

Indigenous Knowledge in Esan Proverbs of Edo State Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The Esan people are an ethnicity in the Edo state of Nigeria. Their language and culture are a subset of the larger Edo ethnic group in Nigeria. A close study of the Esan indigenous Knowledge and culture reveals that the appeal of the Esan folk proverbs is in their eclectic nature because of their portrayal of diverse issues in the Esan cosmology and belief system, ranging from folk art to traditional health care beliefs and practices. This finding suggests that the subject of Esan proverbs deserves some scholarly attention. This article, therefore, examines the nature of Esan proverbs even as they perform their didactic and pedagogical functions in contemporary Esan parlance. This study adopted a combination of research approaches, including content analysis, library searches, and ethnographic methods, such as interviews and observations. In the ethnographic study of a specific Nigerian focusing on its proverbs, this paper's research light shall beam over the five local government areas (LGAs) populated by the Esan people in the Edo State of Nigeria. Apart from its potential for insightful scholarship, the significance of this study on Esan proverbs also lies in the fact that inquiries into the indigenous knowledge system (IKS) portray folk proverbs as veritable windows into the culture and essence of a people. Indigenous Knowledge has much more impact on contemporary society than people know.

Keywords: Folk proverbs, Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural education, Eclectic culture, Esan people of Nigeria.

1. Introduction

The use of proverbs to buttress points during conversations or cap statements is a common phenomenon among the Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria. In doing this, the speaker is considered someone well-versed in the people's language and culture and thus well respected as a repository of indigenous Knowledge (IK). The documentation of proverbs has, in recent times, gained traction—with the works of Omoera and Inegbeboh (2013), Ogah (2015), Anene and Njoku (2020), Obodoegbulam and Tasie (2020), and Gbari (2020) to mention but a few. Their works center on documenting the various proverbs in their indigenous languages alongside their English translations. Good as their efforts are as pilot studies, what is lacking in them is the non-inclusion of content analysis and context of use in their publications. This study goes beyond such mere documentation and meanings of folk proverbs and provides a context of usage, thematic significance, content analysis, and interpretations through which much of the proverbs' interconnections, or eclecticism, vocational relations, etc., are comprehended. It is impossible to exhaust all the folk proverbs of Esan in one study, so this article has selected some of them, calibrated them, and discussed them in line with its stated objectives. Also, within the remit of this article, we explore the proverbs' representations/portrayal of indigenous Knowledge. The foregoing scope of the study thus provides solutions to questions such as: Are Esan folk proverbs eclectic? Does their eclecticism provide indigenous Knowledge? Are there Esan proverbs that educate people on Agriculture, architecture, eroticism, geography, law, medicine/hygiene, politics, leadership, morals, and Religion? If yes, are they anachronistic or still relevant in Esan contemporary society and its parlance? If the Esan folk proverbs are still relevant in a contemporary setting, how can the present-day

Esan people foster the continuity of this tradition? The sole aim of this paper would have been achieved if it could provide answers to these inquiries.

2. Esan in the Perspective of this Study

Who are the Esan people, and where are they found? It is a name for a territory occupied by a people of a particular tribe and custom. It is also a language spoken in that locale. Geographically, in the Edo State of Nigeria, Esan is bounded by Owan East, Etsako West, and Etsako Central in the North, Owan West in the Northwest, Orhionmwon in the South and river Niger by the East. Esan occupies about 2,814 square kilometers (Oseghale, 2019). Their historical origin is often traced to the Benin kingdom, so the social and political organization of the people is very similar to that of the Benin people (Okojie 1994). For easy illustration, the Esan region is marked out below on the map of the Edo State of Nigeria (Figure 1).

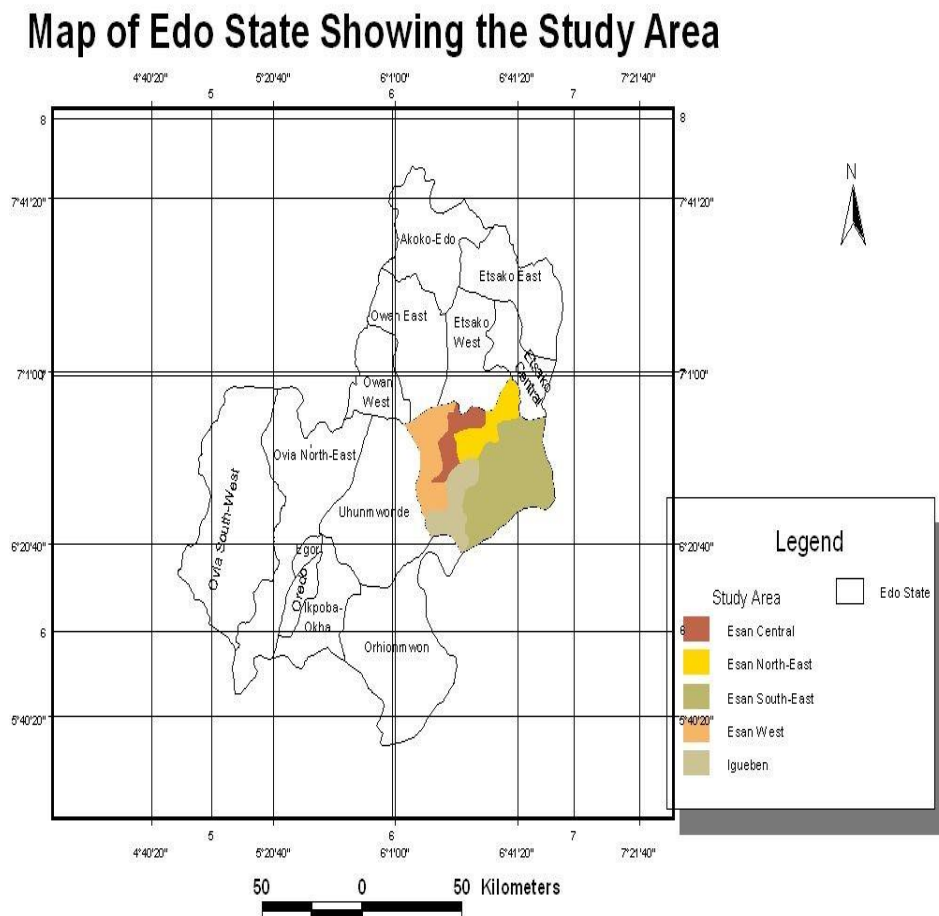


Figure 1. A map of the study area
Source: Charles O. Aluede

Apart from Esan history and geographical location in Nigeria, a brief description of their socio-political life will enhance our Knowledge of the people under investigation in this study. Esanland is made up of thirty-five kingdoms, which the *Enijie* superintends. *Enijie* is the plural noun for kings, while *Onojie* is the singular noun for a king. Ebaluneigbeifoh (2012:5), avers that:

... Before the coming of the Europeans, the Esan people had already been constituted into an organized people that were overseen by the *Onojie*, who, in ancient times, probably descended from the Benin war or lead the people to victory and so would be made king for his heroic act. No *Onojie* is subject to another, and they respect each other as the traditional culture demands.

The *Enijie* perform tripartite roles as spiritual, judicial, and social heads. However, it should be quickly stressed here that they do not have rights over criminal and serious civil cases. However, where parties

involved in any non-criminal litigation agree on arbitration, the king's palace is always open to amicable resolution of such disputes.

3. Materials and Methods

The ethnographic research method, comprising participant observation and interviews, was adopted in this study. Consultation of written works by scholars in this study area also complemented its findings, affirmations, and conclusion. Interviews were conducted with thirty (30) persons. A mixture of oral interviews, informal interactions, and observations was used to gather data. Esanland is made up of kingdoms that are grouped under five local government areas. Of these kingdoms, ten (10), namely, Ubiaja/Ewatto, Uromi/Uzea, Irrua/Opoji, Ekpoma/ Ewu, and Igueben/Ebelle were our chosen research fields. One of these selected towns is a local government headquarters paired with another town. Phone calls were constantly made to verify data and findings from resource persons and at times to corroborate opinions.

4. Defining Indigenous Knowledge and Education

African Indigenous Knowledge and African Indigenous Education can be used interchangeably. This is so depending on the context and perspective of the presentation. Mushi (2009) defines African indigenous education as a process of passing among the familial members and from one generation to another the inherited Knowledge, skills, cultural traditions, norms, and values of the tribe. However, context or the perspective of focus notwithstanding, culture and Knowledge are always dynamic. They evolve from time to time in response to contemporary realities. Therefore, Mushi's above definition may be reductive if not demeaning of the concept of African indigenous Knowledge. As a response to Mushi (2009), the opinions of Emeagwali and Dei (2014) are vital when they claim that indigenous Knowledge has not remained static has not been confined to the shores of the African continent. Like all knowledge systems, such Knowledge has diffused and interacted with other ways of knowing from other communities.

While discussing the indigenous knowledge system, Emeagwali and Shizha (2016), dislocated and disrupted the notion that African indigenous Knowledge is confined exclusively to the supernatural. That is why we agree with Abah, Mashebe, and Denuga (2015) when they acknowledged that indigenous knowledge systems constitute the core of community–development processes in agriculture, food preservation, collection, and storage of water, animal husbandry, and ethnic veterinary medicine. It also forms the basis of indigenous interpretation of meteorological and climatic phenomena, orientation and navigation on land and sea, and the management of natural resources. The indigenous knowledge system is also very helpful in local primary healthcare, preventive medicine, and psychosocial care, as well as the role of procreation.

Education is commonly defined as receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially in a confined space or institution such as a school or university. Put differently, education is the wise, hopeful, and respectful cultivation of learning undertaken in the belief that all should have the chance to share in life (Smith, 2020). Going by Smith's definition, the ideas of education and indigenous Knowledge appear to present the same side of the coin. The thrust of each is to undertake a learning process, to be skilled, and to be prepared to share with others to make life meaningful. Of what use is knowledge acquisition if it cannot improve the living standards of its people? Can new techniques not be introduced to replace the clumsy and obsolete way of doing things? To this end, we noticed that Indigenous Knowledge is a necessity in determining the way forward in Africa because of its inherent opportunities (Naamwintome and Millar (2015), thus an avalanche of scholarly positions points to the fact that African Indigenous Knowledge though underutilized is germane when it comes to resource application for development (Khumalo, 2017). In a similar vein, Ayeni and Aborisade (2022), remarked that diverse forms of indigenous Knowledge, deeply rooted in the relationships of the natives with the environment as well as in cultural cohesion, have allowed many of these communities to maintain a sustainable use and management of natural resources, to protect their environment and to enhance their resilience. In support of the views above, the quartet, Obiero, Klemet-N'Guessan, Migeni, and Achieng (2023), revealed with exactitude in their research how indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge systems and practices could complement each other for sustainable management of aquatic resources from East to West Africa.

5. Esan Folk Proverbs and their Eclectic Nature

The term 'eclecticism' used in this discourse is not different from its actual dictionary meaning. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, eclecticism is the quality of being eclectic. It states that it is an approach to the thought that draws upon multiple theories to gain complementary insights into phenomena. An art subject is eclectic if it borrows from multiple other styles, fields and sub-fields. Esan proverbs have these eclectic attributes worth examining. Having given this background, we would like to also examine what

proverbs are. Ikenga in Ogah (2015) defined “proverbs as short wise sayings which have come into common use, the wisdom of many and the wit of one, the wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression.” According to Ogah (2015), proverbs are one of the most reliable forms of oral tradition and, as such, are vehicles of the authentic beliefs of the people living in preliterate societies. Undoubtedly, African proverbs are a reliable form of oral tradition. However, to link proverbs only to the preliterate class is not exactly correct because interlacing speeches with proverbs are still valued and appreciated as a great linguistic skill at all times in any culture. African creative artists, namely novelists, poets, playwrights, composers, etc., have profusely used them in their works to help establish the indigenous cultural background of the story and its setting and enrich the language with traditional imageries, symbols, and meanings. Kimwaga in Emeagwali and Shizha (2016:7) assert that African civilization and cultures are replete with cultural Knowledge that is deeply rooted in local cultures and everyday lived experiences. African indigenous societies have, for centuries, developed their own sets of lived experiences and explanations relating to their environment.

This African civilization and culture, sometimes perceived in folk proverbs, manifest in the indigenous people’s everyday lived experiences. Esan folk proverbs are unique and worthy of study because they are eclectic and drawn from many fields of human endeavor. They are concise, wise sayings imbued with so much wisdom and exactitude. They function both at a conversational level and in other oral forms, such as songs. Whether in conversation or songs, an attempt to pay attention to them reveals their eclectic nature. That is, the way they borrow from different fields of human endeavor at a primary level of signification to convey a secondary meaning. From this perspective, this article takes a critical look at some Esan folk proverbs and the different strands they represent. Because readers of this article will be from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, we have decided to translate most of the proverbs to be discussed in English to reduce the boredom of having to struggle with dialectical forms associated with their pronunciation. In the following segment, we will be discussing the affinity that Esan proverbs have with many other fields, such as: (a) agriculture, (b) architecture, (c) eroticism, (d) geography, (e) law, (f) medicine/ hygiene, (g) morals and (h) religious knowledge.

5.1. Agriculture in Esan Proverbs

In agriculture, be it cropping or animal breeding, apt Esan proverbs give directions on good farming. When viewed with contemporary realities, these directions confirm the veracity of such claims as depicted in their proverbs. For example, while discussing the art of growing tropical fruits, Verheij (2006:6) remarked, “No flowers, no fruits! Scanty flowering is the main reason for disappointing crops in the tropics. Hence the flowering habit of a fruit crop is extremely important”. In Esan, it is said that “if a tree crop must produce fruits bounteously, its surrounding must be weeded.” put differently, “*when you clear out debris from a fruit tree, it will then produce fruitfully*”. In a similar vein, another Esan Proverb says that “*it is with great care that the cocks are slaughtered otherwise hens will remain barren*”. Hens may still lay eggs but they may be unfertilized, and procreation may be decapitated. As the cock is used as the subject of the aforementioned proverb, it is by extension, admonishing that much care be taken to preserve male animals. This saying in itself is instructive because, before the research in animal husbandry and the prescription of male-female ratio in animal colonies, the indigenous people had cautioned on a balance of contraries if poultry, tree crops, and livestock farms were to develop and expand.

5.2. Architecture in Esan Proverbs

Put simply, architecture is the process and the product of planning, designing, and constructing buildings or other structures. Architectural works, in the material form of buildings, are often perceived as cultural symbols and works of art. It is not in doubt that indigenous Knowledge is eclectic. Indigenous Knowledge integrates society's spiritual, environmental, technological, social, economic, and political dimensions (Dounias et al., 2016). Thus, in the field of architecture, we also find some beautifully crafted Esan proverbs that are straight to the point about the protection of buildings and buildings themselves; some of such are:

1. *When a house has cracks, reptiles reside therein.*
2. *When a house collapses, its leftover materials (the ruins) cannot take the house to its original position.*
3. *A crack in the wall should be attended to promptly, timeously, lest the owner has to rebuild the whole house.*

Any house that has cracks should always be urgently addressed. This is so for many reasons. Some of them are: if reptiles find ways into such cracks, then the house dwellers are unsafe because they stand the chance of being bitten; the wall, if not patched in time, can fall on the inhabitants, and when the house is unattended to, and it collapses it becomes an economic misfortune. Beyond the issue of architecture, this set of proverbs extends to the public health implications of such neglect.

5.3. Esan Proverbs and Eroticism

In the Kama Sutra, Danielou (1994:7) opined that: “Although erotic techniques concern all men, the refinements of the art of love are only possible if one possesses a pleasant dwelling with comfortable beds, bathrooms, reception rooms, gardens, flowers, and scents”.

The Kama sutra is enshrined in Vedic philosophy; it is an ancient Indian Sanskrit text on sexuality, eroticism, and emotional fulfillment in life. We discovered that the Esan people have ideas about romance. They are not found in mundane situations and discussions but among elders. In their old age, these elders are at liberty to say such proverbs. Some of them are:

1. *Without foreplay, no meaningful sexual exercise can be achieved.*
2. *The conscience which permits a woman to mate with a man, should further allow her to twist her waist along for maximum enjoyment.*
3. *No matter how huge, wealthy or influential a woman is, she does not mate herself; a man must always climb her.*

The three proverbs in this segment are apt in that, they address different aspects of romance / connubial activities. The first one talks about the importance of foreplay in arousing the sensibilities of the opposite sex. Putting a mature female in the mood for sex requires the creativity and romantic dexterity of the male lover. As an extension of the first proverb, the second one recognises that lovemaking will be a lopsided and unattractive exercise if the second party, the female, is not mutually sensitised in the coital activity. However, the third one appears to be anachronistic in the wake of queer bodies, transgenderism, and same-sex marriage to mention a few.

5.4. Proverbs Connected with Geography

Under this sub-head, we will be treating three related proverbs that are centred around geography and they are:

1. *The sea has joined all the rivers.*
2. *Anyone in front who falls into a ditch invariably teaches those behind how to navigate the way.*
3. *One is not wandering while passing a road once passed before.*

The three proverbs above fall within the domain of geography. They emanate from folk consciousness rooted in native geography. It implies that the ocean receives water from many rivers, known as tributaries. This, therefore, means that all such rivers have the ocean as a binding force and the mother of them all. Even though the context of using such proverbs may not be in a geography class, it is in everyday conversation.

The proverbs “anyone in front who falls into a ditch invariably teach those behind how to navigate the way” and “one is not wandering while passing a road once passed before” allude to the fact that roads and basic road signs need to be mastered. If one is not conversant with a particular terrain, it is good to not take the lead but be at the rear. Doing this will allow one to learn from the mistakes of the one in front. By the principle of repetitive practice, individuals are encouraged to note landmarks when on a journey, as this tendency will be of great help someday.

5.5. Esan Proverbs and Law

Law is known as a system of rules which a particular country or community recognizes as regulating the actions of its members, and which may be enforced by the imposition of penalties (<https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>). We may well reduce our thoughts on what law is to a generally agreed collection of dos and don'ts of a community or nation, which when circumvented is punishable through an established legal procedure. Thus, it is a mantra in law; *Nulla poena sine lege*—a derivative from Latin which in English means ‘no penalty without law’. Below are examples of Esan folk proverbs which have legal connotations:

1. *The thief and buyer of stolen goods are the same.*
2. *When laws are not made, laws are not broken.*
3. *Whoever engages a married woman in randy talks and whoever sleeps with her is guilty of the same offence.*

To the Esan, buying stolen property is a tacit approval and encouragement of criminality. Anyone found to have bought stolen property is also considered a thief. This issue is also captured in Nigerian law as a criminal activity, and it is enshrined in Section 427 of the Criminal Code Act. Cap. C 38. The second proverb says that when laws are not made, they are not broken, which is aptly captured in the Nigerian law as ‘No law; no

transgression'. There is a plethora of Esan proverbs that abhor idle or wet talks with a married woman. In the traditional Esan society, the male culprit is sanctioned and fined with rules that prohibit such conduct. No doubt, Indigenous and local knowledge systems and local practitioners' Knowledge can provide valid and useful information to improve our understanding of biodiversity and ecosystem governance for human well-being (Tengö et al., 2014). Beyond biodiversity and ecosystem management, an accurate grasp of the principles of indigenous Knowledge has the potential to help the African and human race in innumerable ways.

5.6. Esan Proverbs and Medicine/Hygiene

This study takes cognisance of the popular and professional understanding of 'medicine', which is summed up in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary definition of the term as the science and art dealing with the maintenance of health and the prevention, alleviation, or cure of disease and a substance or preparation used in treating disease. Indigenous Knowledge of medicine and public health in Esan is not different from its Western concept defined by Merriam-Webster. Esan folk proverbs listed and discussed below derive from Esan traditional Knowledge of medicine and public health.

1. *If with force catarrh is blown from the nose, it will result in deafness.*
2. *When the nose is being beaten, the eyes will cry; what the head harbours are many.*
3. *No matter how beautiful and neat a piece of cloth is, it should never be chewed.*

The first proverb takes us to human anatomy and physiology. It sends a signal that the eardrum is tender and could rupture as a result of the exertion of much force. Except for experience, it is amazing that the traditional Esan knows the connection between the ears, nose and throat which is an area of specialisation for physicians in general and Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialists and surgeons in particular. The head contains a lot of organs. It harbours the eye, ear, nose, and mouth. The second proverb recognizes that these organs within the head are connected. To the Esan, the nose and eyes are also related. They have since noticed a kind of sympathetic reaction between them such that when the nose has some discomfort, the eyes are also affected. Between 2020 and 2021, when COVID-19 became a life-threatening pandemic, people went beyond the use of a nose mask to a face mask. This affirms the thinking that droplets could contaminate the eye and affect the head and the entire body.

As listed above, the Esan proverb states: no matter how beautiful and neat a rag is, it is never eaten. According to Aluede (2014:25), children in their formative years are often admonished as soon as they are sighted chewing their clothes. It is considered a very dirty habit to do so. Indulging in this kind of poor health habit could lead to being infected with dysentery, diarrhoea and other related diseases. In addition to the foregoing belief, the human skin is regarded as the body's largest organ, housing and holding all other organs and should be maintained and nourished by covering it. This, therefore, means that the cloth that has provided coverage for the body is in constant contact with microbes, and chewing it could lead to gastrointestinal infections.

5.7. Morals in Esan Proverbs

1. *When a young man buries his face in the thighs of a lady too early in life, he does not see the future.*
2. *Being indebted is better than being a thief.*
3. *Anger does no good. Nothing done in anger ever suffixes; it is usually laden with regrets afterwards.*
4. *It is a fool who is offended and will not know. And it is also a fool that if spite hurt and apologised to that will be unforgiving.*
5. *If while planning for marriage a lad sells his gun to raise money, what will he use on the day of trouble to protect his bride?*

The aforementioned proverbs listed are quite clear, didactic, and self-explanatory. While numbers one and five are specifically directed at the male folks over good moral conduct, the proverbs are advice to the male youths to not waste their natural endowments on earthly/worldly pleasures too early in life. That category of male folks is also admonished to be wise enough to have a solid financial resource base before looking for or thinking about a wife. The three other proverbs (numbers 2, 3 and 4) talk of integrity, good composure and being moderately tempered.

5.8. Esan Proverbs that are connected with Religion

In their study of selected Esan folksongs and proverbs in Nigeria as a lead into their spirituality, Aluede and Bello (2022) identified certain proverbs that border on the people's religious construct of life, death, living and belief about the place of God in their worldview. That seminal study drew scholarly attention to the artistic role of religious proverbs in Esan people's folk songs. In the course of the aforementioned research study, findings revealed many religious proverbs. A few are listed below for discussion.

1. *God cites his rivers in places that will not drink up his water.*
2. *It is only God who can know whether the incubated egg will bring forth a hen or cock*
3. *Ebe ko 'khun no 'senobua oi ri bho* Nothing is greater than God. God as the Almighty and Supreme Being is the greatest of all.
4. *Osenobua ole re 'gbo no 'ria de.* It is God who gives a mortal a reason to boast.

In all of these proverbs, we can palpate or see the people's construction of God. He is a great geographer, geologist, and scientist with an unsurpassed discerning mechanism. In Esan, God is often hailed and addressed as the one and only great king, who was not created but created all that has been, the all in all, He that constantly does without asking for gratis in return, He that does good and boasts not of His kindness and a great and tireless provider. It is within this cusp that the people have proverbs which posit that: 'Nothing is greater than God, it is only God who can know whether the incubated egg will bring forth a hen or cock and that it is God who gives mortals reasons to boast of their exploits.'

6. Some Critical Remarks

Proverbs offer invaluable sources of condensed information. The documentation, teaching, and study of Esan folk proverbs will greatly renew their social and cultural relevance and enrich the linguistic competence of the emergent generation of speakers of Esan origin. Furthermore, appreciating Esan folk proverbs will, in no small measure, enhance Knowledge of indigenous systems of Esan land. If it is ignored, it would truncate cultural continuity. According to Uwah, "African scholars are the greatest victims of colonial mentality. To them, African ideas from so-called ordinary observations and discussions do not count as pillars of our knowledge system. But that of the Europeans is held high; we have a problem" (2021).

There is nothing wrong if Africa sets the pace for a cultural renaissance. It is thus reasoned that Africans are overdue for a clear-cut and well-thought-out cultural constitution that will accommodate African realities rather than uphold Western models, even in the face of glaring cultural dissimilarities.

7. Conclusion

Contrary to what many people may believe, the coming of the missionaries ushered in Western education and their system of Knowledge. This article affirms that the Esan people, and by extension, Africans, have continually had a rich cultural tradition where Knowledge of diverse subject matters is coded in proverbs and orally communicated to one another for didactic purposes and indigenous education. This underscores the eclectic nature of folk proverbs. To buttress this fact, the authors selected proverbs that address many aspects of human endeavour, namely, agriculture, architecture, eroticism, geography, law, medicine, hygiene, morals, and religious Knowledge within the Esan ecosystem. Having undertaken this study, that more scholarly interest in Esan proverbs will further unveil issues that could be of scholarly and cultural benefit to all keenly interested in African indigenous knowledge systems.

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