

THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF SILENCE AS CONSENT IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

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Abstract

Language is a means in which we can have little access into the mind or thought of other human beings. It is a tool and also symbolic in nature. Speech announces the presence of every human being. Speech is not necessarily making noise but active communication. Communication can either be through verbal expression or through sign expression. In Igbo Ontology or Igbo metaphysical concept of being, word expression has a very important role to play in Igbo existence. Words are used to communicate to and with the gods in ritual incantations and during sacrifices, ancestors are venerated through words. The living expresses their feelings through words; feeling of admiration, love, caution or even feeling of hatred. Silence is not left out in this realm of communication. If someone is expected to talk in a matter that concerns him and he keeps quiet, it is assumed by the Igbo as consent. But this is not always the case perhaps, since silence could also mean but not limited to someone being not ready to divulge his intentions. This paper sets out to explore the importance and dangers of silence in line with Igbo misconstruing ontological silence as consent and the audacity with which Igbo ontology claims the knowledge and the exact contents of other minds. The philosophical tools of analysis and hermeneutics are applied to discovering why silence is seen as unspoken and unheard language of consent amongst the Igbo people.

1. Introduction

Language is no doubt one of the greatest human inventions. It distinguishes him from other higher primates. Language contains words which are intelligible sounds which can be learnt and repeated over time and space. Other animals no matter how small they may appear make sounds as means of communication with each other, but it cannot be called language as we claimed because it is not comprehensible at least by human beings. Language is resourceful and is encoded with meaning. Human beings are shaped and formed by language. It carries with it the ethics of the community where it is spoken. Language is informative, it bears with it signs and warning of looming danger. Any society that is about to be invaded comes to the knowledge of it using language. Language could carry with itself some level of deformation. A child can easily be deformed through what he hears from his immediate environment. A mother can make her children hate their father by using words to ignite ill-feeling against their father by telling them what her husband did to her when she was pregnant or the father telling her children how he was badly treated by their mother thereby sowing the seed of discord in the family through language. Words are loaded with meaning and emotions. Through words peace could be reached and war averted; by words also embers of war could be fanned. Through language history is kept and

transferred to the next generation either written or orally. Language is the carrier of civilization. To buttress the point, Francis Njoku wrote that “Language is a vehicle of transmission of cultural values and identity. Ideas are molded, transmitted and retained by language.”¹ In Igbo culture what is said, how it is said, where it is said and when it is said matters a lot and bears deep meaning both to the living and the dead. Again what is supposed to be said but not said carries a heavy weight also both to the living and the dead. Some certain sounds are not allowed in some places at some certain time or period. For instance, if a cock crows beyond sun set or at an unholy hour in a compound, such cock has committed an abomination and should not be allowed to see the light of the new day. It must be killed and eaten by the elders around.

Throughout the colonial era, language was seen as a veritable tool in the hand of the colonial masters. During the scramble for Africa in 19th century, there was a reoccurrence of ‘Babel’ experience where God confused man by language. The Europeans discreetly shared and structured Africa in such a way that no African neighbor will be colonized by countries with the same language. Francis Njoku opined that “to colonize, destroy a people’s language and make them learn the language of the colonizer. ...To force their expansionist agenda on Africa, European languages- English, French, German and Portuguese- were introduced.”² Nigeria was colonized by Britain and the country neighboring to her geographically in the North- Niger Republic was colonized by France, her neighbor down South- Cameroon was colonized by France thereby putting a serious language barrier among African neighbors. This the colonizers did to enable them loot and milk away all the human and natural resources in Africa without any threat of Africans coming together to resist this nefarious act. Africans were not believed to be human beings in existence prior to the coming of the Europeans. The touching and marching of the Europeans on African soil brought about the existence of human beings in Africa.

2. Silence As Language Eternal

As it was presented by Pantaleon Iroegbu in *Kpim of Time is Eternity*:

Eternity etymologically comes from the Latin *eternitas* (*aeternus*). To the Greeks, eternity is *aionios* (αἰώνιος), from which *aeon* (αἰών) is derived as meaning, age or world. To the Hebrew, eternity means *olam* which means duration, length of time, or period. *Olam* could as well mean time that has no beginning and no end or time that has a beginning but has no end (everlasting time).³

In common usage of the word, what is eternal is what is always the same, ever the case, and what never changes no matter what or becomes something else, the ever so as it is. In the ancient period, Plato in his last dialogue *Timeus*, used his Theory of Forms to describe Eternity. He went on to say “what is it that always is, but never comes to be, and what is it that comes to be but never is? The former, since it is always consistent, can be grasped by the intellect with the support of a reasoned

account, while the latter is the object of belief, supported by unreasoning sensation, since it is generated and passes away, but never really is.”⁴ In the Medieval era, Manlius Boethius gave one of the most celebrated and highly commented definitions of Eternity by various scholars. He stated that “Eternity is the perfect possession of interminable life held wholly all at once (*totum simul existens*). So following Plato, if we want to give things names, let us say that God is eternal, but the world is everlasting.”⁵

In Yohanine tradition, much emphasis was laid in the power of the word, *logos* (λογος). In the first Chapter of the Gospel according to John, the strength and the personification of the word was clearly shown. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him and without him was not made anything made that was made.”⁶ The exhibition of the word above shows that the first thing that came into existence was the word which was God and his creative power, “which called things that are not as though they were.”⁷ However, the beginning as the Bible said signals the appearance of time and space and the ‘Word’ took its stand in the space that was created. Surprisingly, prior to the expression of the ‘Word’ there was absolute silence and disorderliness. By implication, there is something in existence with the creator, which was ‘Silence’ and it is eternal. Max Picard rightly said in his famous book *‘The World of Silence’* that “Silence has greatness simply because it is. It is, and that is its greatness, its pure existence. There is no beginning to silence and no end: it seems to have its origins in the time when everything was still pure Being. It is like uncreated, everlasting Being.”⁸ Silence emerges with the creator and was broken by the creator when the first word was spoken. “There is nothing behind it to which it can be related except the Creator Himself...it is original and self-evident.”⁹ Silence is that which precedes the created world. Silence carries its own sacred qualities. Picard writes touchingly about the godly in silence. In a noisy world, sacred places are the last sanctuaries for silence. He posited that “Silence has locked itself up in the cathedrals and protected itself with walls. ...The cathedrals stand like enormous reservoirs of silence. ...The cathedral tower is like a heavy ladder on which the silence climbs into heaven, to fade and disappear therein.”¹⁰ Silence holds with itself a high degree level of privacy.

3. Hermeneutics of Silence in Igbo Ontology

Hermeneutics like every other human concept has a very intricate long history and enormous twists and turns. In ancient Greek thoughts, the word ‘hermeneutics’ was refers to the problems of interpretation and understanding. This spiral and dialectical long history may not be too far from the fact that it is a human endeavor and the fact that it is a human endeavor. Human endeavor because man is involved in the search to understanding himself, interpreting the world so as to give meaning to it. The term hermeneutics came etymologically from the Greek word *hermeneien* which means “to interpret”. This is perhaps a reference to the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods. His task was to explain the decisions of the gods to the humans. Hermeneia thus means interpretation or commentary. This could be the reason why St Paul was called

Hermes and Barnabas they called Zeus in Lystra for making someone who was born lame to walk "...they lifted up their voices saying in Lycoanian, 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!'. Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, because he was the chief speaker, they called Hermes."¹¹ Simply because Paul was seen seemingly doing the work of Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Although, "in its most basic sense hermeneutics refers to the many ways in which we may theorize about the nature of human interpretation, whether that means understanding books, works of art, architecture, verbal communication, or even nonverbal bodily gestures."¹² Human interpretations are not done in a vacuum; it tries to give answers and meanings to his challenges and mysteries his through culture, history and experiences. "Hermeneutics attempts to answer the question by examining closely the hidden realm of activity behind the scenes of our own lives. The aim is to make the structure, or perhaps the lack of structure, of human understanding as explicit as possible."¹³

To make sense the meaning of silence in Igbo ontology is to bring it up to the realm of interpretation and meaning, to go to its root or etymology. The word 'silence' could mean *I gbachi nkiti*, *I dere juu* or *I mechi onu*. Silence is the state of being silent or refusal to speak when expected. Making someone to keep quiet can also be seen as being silenced, which could be interpreted as estrangement. In Igbo ontology, life and death are seen as part of life, in other words everything living must one day die. But death is not seen as the end in itself but a completion of one phase of life, so death is a continuum. The age at which someone dies is not necessarily considered mathematically. One is seen to have died 'prematurely' if he or she dies before his/her parents, or if one dies leaving behind small children; that is if one fails to raise the children up to adulthood. In another vein, one is seen to have died at ripped old age when he may have raised his children to adulthood, marry for them and give their hands in marriage. Must have lived to see his children's children and die in the presence of his people. When death occurs, there is silence. Silence to speech both to the dead and to the living. Picard rightly writes "man lives between the world of silence from which he comes and the world of the other silence to which he goes-the world of death."¹⁴ In some part of Igbo communities, bereavement is met with silence; bereaved persons are avoided for some days customarily following the death of their loved ones. To bolster this point, Nwoye said:

Sympathizers walk in, go straight to the bereaved, stand before them for a short time, find a seat somewhere among some other mourners and join them awhile in mutual silence. When they feel they have stayed long enough, they again approach the bereaved, repeat the process of showing themselves to them and take their leave as silently as they came in. Although no word has been spoken, quite a bit has been communicated. They have shown by their physical presence that they sympathize with the bereaved and share in the loss of their beloved.¹⁵

This is very significant among the Igbo because they believe that *ogori bekaria akwa, ajuo ya ihe gburu di ya* simply put, if a wife cries too much or shows too much emotion, it will arouse suspicion if she knows what happened to the deceased husband. And if this is so to a wife who is mourning her husband, how much more will it be to a neighbor or a friend who is trying to show much emotion? It will raise a red flag, so it is avoided completely.

Silence speaks eloquently during certain rituals among the Igbo. Sacrifices are offered to the gods for several reasons. Some offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, others offer sacrifices to ward off some malevolent spirits while others may be for other purposes like metal protection (*odeshi*), or poison protection (*O bialu egbum gbue onwe ya*). Silence is usually one of the criteria of making some of these sacrifices potent. Nwoye succinctly captured it thus:

When the sacrifice has been made, it is carried by the person for whom made to a place specified by the officiating priest. On the way to this place, the carrier neither greets nor is greeted by the people he or she meets. The people not only refrain from speaking to anyone carrying a sacrifice, but show difference by giving the right of way, stepping aside until the carrier has passed. Thus body contact is also avoided. Silence in this context, apart from making the solemnity of the situation, further shows that the carrier of sacrifice is engaged in serious spiritual tasks and should not be disturbed by such mundane thing as the exchange of greetings....intervention of any form in this combat between the carrier and his or her adversaries might incur for whoever intervenes the wrath of already offended malevolent spirit....Finally, and perhaps because of the above reasons, the officiating priest usually imposes the observance of strict silence as a prerequisite for the efficacy of the sacrifice. If and when the condition of silence is violated (a very rare occurrence), the sacrifice has not only be repeated, but the offender has to make additional sacrifice.¹⁶

Instances of where silence is eloquently heard in Igbo culture are uncountable. In Igbo traditional setting, face to face talk is held in high esteem and the art of public speaking is revered. Igbo people greet others through handshakes; embrace (*ibi oma*) though this is exclusively for close friends because through *Ibi oma* one can be inflicted with some deadly spells. They also inquire for the welfare of one's wife, children and other dependants whether known or unknown (*ezi na ulo*). But when gestures of greetings are met with silence especially from a close relative or even from someone's neighbor, the person that showed the gesture is thrown into confusion, asking whether all is actually well with the person he greeted. If no response is given and a straight face given, he can call for the convocation of the clan (*Umunna*) to ask the person in question on his behalf why he ignored his greetings. This is imperative because in Act 1, Scene 4 of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, King Duncan while

enquiring about the execution of the incumbent Thane of Cowdor told Lennox, Malcolm, Donalbain and the attendants that “there’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the face”. So giving of straight face is a signal that all is not well. At this time, it must be established that the person who ignored the greeting must be older than the person that greeted him otherwise; it is seen as contempt in Igbo. It is the duty of the younger person to greet the elderly person as a sign of respect and honor. But when the opposite is done, it is usually met with silence. It becomes a serious matter only when an elderly person refuses to take greeting from the younger person. This signals serious resentment which must be checked immediately or else life may be lost or someone may be maimed through diabolic means. Once this is established, the clan’s head summons them for a peace talk which is habitually fruitful. But where truce is failed to reach, the only option left to avert impending danger is to invoke the gods through the process of covenant of life and safety (*Igba ndu*). For the purpose of this paper we may not go too deep into the intricacies of *Igba ndu*. In the process of *Igba ndu* the two parties are requested to bring two gallons of palm wine each, four tubers of yam each, a cock each and four pieces of kola nut each. All these items will be presented to the gods through the officiating priest and the kola nut is blessed and shared among the parties involved for the covenant and all the witnesses which include both the living and the dead. The cocks are killed and the blood sprinkled on the altar of the god by the officiating priest. The cocks are prepared with the yam, oil, salt, pepper and scent leave. Once it is done, the warring parties present themselves to the priest who will ask each to take a muzzle of yam from the pot and give his supposed enemy to the mouth and said ‘I will never harm you or see anything that will harm you or your family and keep quiet’. Once this is done, they will pour libations to the gods; fire about four rounds of gun shots representing the Igbo four market days-Eke, Orie, Afo and Nkwo. The deed is done and everyone present will partake from the palm wine using one cup as a symbol of oneness and brotherhood. The Igbo communal life is credibly exhibited and the interconnectedness of the living and the dead strengthened. Here bitterness is abolished, there will be no resentment and any plan for pay-back now or in the future. Anyone that tries such incurs the wrath of the gods.

Silence is also interpreted as consent in Igbo in various other situations. This is the crux of our research, where silence is seen or construed to mean consent. Nwoye writes that, “this is reflected in Igbo proverb: *Ogbalu nkiti kwelu ekwe*, ‘He consents, who keeps silent’. Thus one who keeps silent over, for example, a collective decision of the community, has given consent and therefore partakes in the collective responsibilities attached to the decision.”¹⁷ Here there is a show of language arrogance and the audacity to have power to penetrate the Kantian realm of knowing ‘things in themselves’. We have seen that silence has deep meaning attached to it, so speech must maintain an intimate relationship with silence so as to remain relevant in the affairs of men.

4. Debunking Silence as Mere Consent (Affirmation) in Igbo Ontology

Looking at the Igbo proverb analytically: *Ogbula nkiti kwelu ekwe*, he consents, who keeps silent. Why did the individual decide not to talk at the first instance? Why was his silence considered as consent not disapproval? Why was the person not persuaded to talk or to at least make a sound loaded with meanings? It can be deduced that silent could not only mean consent, it could as well mean being indifferent owing to the delicate nature to the matter at hand or the person previously has been cowed to silence because of his status in the community, so he feels being marginalized and also feels that his contribution will make little or no difference in the dialogue. So in the light of Logic, one can rightly say that the Igbo proverb: *Ogbula nkiti kwelu ekwe*, he consents, who keeps silent boldly committed *Fallacy of Hasty Generalization (Converse Accident)*. Fallacy of generalization according to Egbeke Aja “is a conclusion made about a group of instances when not all the instances have been observed.”¹⁸ At this point, the generalization was made with insufficient information and statistics. One cannot say that for instance, since Okeke did not say anything in the last meeting concerning the issue at hand, but later joined to carry out the decision. Okafo did the same thing; therefore anyone that keeps quiet has agreed and will act like Okeke and Okafo. It will amount to making fallacious statement and the institution of deceit as norm.

It will not be out of place if one mentions that in a community, status or position plays a very important role in process of dispensing judgment and decision making. For example, someone’s is being accused of raping the daughter of the King- a princess. Of course we know the penalty attached to such heinous crime in Igbo community. The magnitude of the crime is juxtaposed by the lowly estate of the accused and this will definitely influence the reaction of the King, his wife at the background and the king’s cabinet members. In as much as, this evil act was committed against the King’s daughter and after every deliberation the king kept quiet by asking everyone to go. Will the King’s silence be taken as a sign of forgiveness or weakness since silence means consent? Then if by omission or commission the suspect is found guilty and the father having done everything he could to prove his son’s innocence. At this juncture, could a sane person that suckled his mother’s breast say that silence simply means consent? Consent to what? Consent to the false conviction of the boy accused of rape or consent because the King has finally seen an opportunity to deal with the father of the boy for refusing to release his land for the king’s use? Or consent in affirmation that the judgment was fairly given? This is possible because: *Igwe ji ji, jide mma, onye o wanyere o rie*, contextually put, he King (*Igwe*) has the final say to any matter brought to his throne to adjudge. Dan Agbese captured the disposition of the King well by saying, “He [King] becomes a master and others his servants. He wield enormous power-power to give another a means of livelihood[in this case the cabinet members in support of him] and power to deprive to him of it: power to make life comfortable for another and power to make it harsh and difficult; power to spare life and power to take it.”¹⁹ He has absolute power either to keep alive or to kill with the support of the Ezemuo (the Chief Priest and his cabinet members) because: *ala adighi mma bu uru ndi nze*, meaning that prominent people benefit from crisis being

experienced in the land. So they will stop at nothing to actualize their nefarious acts. Here if the man that was wronged keeps quiet in resentment for a judgment of wrongfulness, Igbo will say it is consent. The only solace is found in inner realization that the world is indifferent to his feeling. In other words the:

Man [he] can react to historical contradictions by annulling them through his own action; but he cannot annul existential dichotomies, although he can react to them in different ways. He can appease his mind by soothing and harmonizing ideologies. He can try to escape from his inner restlessness by ceaseless activity in pleasure or business. He can try to abrogate his freedom and to turn himself into an instrument of powers outside himself, submerging his self in them.²⁰

Silence again shows not giving out someone's intention because another Igbo proverb says: *Amaghi uche onye eji n'ala*, the mind of the one seemingly held to the ground is unknown. This is a clear indication that silence is unknown to man at some instances where words are required. Here it is not known what the person being held to the ground will do when he finally regains his freedom; whether he will run away in fear or carry out another type of attack. Robert Greene in his famous book *The 48 Laws of Power* puts it thus, "keep people off-balance and in the dark by never revealing the purpose behind your actions. If they have no clue what you are up to, they cannot prepare a defense. Guide them far enough the wrong path, envelope them in enough smoke, and by the time they realize your intentions, it will be too late."²¹ There are great powers and influences in silence. So caution is required when there is silence in a matter that speech or sound is meant to be heard. Calling silence consent at this point may prove very dangerous. In just recent time, President Vladimir Putin of Russia experienced an aborted insurrection by the Wagner group led by the leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. After the incident, for four whole days the entire world was kept in suspense by President Putin, especially the Western and US media industries that beamed their cameras towards Kremlin, at least to have a glimpse of Putin but to no avail. Speculations that Putin has lost his power and control in the country was high, fears that Putin is at large filled the air. But the *magnum silencia* was broken by Putin with a nationwide broadcast that was seen as vague because the information from Kremlin contradicts what was on ground. The Wagner leader was nowhere to be seen even in Belarus where it was alleged he is taking refuge. Putin's silence was interpreted by the US and Western media as fear and confusion, but silence was invoked by Putin to show his power and control over the situation.

Silence in the public square is strength and potential among leaders of men. The Bible acknowledged the fact by saying "the heart [Mind] is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"²² In line with this age longed knowledge, King David in the Bible concealed and delayed his plan to deal with his enemies ruthlessly, those that wronged him during his reign as King until his last days on earth. He called his son Solomon who was to succeed him and mentioned them to him saying:

I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong therefore, and show thyself a man; and keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in His ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou may prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turns thyself:...you know also what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me, and what he did to the two captains of the host of Israel, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether, whom he murdered, avenging in time of peace blood shed in war, and putting innocent blood of war on the girdle on his loins and the sandals of his feet. Do therefore according to your wisdom, but let not his hoary head go down the grave in peace.”²³

In the public square the King is silent and his silence may have been misinterpreted as either a sign of weakness or a sign of goodwill of forgiveness, but King David was silent to hide his intentions for the appropriate time. For ‘revenge is a meal best served cold’ and this is done with silence and in silence. Silence could as well mean being obstinate but not consent. When a child sent on errand decides not to go but keeps quiet. The reason for not saying anything when the command was made could at the initial time mean respect but it becomes another thing when the expected time for results reaches. The exact reason or reasons for not carrying out the command can only be known through speech which may be true or false. Only the child knows his reason for being recalcitrant. His silence and his reasons are one and the same, unknown by any other person except him. So silence could be employed as a means of avoiding problem or misfortune. Thomas Nagel said “it takes only a Bat to know what it means to be a Bat.”

Guilt can bring about silence. Something very pathetic occurred when we were growing up in my village. A man that looked for male children for so many years in marriage later got three of them in quick successions. And one fateful morning as he was about leaving the house for work, unknown to him one of the boys was under his vehicle playing; he entered the vehicle, ignited it, engaged the reverse gear and crushed the boy. At this point it was still unknown to him what happened until his neighbor shouted pointing under the vehicle, when the man alighted from his vehicle he met a gory and life changing sight. From that day on the guilt of mistakenly killing his son engulfed him. He became withdrawn from the public sphere; he became silent and feeling of inner disapproval enveloped him. He was never seen again anywhere until the day he died. He was silenced by guilt.

As in all cultures, truth is venerated in human society. There is serious quest to find meaning in virtually everything around us. Where can truth be located at the moment, is it in the words of those that have spoken (*n’okwu ndi kwulu okwu*) or in the silence of those that kept silent (*na nkiti ndi gbalu ntiki*)? What truth stands for is now called to question. In language truth is active; while in silence truth is passive. Truth is active

in language because truth manifests itself in language while in silence truth is in slumber; but it is quickened by language. So language and silence complement each other in truth. Pojman quoting Aristotle, said that “to say that what is, is not, or what is not is, is false; but to say that what is, is, and what is not, is not, is true.”²⁴ Truth remains what man said it is, in this case, truth resides with both those that aired their views and those that concealed their own as well. Nietzsche approvingly argued that “truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms- in short a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically and which after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people.”²⁵ The canonical and obligatory truth seemingly found in silence as consent among the Igbo is being queried in line to what truth really is. If we eventually identify what truth is, the meaning of it becomes problematic. And in this paper we have seen that the meaning attached to silence as consent has no objective truth in it. It is neither here nor there.

5. Conclusion

Nature has exulted man by giving him the ability to penetrate the realm of silence through language. Human rationality was revealed through language and it helps him find meaning in the world in which he lives in. Man has used language rightfully and wrongfully and thereby making himself a means to an end instead being an end himself. Language brings about an openness and access to the content of the mind. The allotment or attribution of consent to silence by the Igbo exhibits more of man’s precarious nature. It also exposes man’s shortsightedness while claiming to be omniscient. Another Igbo proverb similar to the one in focus is: *Onye ekweghi anyi ekwetara ya*; if one refuses to consent, our consent becomes his own. In this case, someone in the group is either being intimidated or being coerced to accept something against his conscience. The idea behind this proverb is the emasculation and alienation of the individual and the total disregard of conscientious moral agent as clearly seen in *Ogbalu nkiti kwelu ekwe*.

It is the infringement of individual right and privacy. One can insinuate that if someone is not in support of the group’s general decision, he can go at any length to sabotage it, if not for anything to prove that he was right and the group is wrong. That someone is silent in a case that concerns him is not a sufficient condition to say categorically that he consents to the general decision of the group. The infinity nature of human mind is conspicuously seen in silence. Silence could be interpreted to mean anything else including but not limited to consent. Language finds its security in silence, language loses its power only when silence is broken. Man can prove that he can actually win military battles, Alexander the Great proved it by winning all the known world in his time. Human beings are grappling with technologies created by them, which have formulas how much more silence that was encrypted by nature. So man is yet to win the war against silence because when silence speaks, man hears insinuations.

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