

The Role of Proverbs in the Re-Enforcement of Traditional Religious Beliefs, Morals and Practices: An Appraisal of Twenty Theo-Centric Igbo Proverbs

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Abstract

Proverbs feature prominently in human verbal communication across all societies of the world and are the building blocks of a people's wisdom accumulated and developed over time, and naturally handed over to successive generations, and also serving as the identity of the community's philosophy and world-view. The wisdom in proverbs is applied to daily practicalities of human living which affects both the cultural and religious spheres of people across different societies and religious persuasions. In the context of the African Traditional Religion among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria, proverbs form a part of the religious education of the young ones, with theo-centric proverbs containing the acts of the deities and human responsibility to them incorporated therein. Using mainly the secondary sources of data gathering and analysis from works already written on the value of proverbs, the researchers further highlight the pertinent role of proverbs in religion, and the usage of proverbs to promote the utility value of belief in deities, and to drive home the imperative of man's fulfillment of his existential duties to these divine beings who are believed to sustain both human life and the created order. This postulation is clearly manifested in the manner traditional religious beliefs and practices among the Igbo are held, among a people whose cultural and religious world-view are inseparably intertwined. Proverbial wisdom thus, is believed to come not only from the ancestors, but chiefly from the divinities, the original owners of wisdom, who are known to give deep knowledge and insight to their devotees for them to succeed and prosper in life's endeavours. In appraising twenty theo-centric Igbo proverbs, this research highlights the deep-running inter-connectivity of religion and Igbo proverbs, presenting them as a veritable means of encouraging, promoting and re-enforcing the beliefs, morals and practices which give the Igbo traditional community its religious and cultural identity, a role which proverbs play in a similar manner elsewhere in other cultures, religions and societies of the world.

Keywords: Proverbs, Traditional Religious beliefs, Morals and practices, Theo-centric Igbo proverbs.

Introduction

A proverb is a simple and concise way of expressing a well-known truth, or an adage that is based on common sense and life experience within a given socio-cultural milieu, understandable to members of that particular society, and equally appealing to the rationality of people elsewhere. In the African context and globally, proverbs are considered to be filled with the wisdom of the ancestors, passed down from generation to generation which becomes part of the people's language and oral tradition, and contribute in no small measure to the shaping of the people's morality and world-view. Nelson (1994) states that *paremiology* which is a branch of study that deals with the collection and study of proverbs is known to lend support and give deeper insight to other related fields of study like human culture, anthropology, archaeology, and ethnographic records in the study of history.

As a form of verbal arts or oral literature alongside poetry, songs, riddles, myths and jokes, proverbs are typically a deeper form of communication. Stylistically set apart from regular speech, they are often metaphorical or symbolic in nature and can be used in speech to impart knowledge, offer advice, teach or enforce morals, and make an argument. As both the building blocks and the containers of ancestral wisdom, they are also used to facilitate understanding, relieve inter-personal tensions, and to console and inspire people across all societies of the world.

The Role of Proverbs in the Development of Philosophy

Proverbs generally deal with issues of human existence by man in his environment, and develop from his observations and experience derived from his immediate surroundings. Westerman (1975) commenting on the form and structure of a proverb states that it is a very simple form of spoken or written speech that has developed into a wisdom poem. He further expatiates on the principal forms of a proverb as including a simple assertion, an antithetical statement or question, a maxim expressed in the form of an imperative, and sometimes appearing as a question together with its answer. A proverb has the form of an explained riddle aimed at imparting knowledge. Proverbs constitute a means of measuring a people's wisdom, knowledge, and the philosophy inherent in and developing within the life of a community. Proverbs present the wisdom that applies to the practicalities of everyday life, embracing all areas of cultural life and accumulated experiences including those in a people's religion. Proverbs also come as declarative sentences from empirical deductions made over time, as well as comparisons in which similarities and differences are portrayed and hidden meanings are discerned, for the over-all moral, mental, psychological and social development of the people within a given community. For Westerman, proverbs also border on the corrective, healing, as well as the destructive powers of human speech, and portray the effects of human language and communication for good and for evil. Proverbs are

intrinsically concerned with the job of limiting the human possibility of foolishness and man's tendency to do evil, as they expose man's irrationality, foolishness and evil. Proverbs encourage the pursuit of wisdom and good behaviour, and warn and reprove the foolish and the erring in the society.

On the significance and role of proverbs in the upbringing of new generations of human beings in the society, Lubis (2019) states that unlike other verbal arts like jokes or rhymes, proverbs are not simply taught to children by repetition, rather they are interwoven into daily speech acts such as stories told by grand-parents, or instructions given by parents, and they find their way into everyday conversation. In practical usage, many proverbs may share both different and similar meanings across cultures and languages, but this depends on the socio-cultural setting of the people in question. Proverbs serve as a pointer to a people's cultural background and tell a great deal about the philosophical orientation of the community from which they originate and are used. Cole, et al (1971) affirm that proverbs are so central in some societies that meta-proverbs exist to extol the importance of one learning his people's proverbs. Citing the usage of proverbs among the Kpelle, the largest ethnic group in Liberia, tales and proverbs are routinely used to instruct children, to support arguments, and to warn against ill-considered behaviour. At story-time, youngsters not only absorb the inherent morals of the elders' tales, but are also being prepared to use the proverbs themselves to impart similar lessons to others in the future. In this way, the Kpelle tribal proverbial wisdom is perpetuated across generations. Similarly, in Ghana and Côte D'Ivoire, Yankah (1989) states that it is a source of pride for Akan elders when their children display a keen proverbial eloquence, as it is considered a mark of intelligence for a child to be able to skillfully decode proverbs.

From studies conducted among the Mongo tribe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nelson (1994) states that in the absence of codified laws, proverbs often acted as the "legal precedents" for deliberations and decisions by the *Council of Elders*. The moral imperatives of the lessons included in proverbs throughout many cultures of the world appeal to common human desires for kinship, friendship, equality, justice and even encompassing human responsibility in the worship of divinities. By inspiring and encouraging the highest form of moral conduct in the society, proverbs inspire good deeds and discourage foolishness, selfishness and anti-social behaviour among members of any given community. Arewa and Dundes in Yankah (1989) posit that because the significance of proverbs comes from the cultural past whose voice speaks truth in traditional terms, a proverb may serve as an effective impersonal vehicle for personal communication. For example, if parents use a proverb to scold or correct a child, they externalize this responsibility and transfer the onus unto an anonymous voice of authority from the past, under which influence they are also subjected. Part of the rhetorical power of proverbs

comes from its inherent authoritativeness as the collective wisdom of elders alongside a desire to pass this knowledge down to non-elders.

The Link between Proverbs, Morality and Religion

Generally, it is believed that the future and continuity of communities depends on the ethical conduct of their members, and training and education in the appropriate moral conduct and good behavioral patterns promote the good of the people in the community. The methods employed to teach morals and virtue to up-coming generations vary in different places, and here lies part of the link between proverbs and religion, as both share in this arduous task of shaping the philosophy and morals of a society. The morality of any given community is largely driven by religious beliefs, with teachings given to children to internalize the lessons for daily dealings with other members of the community. The usage and teaching of proverbs contribute significantly in achieving this goal. Some proverbs emphasize and relativize the important role and authority of the gods as the higher beings that created and sustain human life on earth, and protect the members of the community from malignant forces of both spirits and nature, and the need to remain in good standing with them. Perhaps, exemplifying the closest relationship between proverbs and religion, proverbs occupy a significant place in the sacred book of Judeo-Christianity – the Bible. Ross (1994) states that the Book of Proverbs accomplishes what no other biblical book does, that it simply compiles numerous short instructions for living an effective life on earth, as the writers recognized varied circumstances of a person's life and provided principles to apply in a variety of situations rather than instructions to follow in only a few specific instances. The strong connection between the wisdom that proverbs carry and religion is stated early enough in what is regarded as the central theme of the biblical book of Proverbs – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” in chapter 1:7. In Judeo-Christianity, Proverbs reminds believers that God concerns Himself not just with the big cataclysmic events of life, but even those mundane invisible moments in people's lives as well that border on minute details of ethical requirements that promote healthy inter-personal relationships in the community of the faithful. The fact that the Judeo-Christian canons of scripture contains one whole book of thirty-one chapters bears out the strong connection and utility value of proverbial wisdom in religion as a tool to teach and foster godliness and sustain the moral imperatives that emanate from religious beliefs and practices.

The scriptural Book of Proverbs contains many brief statements laden with wisdom about how to live a life that is acceptable to the members of the community, as well as pleasing to God, who is the sole object of religious worship. Written as poetry, it employs vivid imagery, Hebrew parallelism and other literary techniques to guide the readers in their quest for wisdom. Working to promote religiosity, the wisdom contained in the book incorporates

nearly every aspect of human life, focusing on the unsteady nature of human character, the standard basic behaviour of a righteous person, and on man's proper relationship with God as his creator. In the process, it expounds the nature of knowledge and defines the meaning of a successful human life on earth. Generally speaking, the purpose of proverbs in all cultures and religion is to present wisdom in a compact, easily accessible and lasting form that can be passed on to successive generations for the sustenance of a given religio-cultural identity. Commonly presented in a brief simple form with profound underlying meaning that must be dug out through reflective discernment, proverbs have helped to nurture a significant source of practical daily usage wisdom for thousands of years to people of different religious, cultural and educational backgrounds, providing a good part of the main tools of propagating informal education of people in different societies of the world. The Book of Proverbs has over the millennia challenged, encouraged and helped people to a better understanding of how they should live, and the consequences of immoral judgment and behaviour which form part of the major pre-occupation of religion.

The Significance of Proverbs in Igbo Philosophy and World-view

Proverbs among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria are central to the propagation of Igbo wisdom and culture and remain a significant factor in the informal education of up-coming generations. As in other societies of the world, they constitute an integral part and a foremost factor of Igbo rhetoric and are used in motivational speech that enhances interpersonal and group communication. Momah (2019) asserts that a good Igbo idiomatic expression, either a proverb or a parable is devised to enliven and enchant, and to compel listeners to think, reflect, and talk to themselves. Proverbs are rarely explained among the Igbo, with exception of children and young people who ask for their meanings, and this is with the intention of helping them in their mental development and social integration. Ordinarily, adult listeners are obligated to figure out spoken proverbs for themselves, comprehend the inherent crux of the matter, and draw their own lessons and conclusions about the topic of the discussion. This approach is aptly encapsulated in one of the leading Igbo proverb about proverbs: "*Onye a t^uchaara ilu k^owaara ilu, a mara na ego e ji l^uta nne ya lara n'iyi*" - "The bride-price paid for the mother of the person who always asks for the explanation of proverbs is regarded as wasted money". Where this is the case, it is presumed that the woman who got married into her husband's lineage with high expectations to help promote its good name has produced a non-entity.

Proverbs serve as the prescription of acceptable behaviour and action, also used as an application of judgment in times of moral lapses, aimed at correcting and re-directing the person that acted in an unwise and unacceptable manner. Proverbs are believed to be a reservoir of wisdom and knowledge handed down by the ancestors and predecessors as the

progenitors of communal experience and wisdom. Umeh in Kanu, 2015) points out the usage of proverbs in Igbo land as a language of diplomacy to avoid direct confrontational answers to direct questions which could otherwise cause more friction than provide a resolution or settlement of a contentious matter. With the usage of proverbs in this manner, one can reveal a secret or indict an otherwise respectable or feared culprit without being directly committed. In this application also, proverbs serve as a shorthand type of verbal communication that reduces unnecessary repetitions and saves time in the prosecution of a particular matter or the conclusion of an argument. Anozie (1999) contends that proverbs reveal profound thoughts and encapsulates the soul of the people, constituting the true index of what a people hold dear, and the interpretation of the principles of life and the mode of acceptable behaviour upheld by a people. In this regard, Anozie agreeably surmises that a people's proverbs stand as trustworthy witnesses of their social, economic, political, ethical and religious ideals. The wisdom and philosophy of life of a particular people are located in their proverbs which are shrunk to a few words as a device to containing things worth knowing and relevant for day-to-day living. The emphasis and chief goal of proverbs is to engender upright living and a high standard of morality in the society. Chukwu (2013) postulates that proverbs form a significant part of the curriculum for the instruction and nurturing of children in the largely informal education of children in the rural setting of an Igbo community, affirming that it is a base of the African or Igbo intelligence, morals, ethics and the embodiment of wisdom.

It is a fact that the true meaning of a spoken proverb lies underneath in its real meaning which needs some efforts in thinking to discern and grasp. On this premise, Isidienu (2016) opines that the true relevance of proverbs lies in their philosophical meaning, and that the ability to apply the derived knowledge to different situations of life leads to the solution of the various problems that face man. The specific roles and purposes which proverbs serve in Igbo culture touch every aspect of the people's life. Igbo proverbs in their utility value constitute both the foundation and the building-blocks of Igbo philosophy and contribute significantly to the development of the social, cultural and religious world-view of the Igbo people.

Analysis and Appraisal of some Theo-centric Igbo Proverbs

As previously noted in this work, a people's world-view is formed primarily from their cultural, social, economic and religious backgrounds. In this section, the work presents and appraises twenty theo-centric Igbo proverbs that bear out the inter-relationship between Igbo traditional religious cum moral approach to socially-acceptable standards of knowledge, wisdom, and human behaviour in community life. "Theo-centric proverbs" in our context refer to proverbs with religious content that highlight the existence of, belief in,

and the role of the divinities in human society, as well as the expected human responsibilities of their worshippers to the divinities and their associated cult-personnel (the priests). These divine-centered proverbs contribute significantly to the people's belief in the spirit world and to a deeper understanding of the objects of their worship, as human beings in all societies are basically religious animals. It is noteworthy that in the context of African Traditional Religion with a range of deities available for worship, and with the strictly communal nature of human relationship in society, there is virtually no room for the expression and the practice of atheism, as being a fully integrated member of the society is dictated by one's full involvement in the religious and cultural activities of his community which are inseparably intertwined. This analysis and appraisal is undertaken under ten different headings, with two theo-centric Igbo proverbs selected for each topic, presented as follows:

Caution against Offending the Divinities

1. Igbo proverb: "*Onye nwere uche anaghị eso onye-amoosu eje ikpa nkụ n'ohịa-arụsị*".

Translation: "A wise person does not accompany a witch to fetch firewood from a sacred forest".

It is a taboo to venture into a sacred forest which is generally believed to be the property of the divinities or a particular deity. The witch is also believed to possess some powers to operate in the spirit realm and consequently has a level of affinity and immunity in the spirit world that is unavailable to the ordinary person. Wisdom therefore demands that no one in their right senses should be lured into such a dangerous adventure in which the witch may escape, leaving the foolish person to face the wrath of the aggrieved deity/deities alone. This proverb apart from its religious value also generally serves as a warning against the taking of unnecessary risks or embarking on uncalculated acts of heroism that may backfire on the person, both in the secular and religious fields of human endeavour.

2. Igbo Proverb: "*Obodo na'eje agha anaghị ahapụ ichurụ chi ha aḡa maka na ha nwere ndị-agma dara dimkpa*".

Translation: "A people going to war should not neglect sacrifice to their deities because they have giant warriors".

This proverb re-enforces the indispensability of the divinities in all worthwhile human undertakings. The rituals and sacrifices due to them should be observed for man's ventures to succeed. As in all religions, man is nothing without the divine, and can hardly make any progress without divine approval and assistance. In a war situation, the divinities can decide to give victory to a smaller army, just to spite a much larger army that takes them for granted

and trust in their limited human strength and sheer numbers. This proverb clearly re-iterates the unarguable fact of mortal man's dependence on the divine in all facets of his human existence and endeavour.

The Sovereignty of the Divinities

3. Igbo Proverb: "*Chi ndị na-emere ndị-iro ihe anaghị abụ ajọ-mmụọ a na-eche na ha bụ*".

Translation: "The Gods that bless a people's enemies are not actually the evil spirits they are taken to be".

The implications of this proverb point to the supremacy of the will of the divinities over human beings. The divinities cannot be questioned and castigated even if they are on the side of one's enemies because they have unquestionable influence over the affairs of human beings and their choices of action cannot effectively be opposed by man in his mortal frailty. If human beings misconstrue their acts and are tempted to dishonour and give them less regard than they deserve, it still does not subtract from their generally known wide range of powers and freedom of choice of action in the created order and in the affairs of man. They remain deities those human beings, compelled by the reason of man's inadequacies as finite mortal creatures must reverence and worship in all circumstances, whether they are benevolent at all times, or choose to be malevolent sometimes.

4. Igbo proverb: "*Obodo anaghị eji na e meriri ha n'agha ghara ifezi arụsị dī na be ha*".

Translation: "A people do not abandon their deities simply because they were defeated in a war".

This proverb is similar in connotation to the first one on the imperative of deities remaining objects to be worshipped in spite of their real and perceived failures from man's perspective. A community that loses a war has no choice than to continue paying religious allegiance to their deities, and even seek to placate them for blessings of better outings in the future, as toeing the line of laying the blame on them and denying them worship could result in much worse disasters than losing a war.

The Forbearance of Human Short-comings by the Gods

5. Igbo proverb: "*Chi kere onye na-asụ nsụ na-enwere ya ndidi ma Ọ na-agỌ Ọjị*".

Translation: "The God that created the stammerer has to bear with his prolonged prayer time".

The transcendent nature of the divine over the human in religious philosophy implies that man as the weaker partner in the divine-human relationship relies on the forbearance of the gods to ignore or overlook some aspects of his human imperfection to sustain the communication. In other words, the emphasis is that in religion, the creator is duty-bound to understand and tolerate the manifest imperfection of his creation in the process of sustaining the creator-creature relationship. In other words, the divinities are expected to make some concessions in their relationship with man.

5. Igbo proverb: “*Mmanya atoghị ezigbo uto ka a na-eji nnukwu iko atasara ndị-mmụọ n’ala*”.

Translation: “The wine that does not taste so well is lavishly expended in libation to the deities”.

It is a known fact that men are obligated to honour the gods with their material possession in the liturgical rites of worship. However, the worshippers in their propensity to sin and selfishness due to human imperfection at times do not always actually employ the best parts of what they have for fulfilling their required obligations of worship to their deities. It is taken for granted that the gods (or ancestors as the case may be) would not really be offended and proceed to punish every seemingly minor infraction or man’s act of short-changing the deities, as the divine beings (deemed to be holy and perfect in all world religions) are expected to discount and overlook, at least, the minor sins of their imperfect human devotees. This liberalist mindset makes some worshippers to take certain liberties and exceptions, in overlooking and not fully accomplishing some of their duties to the gods while not expecting any backlashes.

Evasion of Religious Responsibilities

7. Igbo proverb: “*O na-esiri onye akwa-nri ike iji anụ mara abụba achuru chi ya aja*”.

Translation: “A stingy person finds it difficult to sacrifice a fat animal to the divine”.

Similar in nature to the last proverb, man’s evasion of his responsibilities to the divine is a permanent feature that is observable in all religions. Man is intrinsically handicapped in regards to perfection due to his fallible and mortal nature, and so, in as much as he struggles, his efforts at meeting all the requirements of the divinities always fall short at some point. Whereas most devotees do not deliberately fail to meet up in this regard, others due to their lack of integrity consciously neglect their duties to the deities, and while doing so, still expecting divine blessing and protection from the deities that they have failed to impress on their own side of the bargain.

8. Igbo proverb: “*Eze-mmụọ ekwesighi ichesị ka e si akpụ arụ n’okwu arụsị ọ na-enye nri*”.

Translation” “The chief-priest is not supposed to be ignorant of how taboos are atoned for in his own shrine”.

This proverb deals generally with the need for proficiency and expertise in one’s chosen profession and particularly with the aspect of the priesthood duties when required standards of performance are not being met. The priestly cult is the bridge between the divinities and their devotees in most major religions of the world, and priests and other ministers of religious rites are trained extensively both to know, relate with, and communicate effectively with the relevant deities in order to foster a sustainable relationship with their human worshippers. Being the formulators, interpreters and administrators of liturgical rites in cult worship, it is expected that priests should be knowledgeable and exhibit deep mastery of their sacred arts to function well as the engine-room of divine-human interaction in religion. Thus, this proverb cautions that ignorance in any aspect of priestly functions constitutes a major setback on the utility value and the progress of religion in a community, and this should be avoided.

The Results of Failing in Religious Obligations

9. Igbo proverb: “*Onye ji mkpi dara ogbi chụrụ chi ya aja`anaghị ekpeta ọ nụ ya ebe a na-azọ ala*”.

Translation: “The person that sacrificed a dumb he-goat to the divinities is bound to lose his land-case”. In every religion, there are duties and responsibilities for the human worshippers to the divinities and the relationship between the human and the divine hinges largely on this. As the divinities do their duty of providing for and protecting their devotees, they in turn owe a responsibility of offering acceptable devotion and worship to their deity/deities. Any failure on the part of the human devotee in reciprocity of response comes with commensurate consequences which are obviously always unpalatable. Thus, this Igbo proverb re-enforces the imperative of worshippers living up to their religious expectations and duties both in African Traditional religion and in other religions, while also emphasizing the law of retribution - that people invariably reap what they sow in their relationship with the divine, as well as in other spheres of human endeavour.

10. Igbo proverb: “*Onye ji ewu nrịọta chụrụ chi ya aja`atụla anya na ọ ga-azacha ya ihe niile o kpere na ekpere*”.

Translation: “He who sacrificed a borrowed goat to the divinities should not expect positive answers to all his prayers”.

This proverb is similar in form, content and connotation to the last one, also re-iterating that fact that those who cannot afford to please the divinities should not expect complete divine intervention, blessing and assistance. The divinities do not take seriously worshippers who fail to meet up with their own expectations in the divine cum human relationship in religion. As the borrower of the he-goat would still be indebted to the lender, who may also be a devotee of the deity in question, there is bound to remain an obligation cum communication gap that would inhibit the suppliant's petition and expectation in prayer. This is because the supposedly all-knowing divinities know how sacrifices offered to them are sourced. More so, in the scenario evoked by this proverb, part of the lender's own prayer might include petition for the divinities to compel his (possibly bad) debtor to pay back what he has borrowed as a pre-condition for answering him (the debtor).

The Effects of Poverty on Religious Duties

11. Igbo proverb: *"Aja' onye-ubiam na-abukari n'okwu' mmuo nke na-anabata uriom-okuko"*.

Translation: "The poor worshipper normally patronizes the deity that accepts the sacrifice of a day- old chick". One's financial capacity is no doubt a major factor in the determining the fulfillment or otherwise of the obligation of devotees to their gods in religion, especially in the area of the usage of material things for worship, offerings, or sacrifice to the deities. Consequent upon this, poor members of the worshipping community, where and when they have a choice opt for being devotees of deities that make the lesser demands they can afford, and actually give according to their ability when the need of sacrificing to deities arises. Therefore, poorer members of the community are most likely not to be intimate devotees of deities that demand costly animals like cattle, rams and goats for sacrifice as the case may be. Thus, social classification based on the financial wherewithal of individual devotees also plays a significant role in the preferences and choices people make in their religious activities in African Traditional religion, as it applies in some other religions of the world.

12. Igbo proverb: *"Onye nyere chi ya nwa-uriom anaghi atu anya iketa ukwu-anu ma a chuchaa aja"*.

Translation: "The worshipper that offers a day-old chick to the divinities should not expect a large chunk of meat after the sacrifice".

The largesse that accrues from devotion and worship to the divinities also comes in proportion to the input of the worshippers in their liturgical acts of reverence to the deities. In this regard, the law of sowing and reaping equally applies, as those who plant generously during the farming stage reap bountifully in the harvest season. Thus, going by the point

previously discussed on the effect of poverty on the worshipper's relationship with the deities, it is most obvious that the type of animal a devotee presents to his god will determine the size of the sacrificial meat he would take home from the shrine after his act of worship. This proverb apart from its connotation in religion, also serves to re-enforce the moral lesson of the virtue of hard work which applies in other spheres of human endeavour. The gods invariably in most cases determine the blessing they bestow on their devotees from what they (the devotees) were able or willing to expend during the act of worship.

Religious Fraud by the Priests

13. Igbo proverb: "*O nweghi ihe onye akwa-nri ga-emenwu banyere ka eze-mmụọ si kee anụ ewu ọ kputara n'ajā*".

Translation: "There is nothing a stingy person can do about how the chief-priest shares the meat from the goat he brought for sacrifice".

Across all religions run by man in his imperfection, there is always the possibility of dishonesty and fraudulent practices by officiating ministers who administer the rites of worship to the devotees of religion. On this premise, it is accepted that only the priest knows the proper formula for sharing meat from the sacrifices he offered on behalf of worshippers to the gods, and that however he does it is the will of the divinities. Greedy priests are known to take advantage of their privileged position to appropriate huge chunks of meat and other items of offering to themselves after each sacrifice, and the supplicants dare not question them for fear of offending the deities and consequently losing the divine favour and positive answers to the prayers they have offered. The worshippers knowing this possibility of human excesses in religion allow for irregularities in the administration of religious functions by gullible human priests, and should be ready to tolerate the fact about the priests always getting the "lion share", even if only to maintain their continued relationship with the divine. This anomaly is observable in African Traditional religion and other major world religions that run the priestly system.

14. Igbo proverb: "*Udi anụ kọrọ na be dibia na-eso n' ihe ndi-mmụọ ga-awa n' afa*".

Translation: "The type of meat that is lacking in the chief-priest's house is always among the items required by the divinities for the next sacrifice".

The priestly class at times exploits the reverence and trust the worshippers repose in them to their personal advantage. Being the mouth-piece of the divinities, faithful devotees hardly doubt whatever message priests give out as coming from the divinities, as they are the living oracles of the deities that people come to consult. Priests live off the perquisites of their cultic vocation, and so, do all that is humanly possible to earn their living, at times, through dishonest means. All that a priest gives out in his sacred role as the sole medium of

communication between the divinities and men are believed as coming from the divine and are to be obeyed promptly without reservations to avert disaster, and so, the temptation for priests to add their favourite animals and other items they need to the list of what the deities demand for sacrifice (to keep food on their tables) is an ever looming possibility in their interaction with their clientele - the devotees of the deities.

The Justice of the Gods

15. Igbo proverb: “*Arụsị anaghị ahapụ onye o nyere afọ-otuto maka na o mechaara kwuo eziokwu*”.

English Translation: “The divinities do not withdraw their punishment of a swollen stomach from a culprit because he confessed later on”.

Divine beings are tasked with the responsibility of enforcing law and order and maintaining justice in the human societies where they are worshipped. In most cases, the morals that obtain in a given community are founded on the premise of their religious convictions and compliance to such moral dictates are intricately interwoven with the religious imperative of obeying and honouring the divinities, and consequently making people to fully identify as a member of the society. Criminals who disrupt the peace of the community face a religion-inspired, priest-administered ‘trial by ordeal’ in which the divinities are invoked in public to adjudicate in the process of determining the innocence or otherwise of the arraigned suspect. If after the suspect is found guilty and punished by the divinities, the punishment meted out to them holds even if they later owned up to their involvement in a belated act of confession. This proverb while highlighting the prominent role of the divine beings in regulating the affairs of men reiterates the importance of truthfulness and doing the right things at the right time, as well as the inevitability of divine retribution on human infractions of moral and religious law, to checkmate anarchy and maintain justice, peace and order in the socio-religious community.

16. Igbo proverb: “*Chi onye azupụtanwughị nwa ya nke oma anaghị ege ntị n’ọnu ọ na-abụ ya*”

Translation: “The divinities of parents that failed to bring up their children well do not implement their curses on them”.

In African Traditional Religion where religious beliefs permeate all aspects of the people’s life, the role of parents in bringing up their offspring well is a significant socio-cultural as well as a sacred religious responsibility for all the adult members of a worshipping community. This role of proper parental tutelage when fulfilled, bequeaths on the society a sustainable cultural and moral stability, as well as ensuring the continuity of religious worship and practices in the religious community, as each successive generation is made to

inherit and uphold the traditions and morals received from its forebears, thus maintaining the people's religious beliefs. Children across all beliefs hope to, and are motivated to honour and obey their parents in order to inherit and enjoy the blessings that would follow as a result of their pronouncements.

It is also widely believed across all religions that parents' curses on their wayward and disobedient children are effective when contrition, repentance and placation are not undergone by the errant offspring in question. However, the divinities being the dispensers of justice among men, and also being stake-holders in the issue of human character and behaviour do not readily honour and implement the negative pronouncements of errant parents on their ill-behaved children, since such parents also obviously constituted a major part of the problem. This proverb highlights the importance of fulfilling the parental role of properly bringing up one's children, and also emphasizes the vested interest of the divinities in this aspect of the moral development of young members of the society – the perpetuation of religion in successive generations, of which they are the direct beneficiaries as the joint recipients of both individual and communal adoration and worship.

The Certainty of Divine Reward for Worshippers

17. Igbo proverb: “*Ọ naghị abụ a kwachaa eze-mmụọ, a jụwa ma ọ larukwere be ndi-mmụọ n'udo*”.

Translation: “No one should doubt the welfare of the chief-priest in the land of the dead after his successful funeral”.

The divinities are known to reward faithfulness from their devotees, both in their earthly life and in the hereafter. Although the concept of eternal life including heaven and hell is not as clearly specified in African Traditional Religion as in Judeo-Christianity and some other religions, suffice it to say that worshippers of deities believe that their relationship with these divine beings would continue even after their physical life on earth. This is one of the major motivating factors that drive compliance to the ethico-moral and religious requirements by members of any given community. People who want to join the revered ancestors after their death strive to obey the requirements of their culture and religion, so that after their physical death and a “good burial”, they would be given an exalted position among their fellow ancestral elders in the other world that is believed to last forever. This divine recompense for devotional faithfulness is expected to be available in a greater measure to the chief-priests and other members of the priestly cult who were in very close contact and relationship with deities they represented and served among the people during their earthly life. It is then expected that these inner-circle human partners of the gods would be given priority when the time comes for the divinities to reward their devotees in the afterlife.

18. Igbo proverb: “*Onye chi ya so eje n’ubi na-egwutekarị nnukwu mba ji*”.

Translation: “The farmer whose divine beings accompany to his farm is bound to own big tubers of yam”.

Similar to the fore-going discussion about divine blessings and reward in the afterlife, people favoured by the divinities are always ahead of their mates in all areas of human endeavour. Such people acquire both physical and material prosperity due to divine favour from the deities that they serve. However, divine blessings are not gotten in a vacuum, as the divinities encourage industry and oppose laziness. This is apparently so because the divinities do not proceed to do for human beings what they can do for themselves, as the traditional saying goes “Heaven helps those who help themselves”. The divinities can only bless people who are diligent and hard working in the areas of their handiwork, natural talents, and vocation. Thus, there is no way a very devoted worshipper who has no farm or who is too lazy to work on his farm and has no serious livestock enterprise can expect to be blessed with a bountiful harvest or become a wealthy person in a largely rural agrarian environment. This proverb attempts to strike a balance between religious devotion and hard work, and to promote better work-ethics and attitude to creativity and productivity among the members of a society, thus re-enforcing the fact that religious engagement and devotion alone cannot foster economic prosperity – contrasted with ‘the favour without labour’ prosperity teaching being falsely preached by some groups in pseudo-Christianity.

The Short-coming/Extremities of the Gods

19. Igbo proverb: “*Ehi arụsị na-ahọrọ onye ọ chọrọ inọ n’ubi ya taa nri*”.

Translation: “The sacred cow chooses in whose farm it wants to graze”.

The divinities of African Traditional Religion are assumed to possess the divine characteristics of holiness and perfection, and should be revered and held in awe by their devotees. The myths and superstitious beliefs surrounding these deities which are believed by all members of the worshipping community help to perpetuate the mysteries that make divine beings what they are – the objects of worship. This worship invariably extends to human beings, animals, trees, grooves and other landmarks regarded as being the reserved property of the deities within a community. Such ‘holy’ items are not tampered with, and the fear and reverence that are due to their divine owners are extended to them. The free movement of such ‘untouchables’ can neither be impeded nor interfered with, to avoid incurring the anger of the divinities with its ugly consequences. Thus, sacred animals are treated with respect, and a farmer dares not force them out of his farm, even if the sacred cow or totemic animal is destroying his crops. The best he can do is a gentle act of persuasive prodding for the animal to leave. This extremity of the deities which worshippers

have to put up with also manifests in their obligation to revere some animals, places and objects, and their being forbidden to kill potentially harmful sacred animals like pythons, monkeys and other animals, depending on the taboos that obtain in a particular area.

20. Igbo proverb: “*Onye-ohi gbanariri ndi na-achụ ya n’uju ahia ga-aburiri nwa eze-mmụọ*”.

Translation: “The thief the escapes from his pursuers inside a full market must be the son of the Chief-priest”.

While the last proverb deals with sacred animals, this Igbo proverb deals with the respect indirectly accorded the divinities through their priests and their immediate relations – in other words, the sacred people. It is held that the fear of the divinitie is the beginning of wisdom for devotees, and so, nobody likes entanglement in any case with the chief-priest of a deity, or even with powerful herbalist in the community. This is because the deities involved would likely side with their servant in most cases. This proverb evokes a scenario whereby a thief who steals someone’s article in a market filled with people on a community’s market day would naturally be caught and punished in little or no time because of the number of potential pursuers at hand. But chances are that if the culprit is perceived to be a son of the chief-priest, his pursuers would not put up a brave chase and would let him escape, for the obvious reasons stated earlier on. The divinities and their priestly personnel actually take some liberties and exceptions to certain rules and moral laws that govern the communities where they hold sway, and this is to be adjudged as neither un-natural nor out of place, considering that the human worshippers cannot effectively confront and challenge whatever are the excesses of the divinities because of their finite nature, in contrast with the all-mighty deities and the equally significant derived powers wielded by the priests who are their closest human associates.

Conclusion

This work has delved into the relationship between proverbs and religion especially as it obtains in African Traditional Religion among the Igbo people, as well as the value and the motivation proverbial wisdom adds to religious beliefs and practices. It has been observed that theo-centric proverbs by their design and function constitute a major boost to the people’s interest in remaining dutiful in their continued offering of reverence and worship to the various ancestors and deities in Igbo traditional religion. It is obvious that in religion, proverbs have a high value as they help to present a practical guide to the details of living a moral life which they achieve through offering concise, relatable wisdom to provide direction for man’s daily situations and challenges in life. In the setting of traditional religion that lacks written scriptures for devotional reference, proverbs based on spiritual

principles also help the people to discern right from wrong, and make decisions that would help them live in accordance with their religious beliefs, thus being in alignment both the deities and their human neighbours in a harmonious and peaceful socio-religious and cultural environment. In synchronizing with religion, proverbs have the added utility value of acting as a bridge between the faith-driven spiritual teachings and requirements of religion and the real world of their practical application in the existential circumstances of the lives of religious devotees.

This work highlights that by incorporating religious themes and concepts into their language and their world-view, proverbs help to re-enforce a people's tenets of faith, and help devotees to internalize the values they are required to uphold and live by in their community. Much as proverbs promote religion and the morals of a given society, they basically serve as the main conduit of passing on inter-generational wisdom from one generation to the other thus ensuring the preservation of a people's philosophy, and the handing down of their cultural and religious traditions to successive generations in a sustainable manner.

The deities that human beings worship being in the divine form of existence are believed to have an infinite scope of wisdom which they bequeath on their devotees in order to help them to excel in life and overcome the challenges of their mortal human existence. Two instances will suffice here to bear out the fact of divine involvement in man's capacity to acquire wisdom: in Greek mythology, the goddess Athena endowed Odysseus the King of Ithaca with wisdom which made him a prominent figure in his days. The second example drawn from Judeo-Christianity is the record of God blessing the Israelite king Solomon with world-famed wisdom that enabled him to rule wisely and rank among the wisest person the ever lived on earth. King Solomon then went on to write a record-setting three thousand proverbs in his life time, from the repository of wisdom and knowledge that he received from God. Hence many proverbs and riddles in people's culture and folklore are directed to and contain the acts of the gods who while existing transcendently in their capacity as deities, also run the affairs of men at their whims and caprices, and help to direct the development and growth of the socio-cultural, economic, intellectual and religious interests of man in human societies all over the world. Thus, the influence of proverbs in the formation and enforcement of a people's morals and religious beliefs are clearly discernable.

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