

## Unity in Diversity: A Comparative Study of Selected Idioms in Nembe (Nigeria) and English

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**Abstract:** Different linguistic communities have unique ways of expressing certain ideas. These unique expressions include idioms (as compared with proverbs), often being fixed in lexis and structure. Based on assumptions and criticisms of the Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis with its derivatives of cultural determinism and cultural relativity, this paper studies certain English idioms that have parallels in Nembe (an Ijoid language in Nigeria's Niger Delta). It is discovered that while the codes (vehicles) of expression are different, the same propositions and thought patterns run through the speakers of these different languages. However, each linguistic community adopts the concepts and nuances in its environment. It is concluded that the concept of linguistic universals and cultural relativity complement each other and provide a forum for efficient communication across linguistic, cultural and racial boundaries.

**Keywords:** Idioms, proverbs, Nembe, English, proposition, equivalence, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, linguistic universals, cultural relativity

### 1. Introduction: Language and Culture (Unity or Diversity)

The fact that differences in culture are reflected in the patterns of the languages of the relevant cultures has been recognized over time. In this regard, one of the weaknesses modern linguists find in classical (traditional) grammar is the "logical fallacy" (Levin, 1964, p. 47) which assumed "the immutability of language" (Ubahakwe & Obi, 1979, p. 3) on the basis of which attempts were made to telescope the patterns of modern European languages (most of which are at least in past "analytic") into the structure of the classical languages like Greek and Latin which were largely "synthetic". The assumption was that there exist "extralingual categories which are independent of the more or less accidental facts of existing languages" (Jespersen, 1929, p. 33) and are "universal in so far as they are applicable to all languages" (Lyons, 1968, p. 134). Modern linguistics, while conceding the notion of "linguistic universals," recognizes the structure of each language as distinct and treats it as such.

At the other extreme is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis emphasizing the exclusive distinctiveness of each language with its culture or philosophy. The hypothesis consists of two main propositions. The first is "linguistic relativity" which holds that "the world is differently experienced and conceived in different linguistic communities" (Brown, 1970, p. 238) or that "difference in language equals difference in thought" (Parr-Davies, 2004, p. 1). The second, which derives from the first, is "linguistic determinism" which proposes that "language is causally related to the psychological difference in our world-views" (Brown, 1970, p. 238; Teilanyo, 2006, p.1; Adebola Adebileje & Oluwanisola Araba, 2012, p. 7). The ultimate

implication of the hypothesis is that languages are so culture-bound that it is hardly possible to translate one language into another since each expresses a distinct world-view or thought process. The view of Raymond W. Gibbs (1994) is similar to those of Sapir-Whorf as he demonstrates that human cognition is deeply poetic and that figurative imagination constitutes the way we understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

The intermediate position between the two views is that there are certain general concepts and objects which have equivalents in different languages. Some others have no equivalents but may be approximated in other languages through literal translation, calquing (or loan translations) and loan blends. Others are so culture-specific as not to lend themselves to any approximations and may have to be borrowed wholesale into the receiving language as loanwords.

The commonality among human brains in processing language and thought is well-recognized in cognitive science. Therefore, Feldman (2006) has demonstrated how humans, right from early childhood, acquire the intricate patterns of language, including abstract and metaphorical concepts like idioms and proverbs. Thus the brain of all humans of all races and linguistic backgrounds can conceptualize linguistic data like idioms and proverbs in the same manner. Lakoff and Johnson (2003), as well as Goatly (2011), have also demonstrated how metaphor, including idioms and proverbs, is pervasive in everyday discourse and in all languages.

How do idioms (and proverbs) fit into this matrix? Since idioms are largely culture-bound and express the original native speech of a people, is it possible to observe the same idioms in different languages and cultures? The interlingual comparison of idioms and proverbs has been done largely among European languages. For example, Wikipedia (2013a) gives analogues of the idiom *to kick the bucket* across eighteen languages in Europe, namely Bulgarian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Ukrainian. Another source, SpanishDict (2013), does something similar and suggests that “usually where the idiom exists across languages, the two languages are closely related, or one of them inherited it from the other.” Strugielska and Alonso’s (2013) seminal work on the importance of idioms in intercultural integration also limits the discussion to three European languages, namely English, Polish and Spanish. In a few cases, comparison or translation of idioms has been done between European languages, particularly English, and Asian languages like Chinese (Shengrong, 2013; Miss Suzzy, 2013; Free Top Essays, 2013).

There are many studies on African proverbs (Finnegan, 1970, etc). Particularly relevant to this study is the work by Alagoa (1986) which is not only the chief compendium on Nembe proverbs but also draws parallels between a few idioms in Nembe (the Nigerian language being studied here) and English. Alagoa (1968, 1972, 1985, 1994, 1997) has also studied Nembe proverbs as a source of history. The occurrence of the same proverbs in different African languages is also noted.

However, while there has been much study on English idioms, and the challenges in using English idioms in non-native settings (Longe & Ofuani, 1996, p. 117; Teilanyo 2009), our survey reveals that studies on idioms in African languages are hard to come by. More specifically, there has been very little, if any, comparison of idioms (even proverbs, sayings, axioms, aphorisms and maxims) between African languages on the one hand and European, Asian or other languages on the other hand. Is this because there are no idioms in African

languages? Or is it because, as has been argued in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the languages and cultures (including thought patterns) of Africa are so different from those in other parts that there are no grounds for comparison? Indeed, are there idioms in Nembe and other African languages that are comparable in structure or content with idioms and proverbs from other parts of the world? These questions are critical for interlingual and intercultural associations involving Africa and the rest of the global community.

In this paper we demonstrate that there are idioms, culture-bound as they are, in Nembe that parallel English idioms. This contradicts the opinion in SpanishDict (2013) that co-occurrence of idioms in different languages can only be attributed to affinity among the languages or to inheritance. This discovery enables us to argue that intercultural communication between speakers of Nembe (and probably other Nigerian and African languages) and those of English is not necessarily hindered but can, in fact, be facilitated with the use of idioms. Ultimately, then, it is presented that Nembe and other African languages have much to contribute to global communicative culture.

## 2. Nembe as a People and Language

The word “Nembe” has three interrelated but distinct denotations. Firstly, it refers to a specific town consisting of two sections, Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri. History has it that the two were together at Ogbolomabiri before the kingdom was split between two nephews such that one crossed over to establish Bassambiri with his followers (Alagoa, 1972, p. 128; 1964, pp. 50–51).

Secondly, “Nembe” refers to a sub-ethnic group within the umbrella Ijo ethnic group. In this meaning it includes Nembe town as well as several other towns like Okpoama, Twon, Odioma, Liama, Egwema and many more towns and villages attached to them politically and culturally. The Nembe people in this sense occupy Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas in Bayelsa State, Nigeria (Wikipedia, 2013b).

Thirdly, “Nembe” refers to the language, or Ijo dialect within the Ijo language cluster (Williamson & Timitimi, 1983, pp. xvi-xvii) that is spoken among these people inhabiting the towns and villages in the second sense above. It is these last two senses that are adopted in this study. This is because the proverbs are common to all the Nembe-speaking people, also called Brass people. By the 1991 National Census the totality of Nembe people amounted to 440,100 and was projected to be 520,864 by 1996.

The Nembe people are bordered in the east by the Kalabari and the Okrika, two Eastern Ijaw sub-ethnic groups, to the north by the Ogbia and Abua-Odual people, to the west by the central Ijaw people (called Izon) and to the South by the Atlantic Ocean. The Ijaw people constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria, after Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. They are indigenous in all the six states in the South-South region, namely Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the ethnic group and language has been pronounced and written in different ways. Some of these are Udso, Idso, Idzo, Idjo, Djo, Ijo, Ijoh and Ijaw (Williamson, 1965, p. 1). In addition, Williamson and Timitimi (1983, pp. 14-17) use Ijo to refer to a “language cluster,” Izon (sometimes Ezon) being a

The occupation of the Nembe (and other Ijaw people) is mainly fishing, although they also do some minimal farming, commerce, canoe-carving, salt refining and a few handicrafts.

The Nembe people have some peculiarities. Like other Eastern Ijaw groups (Kalabari, Okrika, Ibani, Opobo, Bile), they have some central political systems entitling them to be called “city-states” like Greek city-states (Alagoa, 1964, p. 3) by which there is a strong central city with a monarch, and to which several other smaller towns and villages owe allegiance. Among the dialect groups, Nembe is privileged to have arguably the largest literature and is the fourth Nigerian language to have the full Holy Bible, *Tonton Bible Mi*, translated into it (1956) after Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo (Hansford et al., 1976), besides a dictionary (Kaliai 1964, 1966).

### 3. Methodology

The method adopted in this study is mainly library research. The proverbs being studied are collected from existing literature. There are several works on English proverbs – books (including dictionaries), articles and internet sources. The proverbs that have equivalents in Nembe are selected from these collections for the analysis. For Nembe, the primary source is Ebiegberi Alagoa’s (1986) bilingual *Noin Nengia, Bere Nengia: Nembe N’Akabu (More Days, More Wisdom: Nembe Proverbs)*. The proverbs are sifted to identify those that are judged to be more of idioms and have correlates in English. These are complemented with expressions from recorded folk music, namely audio compact disks, produced by Igoni Ogbo Cultural Society of Odioma, and from the writer’s knowledge as a native speaker.

The method of data analysis is general textual explication. The idioms and proverbs from the two languages are juxtaposed for a comparative study of their propositions and the vehicles (lexical items and lexical fields) employed.

### 4. Idioms, Proverbs and the Likes

An idiom is “a number of words which, when taken together, have a different meaning from the individual meanings of each word” (Seidl & McMordie, 1988, pp. 12–13) or “a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words” (Hornby, 2010). The word **idiom** is taken from the Greek word *idios*, meaning “one’s own” through Latin *idioma* meaning “special property,” “special feature” or “special phrasing.” Therefore, “it is often impossible to guess the meaning of an idiom from the words it contains” (*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*, 1998; p. vii). In principle, an idiomatic expression is “lexicalized” (is to be taken as a single lexical item), and is to be interpreted as independent from the literal meaning of the lexical items (Wikipedia, 2013a). In the order of words, over a period of use, idioms become “fossilized items” such that the lexical items are inseparable in those expressions.

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dialect group within Ijo. The spelling Ijaw refers to the ethnic group as a whole, within which we have several sub-ethnic and dialect groups – Nembe, Kalabari, Okrika, Ibani, Izon, Ogbia, Abua-Odual, etc. – with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility and zero intelligibility among both these sub-groups and those in the fringes.

A proverb is generally a way of speaking in symbolic terms. Hornby (2010) defines it as “a well-known phrase or sentence that gives advice or says something that is generally true.” Ruth Finnegan does not consider a precise definition of a proverb an easy matter, but she agrees that “it is a saying in more or less fixed form, marked by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it” (Finnegan, 1970, p. 393). Thus, its distinguishing characteristics are terseness, relative fixedness, and the universality and timelessness of its veracity. Moreover, it is “marked by some kind of poetic quality in style or sense, and in this way set apart in form from more straightforward maxims.”

The relationship between idioms and proverbs has been controversial in paroemiology. Are idioms the same as proverbs? Is one included in the other, or are they mutually exclusive? There has been much confusion such that many collections put the two terms together in expressions like “A Dictionary of Proverbs and Idioms.”

While idioms are essentially figurative or metaphorical, many proverbs (especially African ones that may be derived from fables with non-human characters) are also figurative in the actual context of use and, therefore, could be ambiguous since they could each have more than one meaning. A proverb is an acknowledged expression of wisdom, but would seem inappropriate until contextualized. The idiomatic expression “to kick the bucket” could both mean the idiomatic “to die” and the literal meaning “to actually kick a physical bucket,” if such an act was actually taking place. Of course, some idioms would seem nonsensical if taken literally, such as “the apple of one’s eye” since we would not expect to have a physical apple in a (human) eye. Similarly, the proverb “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” is ambiguous: its literal meaning is valid, but it could be used as a proverb to refer to the wisdom of holding onto the little one has in preference to the elusive much that is hoped for. Again, both have the characteristic of non-susceptibility to lexical or structural change.

In another wider sense, idiomatic usage refers to the original native speech of a people, such that idioms are considered a superordinate term that includes proverbs. Hence Wikipedia says “**proverbs are idioms** that express a universal truth based on common sense or practical experience.” [emphasis added] (Wikipedia, 2013a). Factmonster (2013) also says “both idioms and proverbs are part of our daily speech. Many are very old and have interesting histories.”

Attempts have been made to distinguish between English idioms and proverbs. *Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary* (2013) gives this useful effort:

Like idioms, proverbs often have a meaning that is greater than the meaning of the individual words put together, but in a different way than idioms. The literal meaning of an idiom usually doesn’t make sense, and idioms can be almost impossible to understand unless you have learned or heard them before.

The literal meaning of a proverb such as “Don’t cry over spilled milk” does make sense on its own, but it’s not until you apply this meaning to a broader set of situations that you understand the real point of the proverb. For example, “Don’t cry over spilled milk” means “Don’t get upset over something that has already been done. It’s too late to worry about it now, just get on with your life.”

But the confusion is not averted as the same utterance is cited by some sources as an idiom and

by other sources as a proverb. For example, to “cry over spilled milk” which *Merriam-Webster* cites as a typical proverb is given by Hornby (2010) as an idiom.

Another source, English Language & Usage Stack Exchange (2013), attempts to differentiate the concepts as follows:

An idiom is an expression that can be understood only as a whole and not by analysing its constituent parts. For example, if you know what ‘kick’, ‘the’ and ‘bucket’ mean, that won’t help you understand that ‘kick the bucket’ means ‘die’. A proverb may or may not be idiomatic, but it expresses succinctly some form of philosophy, folk wisdom or advice. ‘Hindsight is always 20:20’ is neither an idiom nor a proverb, but a trite expression of the obvious.

Idioms are short arrangements of words that have a meaning beyond their literal. They can be completely different from their literal meaning, such as “bite the bullet”, or “step up to the plate”, both of which mean “begin a difficult task.” Or they can mean close to their literal meaning, but carry lots of cultural baggage along with them, such as “land of the free” which means what it says, but carries lots of American patriotic baggage, or “tea and sympathy” which denotes a rendezvous with a particular goal of commiseration in mind.

A proverb is, instead, a short or pithy remark or story designed to convey a moral or practical message. It comes from the eponymous book of the Bible which, in many chapters, has pages and pages of one or two verse statements of that kind. “Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool in his folly”, “A fool and his money are soon parted”, etc.

Proverbs are usually pretty literal in their meaning, and are certainly not restricted to those from the Bible, though that is the origin of the name and the form as used in English. Some non-Biblical proverbs would be “many hands make light work”, “procrastination is the thief of time”, etc.

A useful hint from the above is that “a proverb may or may not be idiomatic.” This means that a proverb may express a very literal meaning or historical fact; except that it becomes indirect if now applied to some other context beyond the situation that originated it. This is particularly true of many Nembe or African proverbs which state historical facts with purely literal meanings but are now used to illustrate an issue or to admonish (Alagoa 1968, 1985, 1994, 1997). The point may also be made that in structure, especially in English, idioms are mostly in phrasal form while proverbs are generally sentential or clausal.

Idioms and proverbs are also closely related to aphorisms, maxims, axioms sayings or adages. Some sources have attempted to distinguish between different forms of non-literal ways of speaking in English. Headbloom (2013) makes the following observations:

While there are many, many expressions in English, we can think of them as three distinct categories: **expressions**, **idioms**, and **sayings**.

1. An **expression** is a general cluster of words like “don’t know which end is up.” This means to be disoriented or confused. Example: *My cousin Julie is so busy, she doesn’t*



*know which end is up.*

2. An **idiom** is a colorful expression like “raining cats and dogs” (which means raining very hard). Another idiom is “doing something by the seat of your pants” (which means doing something as you go along, without prior plan). Example: *This process is new for everyone on the team; we’re doing it by the seat of our pants this first time.* The meanings of these idioms have nothing to do with pants or house pets, but they give us interesting ways to express ourselves.

3. A **saying** (also called a **proverb**, **maxim**, or **adage**) is a piece of wisdom from one’s culture. Our earlier example (a bird in the hand) is a piece of advice for people trying to choose between two options. From Chinese culture, I have always liked the proverb, “A journey of 1000 miles begins with the first step.” This advises us not to be afraid of big undertakings.

But the distinction is still unclear as one is sometimes defined with the other. If it is true that an “expression” is different from a “saying,” “proverb” or “idiom,” what do we say about “idiomatic expression.”? While an aphorism is defined as “a short phrase that says something true or wise” (Hornby, 2005), the *OED* (1989) defines it as “any principle or precept expressed in few words; a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import; a maxim.” A maxim is “a well-known phrase that expresses something that is usually true or that people think is a rule for sensible behaviour” (Hornby 2005). An axiom is “a proposition that commends itself to general acceptance; a well-established or universally-conceded principle; a maxim, rule, law” (*OED*, 1989).

In all, the distinction between these non-literal uses of language is a tenuous one and may not be pressed too far. For example, some languages, like the Nembe (Ijo) language in Nigeria being studied here, may not have different words for the two. In Nembe, the word *kabu* is principally translated as “proverb,” but it includes “adage; proverb; traditional maxim; enigmatical saying; allegory; parable; [old] saw; by-word” (Kaliai, 1964, p. 7). The Nembe word for idioms is *fiébibi*, meaning “wise saying, idiomatic expression, euphemism, or epigram” (Alagoa, 1986, p. iv), more literally “spoken word/expression.” There is equally the expression *Nembe bibi*, literally “Nembe language,” or “Nembe expression,” used in context to include different forms of indirectness in language use, especially innuendos, and besides *kabu* (proverbs) and *kule* (praise names). Thus *Nembe bibi* in context would include idioms. Alagoa admits that his “Nembe collaborators identified some in the collection as *fiébibi*, rather than as *kabu* (proverbs)”. But even more than is the case with English, Alagoa (1986, p. iv) states that “this does not, in practice, distinguish them [*fiébibi*] from proverbs as a separate genre in popular usage...” In general then, “the Nembe do not mark rigid boundaries between literary genre[s].” The use of *Nembe bibi* (“Nembe expression”) or *fiébibi* (“spoken expression”) suggests that idioms are truly autochthonous to the speech of the Nembe people.

In this paper, the focus is on idioms, rather than proverbs, since we observe that much work has already been done on proverbs across cultures and languages, but not so much on idioms. However, in our analysis, it would be observed that some of the examples would be considered to be proverbs, aphorisms, maxims, adages or “sayings,” as much as idioms.

## 5. Idioms in English and Nembe: Data Presentation

In this section we consider some idioms in English<sup>2</sup> and Nembe that have propositional or even lexical equivalence.

SN	English Idiom and Example	Nembe Idiom and English
1	a. to kick the bucket b. to pass on/away	a. <i>sou bogo</i> (Igoni n.d.a). To pass away b. <i>a ruru</i> . To yawn c. <i>igoni dogu</i> (Igoni n.d.a) to travel to a foreign land (Alagoa, 1986, p. 42) d. <i>bara pula</i> (Igoni n.d.a) for the hands to become crippled
2	to rain cats and dogs	<i>Kana ka buru terigha, buru ka kana terigha.</i> The basket does not cover the yam, nor does the yam cover the basket. (Cf. Alagoa, 1986, pp. 60, 61)
3	out of the frying pan and into the fire	<i>Aguo mangi mo mu ofo tibi gho tie</i> to run from the cobra and step on the horned mamba <i>Ofo mangi mo mu aguo tibi gho tie</i> to run from the horned cobra and step on the green mamba (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 84,85)
4	to take heed	<i>Toruma kirima kirima</i> eyes to the ground, to the ground
5	to go empty - handed	a. <i>Papa bara na wari suo</i> to enter the house with the bare hands b. <i>Ala-mindi gbon bou</i> to scoop brackish water with the palm and drink c. <i>Fula mini</i> . To swallow spit. [When one gloats at food or some other desire but is unable to get it.]
6	a. to give somebody the rough end of the stick b. to be on the rocks; to hit the rocks	<i>Akangara bara bian.</i> A fish-smoking-rack obstructs the hand (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 6, 7)

<sup>2</sup> Some of the English idioms might originally have been sourced from other languages.



7	a. cat and mouse b. at daggers drawn	a. <i>Baba fi kugu fi</i> The gourd breaks, the pitcher breaks. b. <i>Foun na finj na</i> Gunpowder and fire. c. <i>Noin na ene na eriagha</i> Night and day do not meet. d. <i>Fununu pere na Nembe pere na</i> The high priest of Fununu and the high priest of Nembe never see. (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 38,39, 74, 75)
8	Half a loaf is better than no bread.	<i>Buru lagha bo ka fulo.</i> One who does not receive yam [receives] soup. To the one who misses the yam, soup.
9	to count the chickens before they are hatched	<i>Ama erigha ebila anya.</i> to spread the sleeping mat before sighting home (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 6,7)
10	hand in glove	<i>kondo bara igiri meremu bara</i> as the left hand agrees with the anus
11	to put in an appearance	<i>fula piri</i> to give spittle
12	to chase shadows	<i>Obiri kpepu nama imgba.</i> (Alagoa 1986, pp. 78, 79 ) The meat/bone in the dog's mouth.
13	a. Man proposes; God disposes. b. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. c. Easier said than done. d. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.	<i>Ton bio pere fa.</i> In the mind of planning there is no wealth.
14	a. at the end of the tether b. to cross the Rubicon c. at one's wits' end d. The die is cast.	<i>ogono pirika, ekigha; kiri pirika, ekigha</i> Give to the top, it does not take; give to the bottom, it does not take.
15	To tighten one's belt	<i>Bara fina</i> To tie the hand.
16	For one's nerves to be set on edge	<i>Sian igba tie/nunu.</i> For the nerves to stand.

17	a. Birds of a feather flock together. b. Evil communication corrupts good manner. (Alagoa, 1986: 27) Show me your friend, and I will tell you who you are.	<i>Bura na mondi indi bura bura furu.</i> A fish that keeps company with <i>bura</i> smells of <i>bura</i> <sup>1</sup> (Alagoa, 1986, p. 27).
18	Rome was not built in a day.	<i>Aru kara kirigho aru berigha.</i> A canoe is not fully shaped at the spot where it was carved. (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 12,13)
19	Two heads are better than one.	a. <i>Kieri bara sungbali tibigho iku ekig.</i> (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 192, 193 ). One finger does not pick a louse from the head. b. <i>Tende otumo/bugu palimo re otumo/bugu ebi.</i> It is when the thighs press a vagina that a vagina is good (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 112,113; Igoni n.d.b).
20	Beggars cannot be choosers.	<i>Ifingi ho san nina</i> (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 142, 143). The urination of a man with the distended scrotum
21	Once bitten twice shy.	<i>Obi gbom ho asan erika esin.</i> (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 76.77) One who has been bitten by a snake is scared even at the sight of a skink lizard.
22	Evening glory is best. He who laughs last laughs best.	<i>Borobu ebi re ye.</i> (Alagoa, 1986, p. 24) Evening glory is best.
23	The road to righteousness is narrow.	a. <i>Ala toru re kumo bogomo.</i> (Igoni Ogbo n.d.b) It is the long river that saves someone. b. <i>Tuburu mindi re kumo bogomo.</i> It is the opposing water current that saves someone (Igoni Ogbo n.d.b).
24	A stitch in time saves nine.	<i>Ma ifie suo obio nini pele pele.</i> (Alagoa, 1986, p. 66) A second attack of yaws cuts off the nose.
25	Discretion is the better part of valour. God/Heaven helps those who help themselves.	<i>Odu elegimo re-gho wari-aye kumo dua.</i> It is by being mindful of oneself that the household spirits save one.
26	Let bygones be bygone. Not to cry over spilt milk.	<i>Fafa-ye na sangala pogu nengigha.</i> What is lost is not more than a bunch of faggots.

27	The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.	<i>Gbon bara pulo famo.</i> Little pinches finish the oil (Alagoa, 1986, p. 42, 43).
28	not one jot of a tittle	<i>Ye otongbolo ka fa</i> Not a dewdrop (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 120,121).
29	hard luck	<i>Ikoli tamuno re ikoli firimo mu igbo gho suo.</i> It is the crab's soul that sent the crab to get caught in a net.
30	One man's meat is another man's poison.	<i>Din ama oru din ama nama.</i> A god in one town is meat in another town (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 28, 29).
31	All that glitters is not gold. The grass is always greener on the other side.	<i>Aladugho digi angala</i> A mangrove tree seen from afar (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 6, 7).
32	as the crow flies	<i>Ongo dug.</i> to take the canal
33	Easy come, easy go.	<i>Saratibi gho bin egiei saratibigho fa yoye.</i> A knife found in a waste bin gets lost in a waste bin.
34	Empty vessels make the loudest noise.	<i>Dari bogo osi ye biogho fa.</i> A snail that boils too much contains nothing.
35	to cry over spilt milk	<i>Indibei bogo tere ba bara nimi.</i> It is when the fish has escaped that the best way of killing it is known.
36	Pot calls the kettle black.	<i>Eke furu eki obiri/posi tin.</i> The rat accuses the dog/cat of theft (Alagoa, 1986, pp. 32,33).

## 6. Analysis and Discussion

Out of the three dozen expressions, we analyse only the first dozen for want of time and space. We leave the other two dozens for the reader to draw the parallelism in structure and “conceptual metaphors” (Strugielska & Alonso, 2013, p. 3).

In 1, we have the often cited “to kick the bucket.” It has the euphemistic version “to pass on” (British English) or “to pass away” (American English). For this, there are four idiomatic equivalents in Nembe. *Sou bogo* is analogous both propositionally and lexically to “pass on/away.” Note that it is autochthonous to Nembe, and not a literal translation or carry over from English or some other language. Also note the English nominal term “the departed.” *Aruru* (“to yawn”) is another euphemism and arises from the fact that yawning is associated with sleeping,

and death is poetically and in faith-based terms considered a form of sleep. *Igoni dogu* is equally euphemistic and suggests the belief that at death one's spirit or soul departs to another land or community beyond the terrestrial.

*Bara pula* is usually restricted to a chief – whether a paramount chief/ruler, a war-canoe chieftain (*omungu-arū-alabo*) or the priest of a deity. It is discourteous to use *fi* (“die/death”) to refer to these personages. In Nembe, chieftaincy stools are established in honour of ancestral warriors or wealthy men who had men as sons or slaves in number enough to fill a war canoe (about thirty-two, sixteen on either side) to wage war on enemy communities or engage in long-distance trade. At death, they become ancestral spirits, and their descendant sons are successively installed as chiefs in their stead and in charge of their lineage and members of the community parliament. These living chiefs are the “hands” of the departed ancestors. Hence, when they die, the “hand” of the ancestor has gone limp. Similarly, the sitting priests are the “hands” of the deities and get limp at their (priests’) death.

“To rain cats and dogs” is phrasal in structure but has its propositional equivalent in the compound-sentential *Kana ka buru terigha; buru ka kana terigha*. Alagoa (1986, pp. 60,61) gives only a half of it: *Kana buru terigha*. While the English uses the fauna vehicle of domestic animals – ‘cats’ and ‘dogs,’ the Nembe idiom employs the equally domestic, but in this case the metaphors are flora – “basket” and “yam.” It is derived from the fact that a basket with its holes is incapable of shielding a yam from rain, just as a yam does not have enough surface area to cover a basket from rain. The two idioms express the proposition of a heavy rain. The Nembe inhabit the tropical rain forest and know what heavy rains are, obviously more than the English.

No. 3 has the proposition of escaping one danger only to end up in a worse danger. The English employs the lexical field of the kitchen – “frying pan” and “fire” – while the Nembe idiom uses the snake reptile. The cobra’s spit and bite are poisonous, but if, in running from them, one steps on the horns of the green mamba, then one is in greater trouble, just as the fire has worse heat than the frying pan. The parallelism in both idioms is also noteworthy – structurally equivalent prepositional phrases in English idiom and structurally equivalent infinitival structures in the Nembe version. Similarly, the alliterative quality in the English “frying” and “fire” is compensated for by the disyllabic *aguo* and *ofo*.

The idioms in 4 in both languages express the proposition of caution. “To take heed” is a fixed, fossilized expression. “Eyes to the ground” is derived from the need for one to watch one’s steps on a path that is rocky or marshy to avoid a fall or an injury.

In 5, we have the idea of futility or non-fulfillment of a target, with nothing to show for one’s efforts. The hands are meant to carry the fruit of one’s labour; hence to go empty-handed is to go without any accomplishment. The same vehicle of “hand” is employed to express the same idea. But Nembe has other idioms for this proposition: “to scoop brackish water [and] and drink” as well as “to swallow spit.” Living in the Niger Delta and the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, the water surrounding them is brackish, gaining salinity as one gets closer to the sea. Even when compelled to drink it, it does not quench one’s thirst. Nembe “to swallow spit” is a sign of one gloating over some delicious food one sees but does not have access to. All the idioms are united even in the diversity of language codes.

“To give someone the rough end of a stick” is to make someone experience discomfort or pain. The Nembe idiom uses a similar flora item *akangara* -- “woven material of bamboo sticks

for drying small fishes and shrimps” (Kaliai, 1964, p. 16) – made of raffia straw and with spiky edges that can easily cause injury to someone like the rough part of the stick. However, the two idioms are structurally dissimilar. The English is agentive in that someone is doing the giving while the Nembe idiom involves an affected participant in that it is the person that is hit by the *akangara*. “To hit the rocks” (English) is affective like the Nembe. The structural dissimilarity does not diminish the propositional congruence.

The idioms in 7 express a situation of irreconcilable differences or hostility between parties. The English idiom is derived from the natural incompatibility between cats and mice which are generally “at daggers drawn.” The Nembe versions express it in even more concrete forms. The way gunpowder burns and explodes in contact with fire is like the way night and day cancel each other out. The situation is akin to mythical rivalry between the high priest of Nembe and that of Fununu (a community in the western outskirts of Nembe) who are destined never to set eyes on each other.

The next set of idioms adopt terms from the culinary lexical field. Each uses a staple food item in its culture: “bread” for the English and *buru* and *fulo* (“yam” and “soup”) for the Nembe. A staple food for the Nembe is yam boiled with spicy condiments; not made into a porridge but the spicy liquid filtered away (as “pepper soup”) and eaten with the yam into which palm oil is poured. The import of the Nembe idiom is that even if one misses the yam, one should share from the soup as consolation, just as one could make do with a fraction of a deserved loaf of bread. The message is that one should learn to settle for a little.

Both “to count the chickens before they are hatched” and “to spread the sleeping mat before sighting home” mean to do things prematurely and presumptuously. One can never be sure of how many eggs will hatch successfully; and one needs to be sure of reaching home before retiring one’s paddle and lying with a mat in the canoe. To do otherwise is a mark of impatience and rashness.

To be “hand in glove” with someone is to be in complete agreement with the person. The Nembe idiom arises from the fact that it is the left hand one uses to clean the anus after passing excreta. It would be absurd to find anyone use the right hand – *ye fi bara* (“eating hand”) – for this. So to say, one agrees with another person “as the left hand answers the anus” is to agree without reservation. The presentation of this idiom as a simile with “as” is akin to other English idioms like “as cold as cucumber,” “as the crow flies,” etc.

When one stays briefly at an event or scene, one is “putting in an appearance.” The Nembe *fula piri* (“to give spittle”) is derived from the ritual performed during “masquerade” dramatic performances in Nembe whereby the performer is required to go to the river front by the town and touch the water briefly before coming to the town square for the main performance. This is done to acknowledge the fact that the masks and dance steps came from water spirits to whom due homage has to be paid. From this practice, the term is used when one has to “put in an appearance” at an event. It is used by in describing the act of women going to the toilet by the river to wash their genitals first thing each morning just before dawn as required in traditional hygiene.

“To chase shadows” is to engage in an illusion, to waste energy. The Nembe idiom – in nominal phrasal form – is derived from the folktale where a dog with a bone in its mouth is walking across a bridge and sees its image in the river below it. The magnifying feature of

the water makes the bone in image look bigger than the real one in its mouth. Hence the dog abandons the bone in its mouth and dives into the river with the aim of wrestling the bigger bone from the “other” dog, only to end up in futility. The congruence between the two idioms is remarkable as in both there is the concept of shadows or images and there is some “chasing” or running after involved.

## 7. Conclusion

The discussion above has revealed that there is much commonality between idioms in Nembe and English despite the distance between the two languages and cultures. It is discovered that the idioms share the same propositions but employ different vehicles or lexical items according to the flora and fauna and socio-cultural nuances of these peoples. In a few cases, the vehicles are even identical. In some cases, the grammatical forms are different or the images are more vivid in one language than in the other, but the two are still propositionally equivalent.

What is suggested by this discovery is that there is much shared between the peoples who use these languages in terms of their thought patterns. It also implies that some idioms are readily translatable between these languages. The overall implication is that intercultural communication between these peoples can readily be facilitated, rather than hindered, by the commonality of the idioms. It also implies that when an English user of Nembe hears a Nembe idiom that has an analogous idiom or proverb in his/her native English language, s/he is likely to make an informed guess of the communicative import, rather than be dislocated as often thought. The same thing applies for the Nembe user of English in contact with English idioms. In addition, it is suggested that, at least to some degree, the Nembe language/dialect stands shoulder-to-shoulder with English in idiomatic usage. The general psychological impetus for this is that the speaker of such a non-native target language will apply the cognitive principle of resorting to his/her linguistic repertoire of past experience in the form of the repository of equivalent idioms in his/her native language to decipher the communicative value of the idiom in the target language.

The statements made here about Nembe and English are probably applicable to other languages of the world (European, Asian, etc). This study would, of course, need to be replicated among other languages of the world in order to give strength to this hypothesis. Therefore, idiomatic usage is an area to be exploited further in promoting intercultural communication and global culture in general.

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