

# The Use Of African Proverbs To Motivate Clients In Meseron Therapy

---

**Alfred Awaritefe,**  
*alfawa2000@gmail.com*

**Akpunne Bede Chinonye,**  
*praisebede@yahoo.com,*

**Onisile Deborah**  
*deborahsamuel11@yahoo.com*

Department of Behavioral Studies,  
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State

## **Abstract**

*African proverbs use metaphors for practical living and for dissemination of wisdom intricately woven in conversations to accomplish acts which cannot be realized by ordinary words. Believed as handed down from the ancestors African proverbs are highly esteemed. Meseron therapy draws on African belief in the potency of the spoken words, affirming that people have psychological problems because of faulty speaking. That what we say or what is said about us affects our thought and behaviour. To correct the psychopathology, Meseron theorizes "saying it right" (rejecting wrong unwholesome words) taking covert actions at the level of thought and overt actions in form of words and deeds. To motivate clients Meseron therapists can incorporate some salient attributes of African proverbs such as their embedded expression of conventional truth which clients easily identify with without doubt when used by therapists, their brevity and easy to remember and understand nature which can influence clients perceptive capacity, appeal to their reasoning, and make them see self defeatist words as abnormal and pathological. Qualities such as availability, strong tool of persuasion, having a base of practical experience, common sense, intellectual richness worth listening to and obeying, make African proverbs a veritable tool in Meseron approach.*

**Key words:** African proverbs, Meseron therapy.

## **Introduction**

In all the cultures of the world, proverbs exist and have invariable applications as garments of thought. Proverbs imbue the speaker with the ability to make his or her expressions more flashy and culturally relevant to the topic of discourse. A proverb expresses a truth based on common sense,

experience, or belief of a community. Many African proverbs often use metaphors for practical living and for dissemination of wisdom to younger members of the tribe. This is the reason why Africans employ them in conversations to accomplish acts which cannot be realized by ordinary words.

Researchers in African proverbs have defined the phenomenon in diverse but connected ways. Proverbs are said to be the palm oil with which words are eaten (Achebe 1958). According to Esere (2001), proverbs are short clever saying full of wisdom, intended as rules of conduct and behaviour. In the words of Onwudufor (2008), proverb is a saying in a more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it". Proverbs form part of the various figures of speech in language, they are embodiment of the wisdom and ethics of the traditional societies. A proverb is a condensed but memorable saying embodying some important facts of experience that are taken as true by many people. According to Norrick (1985) a proverb is wisdom of many and the wit of one, the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. A proverb according to Nwode and Azubuike (2015) is a short saying or a sentence generally known by many people which usually contains words of wisdom, truth or morals based on common sense or practical experience. It is often a description of a basic rule of conduct that all people generally follow or should follow. According to Mieder (1993), a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.

It is believed by Africans that proverbs were handed down from the ancestors. Thus they are viewed as words of wisdom and as such are respected and as much as possible not altered. The much any one can do is to twist them but not to add new ones. When used in communication, they are found to be weightier than ordinary day to day words. Proverbs are the vehicle

of thought among people; when the truth is elusive, it is a proverb that is used to elicit it. With the importance attached to proverbs among Africans, it may be safely asserted that proverbs are at the heart of nearly all conversational engagement among culturally conscious people.

There are different uses of proverbs. There are proverbs used for self-confidence. Some proverbs are deployed as discourse markers, and as soon as such proverbs are introduced, the interlocutors cannot be in doubt as to the member's boldness, confidence or self-reliance. Others include the ones used to visualize a resolution, forbearance, entertainment, contentment, encouragement.

#### **Some Attributes of African Proverbs**

1. Proverbs are sayings or maxims that express conventional truth.
2. It is generally short and expressed in words that are simple, entertaining and easy to remember.
3. African proverbs are short clever saying full of wisdom, intended as rules of conduct and behaviour.
4. It is a short rhetorical saying expressing a general belief.
5. It is an embodiment of the wisdom and ethics of the traditional societies.
6. An African proverb is a condensed memorable saying of some important facts of experience that are taken as true by many people.
7. Proverbs are multifunctional and flexible instruments of everybody's reasoning.
8. Proverbs are popular, common and numerous, they are pleasant expressions which adorn the rhetoric of a people.
9. African proverbs constitute a part of oral tradition of a people which is unconsciously acquired from generation to generation.

10. It is a tool for the purpose of persuasion.
  11. They are used to express the morals as well as the ethics of the society.
  12. It is based on common sense or practical experience.
  13. It is often a description of a basic rule of conduct that all people generally follow or should follow.
  14. A generally known sentence which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical,
  15. It is fixed and memorable and handed down from generation to generation.
  16. Proverbs are the basis by which words or conversations are made.
2. To correct an undesirable situation, covert actions must be taken at the level of thought.
  3. Overt actions must be taken in form of words and deeds.

Meseron therapy is based on the 'I can' philosophy; man must not accept self defeat but rise up to challenges as a striving creature. It asserts that striving takes place at three levels: thoughts, words and actions. Cognitive techniques of Meseron therapy include the construction of relevant and appropriate statements and the replacement of self-defeatist statements with appropriate statements.

### **Correcting Faulty Speaking**

The main focus of Meseron therapy is correcting faulty speaking. Meseron affirms that people have psychological problems because they say the inappropriate thing. Since what one says or what is said about one, which one believes affects the thought and behaviour of one, then to correct the psychopathology, we must then correct the inappropriate way of speaking about ourselves, and reject unwholesome words spoken to us.

In other words, faulty overt and/or covert behaviours are the end products of a chain reaction triggered off by faulty speaking. Our belief system is strongly influenced by the environment around us, and the environment mould or condition us through spoken (written) and unspoken (unwritten) stimuli. Words are one of the most powerful influences of the mind and thoughts of man. Hence negative /faulty speaking would lead to negative/faulty thinking which in effect moulds our world view and beliefs about ourselves and the world around us, and ultimately culminating in negative/ faulty behaviour (psychopathology).

### **Meseron Therapy**

Meseron therapy is a psychological treatment approach developed in Nigeria by Alfred Awaritefe in 1995 (Awaritefe, 1995, 1997, 2004; Ofovwe, 2005). The term 'Meseron' was adopted from the Urhobo language (the language of the Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria) which means "I reject it." This therapy was developed in accordance with the Nigerian belief in the power of the spoken word – its potency, meanings and consequences; therefore leading to the rejection of the negative while accepting the positive. The techniques of Meseron reflect a cognitive – behavioural orientation because of the mental restructuring that is required of the client; hence is seen as a form of cognitive therapy (Awaritefe and Ofovwe, 2007). It is also considered as a motivational theory because it affirms the need for man to strive for a desirable goal using the inherent potentials and attributes within him.

Meseron therapy affirms that:

1. Negative words are at the root of most problems.

Resting on the basic assumptions that first, the power of the spoken word has potential to sensitize action. Secondly, that the individuals have inherent potential for change. Thirdly, to achieve the desired change there is need for a replacement of a negative status quo with constructive action and fourthly that man is a striving creature. Thus Meseron Therapy affirms that pathological issues especially in the psyche can be corrected when we say it right.

Proverbs among Nigerians in particular and Africans in general are held in high esteem. They have a way of driving words home to the very core of the being of man and triggering a deep thought process hence influencing the perceptive capacity of man. Seen as wisdom handed down by ancestors, they are respected.

### **Using Proverbs in Meseron Therapy**

According to Awaritefe (2009) Meseron approach does not uphold unrealistic optimism and is not a denial or flight from reality. Encouragement, positive motivation must be accorded clients for them to take positive actions to change their undesirable situation. Meseron approach can adopt the use of indigenous proverbs to achieve a change in behaviour by motivating the Client to Strive. The qualities and attributes of African proverbs can be harnessed by Meseron therapists in motivating and encouraging their clients to reject the unwholesome, affirm the desired and strive to achieve the preferred.

The discussion below is based on some attributes drawn from the definitions of some researchers on African proverbs.

- 1) African proverbs express conventional truth (Mieder, 1993; Nwode and Azubuike, 2015). The strength of this attribute in using proverbs in the Meseron approach is that the client would not doubt words of encouragement and motivation that are spoken to him/her by the therapist when they are communicated with proverbs.
- 2) Instructions or words communicated to clients through the use of proverbs are short, easy to remember and understand (Mieder, 1993). According to Achebe (1958), proverbs are said to be the palm oil with which words are eaten. Also the Yoruba people describe proverbs as the horse that can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas. The client would most likely ruminate on the proverbs for a long time afterwards thus influencing the perceptive capacity to do the rejecting of the negative and do the accepting of the desirable thing.
- 3) African Proverbs are full of wisdom (Esere (2001), and are intended as rules of conduct and behaviour (Onuekwusi, 2011; Nwode and Azubuike, 2015): It is generally accepted among Africans that proverbs are words of wisdom from the ancestors handed down from generation to generation (Norrick, 1985; Mieder, 1993), and that these words serve as rules of conduct and behaviour of people within the society. This attribute can be harnessed by Meseron therapists to help the clients see the folly in accepting self defeatist words and engaging in conduct that is seen as abnormal.
- 4) Proverbs are expressions of general beliefs (Onuekwusi, 2011). This attribute can be applied to expose to a client words and thoughts that are found to be contrary to general beliefs which might be the cause of the pathology in the life of the client.
- 5) Instrument of reasoning: According to Wilson and Smith (1970) proverbs are

multifunctional and flexible instruments of everybody's reasoning. Through the use of proverbs, Meseron therapists can appeal to the reasoning of client. For instance a Nigerian proverb say that "he who will not be beaten by the sun or the rain will one day be beaten by hunger." Such a proverb can ignite in a client the need to strive for that which is desirable.

- 6) Availability: according to Onuekwusi (2011) proverbs are popular, common and numerous; they are pleasant expressions which adorn the rhetoric of a people. There is a right word for every circumstance expressed in proverbs if a therapist can search hard enough to find the right proverbs. In other words African proverbs are numerous and readily available.
- 7) Tool of persuasion: according to Kewulezi (2004) a proverb is a tool for the purpose of rhetorical adornment and persuasion. Through the adopting of proverbs in Meseron therapy, it may be easier to persuade a client to change his /her mind over an undesirable circumstance. Most arguments come to an end when the right proverbs are injected into a conversation.
- 8) Proverbs are based on common sense and practical experience (Nwode and Azubuike, 2015): It is easy for clients to relate with encouragement and motivational words of a Meseron therapist relayed through proverbs. This is as a result of their appeal to common sense and their practicability to the situation of the client.
- 9) Rich and intelligent words: in African societies, expressions and conversations are not considered as rich and intelligent enough if they are not garnished with proverbs (Obadan, 2015). People that can weave proverbs

into their conversations are regarded by others as being intelligent and worth listening to. The Meseron therapist must possess the quality of being worth listening to and as an intelligent speaker. These qualities can be achieved when proverbs are used in the Meseron approach.

**Examples of African proverbs that can motivate an individual to positive action**

- a. Good words are food, bad words poison. ~Malagasy Proverb
- b. However long the night, the dawn will break. ~ African proverb
- c. Patience puts a crown on the head. ~ Ugandan proverb
- d. By labour comes wealth. ~ Yoruba proverb
- e. He who fears the sun will not become chief. ~Ugandan proverb
- f. When a king has good counsellors, his reign is peaceful. ~Ashanti proverb
- g. If you are building a house and a nail breaks, do you stop building or do you change the nail? — Rwandan proverb
- h. The chicken that digs for food will not sleep hungry.
- i. When the leg does not walk, the stomach does not eat. ~Mongo (Congolese) Proverb
- j. A healthy person who begs for food is an insult to a generous farmer. ~Ghanaian Proverb
- k. Words are sweet, but they never take the place of food. ~Ibo Proverb
- l. If you watch your pot, your food will not burn. ~Mauritanian, Nigerian, and Niger Proverb
- m. Fine words do not produce food. ~Nigerian Proverb
- n. The forest provides food to the hunter after he is utterly exhausted. ~Zimbabwean Proverb

## Conclusion

African proverbs are held in high esteem by both the elite and the local African folks. Judging from their ascribed attributes, qualities and cultural relevance to the African societies in communicating; they can serve as a veritable tool in the Meseron approach to psychotherapy.

## References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Awaritefe, A. (1995). Meseron Therapy. A paper presented at the first national conference on the practice of psychotherapy in Nigeria held at the Nigerian Institute of International affairs, Victoria Island, Lagos, 6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> November.
- Awaritefe, A. & Ofovwe, C. (2007). Meseron therapy: an African approach to psychological treatment, *Ife Psychologia* vol 15 [2], 71 – 81.
- Awaritefe, A. (2009). Meseron therapy and the Meseron Approach. In: Awaritefe, A. Psychology for Law Students. Benin City: Roma Publications, PP. 169 – 176
- Awaritefe, A., Bello, I.B., Iketuonye, A.C., Ahmed, K.A. and Onisile, D.F. (2017). A Practical Approach to Meseron Therapy of Personality Ife Psychologia, an international Journal (in press).
- Eseré, M. O. and Idowu, A. I. (2001). *The effects of cognitive restructuring in resolving marital conflicts among selected couples in Ilorin metropolis*. Nigerian Journal of Applied Psychology. 6(1), 68 – 80.
- Kewulezi, D. (2004). Selected Igbo proverbs and Idiomatic expressions. Kkoruna Books.
- Mieder, W. (1993). International proverb scholarship: An annotated bibliography with supplement. New York: Garland Publishers.
- Norrick, I. (1985). How proverbs mean: *Semantic Studies in English proverbs*. Amsterdam: Mouton.
- Nwode, G. L. and Azubuike, U. (2015). “Use of Proverbs for encouragement and their Discourse relevance: insight from ehugbo dialects of Igbo”. A paper presented at the annual international conference of Linguistics Association of Nigeria.
- Obadan, M.I. (2015). *Language Endangerment: Issues of Igbo Proverbs*. Correspondence: Department of Languages and Linguistics, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.
- Ofovwe, C.E. (2005). African originated psychotherapy: Meseron, an antidote to stress. In S.N. Madu & S. Governder (Eds.), *Mental Health and Psychotherapy in Africa*. Polokwane (Pietersburg): UL Press for the university of Limpopo (Turffloep Campus) for the World Council for Psychotherapy African Chapter.
- Onuekwusi, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of African Oral Literature*. Owerri. Alphabet Nigeria Publishers.
- Onwudufor, F. O. F. (2008). *Mmanu e ji eri okwu (Igbo Proverbs)*. Enugu: SNAAP Press.
- Wilson, F. & Smith, W. (1970). *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs (3rd ed)*. New York: University Press.