule the person thus:

Onye mkpụmkpụ yiri agbagha ya wororom

(A short person wears his/her footwear wororom)

This song indicates that the short person puts on his/her shoes without minding whether the size fits him/her. The major satisfaction is that at least something is protecting the feet.

We also have this folk song on short people in Ibeme, a town in Abia South Senatorial Zone of Abia State, Nigeria:

Onye mkpụmkpụ nyara utuku akpa

Owumma gerere

Onye mkpụmkpụ nyara utuku akpa

Onye dị nụ agbagharịwa anya

Onye mkpụmkpụ, ome nhwe dị egwu

When a short man carries a big bag,

Anything can happen

When a short man carries a big bag,

Let everybody be vigilant

A short man can be mischievous

The folk song above indicates that a short person sometimes gets involved in activities capable of bringing them to the notice of all to cushion the effect of what nature deprived them of.

2.8 Stereotype pejorative reference

As it is in some part of Republic of the Congo Country in Central Africa where pygmies are found in a considerably higher number, in the Southeastern part of Nigeria, precisely in Abia State, there exist a clan notable for the existence of short stature people in both male and female. Whenever a relatively tall person proclaim that he/she is from that clan, people around will place doubt on the possibility of such claim as it contradicts what people know them for which is not a hidden truth. This is so clear that people from other clans formulated this folk song not only to deride them but also to express

their natural predicament. The clan we are talking about here is the Ngwa clan in Abia State. It is not that there are no short stature people in other parts of the State. Theirs are exceptional. Here goes the folk song:

Ndi Ngwa niile dị mkpụmkpụ,
Ọ dighị onye toro eto n'ime ha
Ha niile na-arịọ Chineke,
Ka o biko zitere ha ndi ogologo
All Ngwa people are very short,
There is no tall person in their midst
They are all praying to the Lord
For Him to please send them tall people.

The folk song above is supposedly formulated by people from other clans in Igbo society who are sympathizing with the Ngwa clan over their predicament of having greater number of short stature people and at the same time praying to God Almighty to grant them their heart desires of endowing them with tall people.

3.0 Summary and conclusion

In this study, we have been able to examine the issue of pejorative referencing of short stature people in Igbo culture. We categorized the pejorative references of short stature people drawing on some proverbs, expressions and folk songs as reference to a disadvantaged person, attention seeking, easy identification and few in number, incompetence, ominous signs and stereotyped in Igbo culture. Evidence abound from the selected Igbo proverbs, other expressions and some culturally formulated folk songs that short stature people are derided in the society for a condition in which they found themselves which is not of their own making but nature's way of representing them. Their gene or growth retardation played a fast one on them which is beyond their powers to change. Being a condition they have to live with, they sometimes come up with measures to help them play down on the insignificance state of their stature and size.

However, for those whose predicament was as a result of genealogical traits, there is hope to forestall future occurrences through tying of the nuptial knot with those highly advantaged in height than them. By so doing, a quick reversal is possible. Until then, still be proud of what nature has bestowed on

you. Knowledge does not belong and end with one school of thought. We, therefore, recommend that more studies are still possible in this area to enrich our knowledge and literature.

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