

## **IGBO PHILOSOPHY: A MISCELLANY OF IGBO PROVERBS AND CULTURAL PEDAGOGIES**

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### **Abstract**

*The call for a harmonious integration of people's belief, ideas and culture is evidently encapsulated in their "philosophy" which comprises the traditional and religious practice and cultural beliefs of the people. However, the way and manner in which these philosophies are understood and transmitted to various generations amongst a given society is no doubt at the mercies of all who live in the society. Igbo people are known for their proverbs which delve into their everyday life and take a high premium on their linguistic culture. It seems that these proverbs can no longer stand the test of time because of poor transmission and changes affecting the world. Hence, it becomes imperative that the meaning, nature, values and the philosophy behind the Igbo proverbs be exposed in order to retain their essence among generations. This paper examines the competence level in the use of proverbs between the old and younger generations of Igbo speakers as richly found in Igbo philosophy. It is, therefore, recommended that Igbo proverbs should be cultivated as an art and cherished as an index of good oratory and acquaintance with traditional knowledge and ancestral wisdom, because the Igbo would say; e jiri mara ndi diiri ha.*

## Introduction

To understand a culture, particularly one in which the spoken word is still the predominant form of recording history and phenomena, one requires some acquaintance with its oral forms. The Igbo have a surplus of these. However, of all the oral legacies, it is probably the Igbo proverb which has continued to enjoy a high frequency of usage, notwithstanding the Western literacy and modernism. Indeed, the practice and transmission of Igbo philosophy decreased drastically in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the influx of the Christian missionaries under the patronage of British colonial government where in most cases indigenous rites and cultural heritages were demolished by Christian missionaries. However, the post-colonial and Biafra war experiences sparked off in them (the Igbo people) the quest for historical identity that aimed at language and cultural restoration. Proverbs as part of this language and culture are valued well in Igbo traditional setting, for they play a variety of roles in Igbo life; one which might not necessarily be suspected is that it enables people to talk to strangers in a way the strangers will not understand.<sup>1</sup>

Although not everyone in Igbo society is a repository of wise sayings, certain people are respected for their knowledge of such things which, of course, add integrity to their speech. Igbo proverbs which occupy a central place in Igbo discourses originated from Igbo people and as such could be called the voice of the Igbo people-*vox Igbo populi*.<sup>2</sup> Thus, because it is very necessary for effective communication, reciting proverbs is as ineffective as not using them. Beyond visual recitation, it is important to always know the appropriate event and time to use Igbo proverbs in order to communicate the appropriate message and achieve the desired result, because Igbos would say; *o bu ihe onye nwere ka o ji aba mba*.

## The Meaning and Nature of Igbo Proverbs

Proverbs, from the general point of view, are simple concrete traditional sayings that express a perceived truth based on common sense or experience. Proverbs are often metaphorical in that they do

not always express denotative meaning but connotative meaning. One may hastily conclude that it is within this implied understanding that Igbo society pictures proverbs as *mmanu ndi Igbo ji eri okwu* - the oil with which words are eaten. Proverbs are the wisdom of a people through which complex stories and situations are concentrated in a few words and phrases that capture and retain the essential meaning of the experiences from which they derive.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, Igbo proverbs are taken directly from Igbo life world. Proverbs, from their ontological perspective, were written by people not intentionally, but they naturally arose from and caused by everyday life experiences. A good awareness of Igbo proverbs and their meaning would undoubtedly lead to a deep understanding of the Igbo, their philosophy which encompasses their traditions, cultures and way of life. Igbo proverbs are used in conversations by adults more than children, probably because adults have learned more proverbs than children. Because many Igbo people are both poetic and traditional, proverbs are often passed down in a fixed form. The grammar of proverbs is not always the typical grammar of the spoken word, hence “many proverbs refer to old measurements, obscure professions, out-dated weapons, unknown plants, animals, names and various other traditional matters”.<sup>4</sup>

Igbo language has several dialects as a result of which many Igbo people may not immediately understand the meaning of proverbs, owing to the strong dialect of words therein contained. As we become more acquainted with these dialects, we begin to appreciate our total inheritance as Igbo language speakers. Igbo proverbs are the integral part of Igbo culture and a pillar in Igbo traditional system. As Kanu says:

The centrality of proverbs in Igbo oral tradition is manifest in the frequency of its use by the Igbos in their conversations, speech, instructions, judgements, drama, arguments, storytelling, in film making and name them; and this is based

on the fact that the Igbo regards proverbs as an essential vehicle through which a message can be adequately transmitted.<sup>5</sup>

Proverbs in Igbo philosophy of language are a well-cherished mechanism for wise sayings and mature discussions. While we as Ndi Igbo should find proverbs as a worthy apparatus for rebuilding Igbo language, it would not however be out of context for elders and masters of Igbo philosophy to find a good transmission means to always use proverbs for our Igbo cultural teachings, because the Igbo would say; *okuko hapu kwom, o ji gini zuo umu ya?*

### **Igbo Proverbs and Cultural Pedagogies**

One of the logical roles of proverbs in Igbo language and thoughts is the fact that it provides itself as available vehicle for the expression of abstract and logical truths. In other words, proverbs are generally used to communicate truths that may be abstract and difficult to grasp. In many African tribal languages, including Igbo, proverbs are drawn from and refer to all activities of society, natural objectives and phenomena. Proverbs act as a catalyst of knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals which provoke further reflection and call for a deeper thinking and consideration of issues.<sup>6</sup> In Igbo traditional setting, proverbs serve as a mechanism through which ideas, philosophies and cultural values are transmitted from one generation to another. In fact, before the invention of reading and writing, even till now, the Igbo see and use proverbs as a resourceful channel of communication.

In teaching the younger generations the cultural heritage of their people, older people use Igbo proverbs as a convenient medium through which “secret” information can be disseminated amid strangers in such instances like marriage ceremonies when bride price would be paid. Proverbs are deeply rooted in Igbo culture, and almost everybody who understands his/her indigenous language is a living carrier of proverbs. Proverbs have embedded logical principles that guide the use of words as well as reveal the basic structure of language in thought and discourse (speech). With reference to the use

and application of proverbs among the Igbo-speaking people of West African region, it is evidently shown that proverbs play logical roles in African language and thought. Even in African setting in general, an African man who is skilful in the use of proverbs in speech and thought (reasoning), is a master of the logic of his/her language and hence better equipped to understand and interpret the ontological nature of his world.

Cultural education is both a philosophy and a process that is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The primary purpose of cultural education, as it relates to Igbo people, is to expose the learners to alternative means of communication and teaching of cultural values. However, a cursory look at literatures in the field of cultural education reveals that it is a growing field of more interest to indigenous scholars. In Igbo cultural pedagogies, proverbs help in proclaiming rules of morality, decorating the language, carrying the bases of native folk philosophy and of course ascribing meaning to human wisdom.

Proverbs in Igbo understanding are also very helpful in human weakness formation. It existentially helps the human person to realise his existential capacity to battle with difficult situations. For example, the proverb, the monkey said that his body is full of beauty, portrays the monkey's vanity in considering himself beautiful when in fact he is not. The monkey deliberately employs this as a self-protective defence. Although he is naturally ugly, he is not ashamed to admit it nor does he hate himself because of it. He projects his own weakness as a positive factor. Hence, this proverb can fit into a situation where one does not allow his limitations to overwhelm him.<sup>7</sup>

Because it is part and parcel of human nature but needs a constant cultural integration, Igbo proverbs, for pedagogical purposes, need a proper and continuous re-examination of its pedagogical values in socializing the youth to the norms and values of the society.

### **Igbo Proverbs as a Medium For Education**

Education in Igbo traditional setting and beyond is a continuous process of learning to be useful to oneself and to the society. It is a process that, if you like, begins from the day one is born till the day we finally leave the planet earth. In making sure that this learning gets its core root to the life of the people, language is very paramount. Language as the major tool for learning is as broad as the piece of knowledge to be acquired. The Igbo language, which is necessary in this contest, has in the name of civilization been thrown away for “foreign language,” so to speak.

Consequently, a close observation of the recent trend in the passing down of the language from the previous generation to subsequent generations has a lot of worrisome indicators of language endangerment. However, in September, 2011, as indicated by Maria L. Obaodan, *The Nigerian Vanguard* published an article titled “Save Igbo Language from Extinction.” It observed the downward trend in the use of Igbo Language. Till date, it is a common practice to slam school children with all manner of punishment for speaking Igbo in school. With this development, the speaking and writing of Igbo language started a slow but steady decline.<sup>8</sup> Even in our individual homes, parents no longer allow their children to speak Igbo Language, let alone entertaining and educating them with idioms and proverbs. Set outside prejudice and sentiments, indigenous languages like Igbo language, with regard to proverbs, remain an admirable means of easy understanding of subject matters. No child forgets the rudiments of his or her indigenous language.

Igbo proverb as a medium for education is understood here as an agent through which Igbo cultural values gain their social context and significance. It does not merely represent a culture but is a contributor to the development of cultural education. Proverbs, with regard to language, are our unique relation to the creator, our attitudinal beliefs, values and fundamental motions of what is truth.<sup>9</sup> Thus, one would say that the loss of a people’s language is a loss of the thorough

understanding of their value systems, beliefs, organisational methodologies and a debilitation of their fundamental truth which are basically their education.

Situating it within both traditional and modern settings, proverbs are used in academic milieu, especially in ancient literatures, to tell ancient stories. Like during *Igba egwu onwa* - the moonlight dance - a lot of ancient stories are told using proverbs. Recall that some authors use proverbs in historical fictions, because proverbs are so much a part of the language and culture of the people. From ancient times, too, people around the world have recorded proverbs in visual forms. This has been done in written form often in a decorative manner such as on pottery, cross-stitch, murals and in visually depicted variety of media, including paintings, etchings and sculpture.<sup>10</sup>

It is common knowledge among people of Igbo descent that indigenous Igbo proverbs play vital roles in speech, communication and exchange of knowledge and ideas among them. However, what may be uncommon knowledge is the fact that philosophy is the basic ingredient that provides Igbo proverbs with the taste for fertilizing ideas across cultural divides. With philosophy inherent in them, indigenous Igbo proverbs readily present themselves as cross-cultural media for educating people of African and non-African descents on the events, achievements, myths and realities of especially the people of Igbo ancestry.

### **Some Igbo Proverbs and Interpretations**

The beauty of Igbo philosophy does not only lie in its nature as a resource material for pedagogical purposes but also in its richness as an embodiment of knowledge. Proverbs as part of this Igbo philosophy produce exceptional value, especially when elders use them for moral instructions among the younger ones. By nature, Igbo proverbs can be said to be naturally instructive. Here are some Igbo proverbs and their literal meanings.

| <b>S<br/>N</b> | <b>Igbo Proverbs</b>                                     | <b>Direct English<br/>Translation</b>                                                        | <b>Literal Meaning</b>                                                                                            |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1              | Onweghi ihe<br>anya huru gbaa<br>obara.                  | There is nothing the<br>eyes see that will<br>make them bleed.                               | There is nothing about<br>which one can say that<br>nothing like it has<br>been seen in the<br>world.             |
| 2              | Nwanyi luu di<br>abuo o mara<br>nke ka ya mma.           | If a woman marries<br>two husbands, she<br>would know which<br>one is the better<br>husband. | If a person does two<br>different kinds of<br>work, he is able to<br>find out which is more<br>profitable to him. |
| 3              | Gidi gidi bu<br>ugwu eze.                                | A crowd is the honour<br>of a king.                                                          | Unity is strength.                                                                                                |
| 4              | Ihere anaghi<br>eme onye ara,<br>ka ma o bu<br>umunneya. | A mad person is not<br>ashamed of his<br>behaviour, but his<br>relations are.                | Relations are<br>concerned most with a<br>person's behaviour.                                                     |
| 5              | Ura ga-eju onye<br>nwuru-anwu<br>afo.                    | A dead person shall<br>have all the sleep<br>necessary.                                      | There is always<br>abundance in life.                                                                             |
| 6              | Onye buru chi<br>ya uzo, o<br>gbagbue onwe<br>ya n'oso.  | He who walks before<br>his godly guardian<br>does the race of his<br>life.                   | Life has stages that<br>should be taken one<br>after the other.                                                   |
| 7              | Onye mutara<br>nwa guo ya<br>Akemefule, o                | One who bore a child<br>and named him "let<br>not my own wealth                              | As you value things<br>belonging to you, so<br>does others value                                                  |

|    |                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                  |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | sikwanu nke<br>onye fuo?                                                                      | get lost” whose then<br>does he want to get<br>lost?                                                                                                                                                                                 | theirs                                                                                           |
| 8  | Ma ihe emeghi<br>mmadu, o<br>naghi ama ihe.                                                   | Until something has<br>happened to a person<br>that person does not<br>learn a lesson.                                                                                                                                               | Experience is the best<br>teacher.                                                               |
| 9  | Okoko kowa<br>mmadu o<br>gakwu mmadu<br>ibeya, ma o<br>kowa anuohia,<br>ya aga n’kwu<br>osisi | When a human being<br>feels an irritation<br>where he cannot<br>scratch himself, he<br>will approach another<br>fellow human being,<br>but when an animal<br>feels an irritation, it<br>goes to the base of a<br>tree to rub itself. | Men are there to help<br>one another in times<br>of need.                                        |
| 10 | A naghi eti<br>nwata ihe n’ihu<br>nne ya.                                                     | One does not hit a<br>child in the presence<br>of his mother.                                                                                                                                                                        | Give due respect to<br>all, including the<br>weak.                                               |
| 11 | Kama nga e riju<br>afo dachie uzo<br>ka m buru onu.                                           | I would prefer to go<br>without food rather<br>than fill my stomach<br>with food and then lie<br>dead across the road.                                                                                                               | It is better to do<br>without a thing than<br>gain it dishonestly and<br>then pay dearly for it. |
| 12 | Uka anaghi ano<br>n’afo ajo njo.                                                              | A word is not bad<br>while it is still in the<br>stomach.                                                                                                                                                                            | One cannot judge<br>another’s word until<br>he has spoken them.                                  |

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|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                         |
| 13 | Agba mbu o tuo n'ogwe a gbaa abuo o tuon'ogwe o bu ogwe ka a piara aku? | When the first arrow was shot, it hits the <i>ogwe</i> tree and when the second arrow was shot, it too hit the <i>ogwe</i> tree. Was it for the <i>ogwe</i> tree that the arrows were made? | Constant failure to achieve an objective one has in mind leads to questioning as to the reasons for it. |
| 14 | O ji mbe n'ala ji onwe ya.                                              | He who holds the tortoise down the ground, holds himself down as well.                                                                                                                      | He who holds or delays the progress of others ties his own progress because no one is an island.        |
| 15 | A tuoro omara o mara; a tuoro ofeke ofenye isi n'ohia.                  | If you tell a wise one, he understands. Tell a dunce, he runs into the bush.                                                                                                                | A ready to progress person toes the good path.                                                          |
| 16 | Egbe bere ugo bere; nke si ibe ya ebena nku kwaa ya                     | Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch; one that hinders the other from perching may lose its wings.                                                                                       | Communal living guarantees peaceful co-existence.                                                       |
| 17 | Aturu muru ebuna gba aka nwa.                                           | The sheep that has a ram for a child has no child at all.                                                                                                                                   | A foolish child is no child to its parents.                                                             |
| 18 | Awo anaghi agba oso ehie                                                | The toad does not run for nothing at mid-                                                                                                                                                   | A person has a reason for acting in an                                                                  |

|    | na nkiti.                                      | day.                                                                                                              | unusual manner.                                                          |
|----|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 19 | Ewu anaghi<br>amu nwa<br>n'ogburi (nji).       | A goat cannot have<br>kids when it is under<br>restraint.                                                         | A person cannot act<br>when his liberty is<br>restricted.                |
| 20 | Dimkpa anaghi<br>ano n'ulo ewu<br>amuo n'ogbu. | A grown up person<br>should not let a goat<br>deliver its kid while<br>still tethered and while<br>he is at home. | A responsible person<br>must not neglect the<br>duties of his positions. |

### **Igbo Proverbs as Integral Part of Language**

One serious negative effect of colonization on language is the waning of the indigenous language. It exposes the present generation to the risk of acculturating easily to various ways of existence that appeal to them. This creates a communication gap presumed to be responsible for the decline suffered by indigenous languages. Nwankwo observes that “Communication being the art of transferring information from one source to another source through language can be distorted when there are appropriate disseminations.”<sup>11</sup> As a corrective measure, proverbs serve as a tool through which individuals, especially the younger one, become culturally integrated in the philosophy of their society.

Igbo proverbs are tied to Igbo language; therefore, they are part and parcel of Igbo philosophy and culture. A child who learns through this means has more advantage over those who merely recite the Igbo alphabets. Proverbs structure and compel Igbo society to pay attention to her cultural heritage. The values of what can be termed “the philosophical” that is contained in Igbo proverbs cannot be underestimated. Hence, the position that “there is philosophy in Igbo proverbs”, to our mind, is incontestable. It is incontestable not because it cannot be criticized by those who think differently, but because any attempt at condemning or denying the existence of philosophy in Igbo proverb amounts to a further affirmation of the same position. Even a

critical exploration of any kind into the realm of Igbo proverbs cannot rule out the existence of meaning, order, beauty, knowledge, wisdom, power and, above all, metaphysics and ethics as basic ingredients of Igbo proverbs. Igbo people use their proverbs to reconstruct deviants and straying beings. It is on this note that it is very much important that a child is exposed to the ethical standards of his environment through proverbs. Whether a proverb is metaphysical, social, ethical or even epistemological in nature, it has a purpose to fulfill and often carries vital messages that are pertinent for educating and developing the mind of people for many generations. Igbo proverbs are indeed a vital heritage to its society. Nwankwo maintains that:

Proverbs should therefore be nurtured as that veritable tool available for inculcating values in the minds of human being in a conversational manner during early developmental stages in such manner that emotions are stabilized, positive goals oriented attitudes to life are inculcated.<sup>12</sup>

The proverb in Igbo social matrix remains a documentation of the lives of the people at a particular time. Like some other oral forms, the Igbo proverb records the history, experience, trauma and tension of a society at every stage in its evolution.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the potentialities of Igbo philosophy to the achievement of reviving the Igbo language, Igbo proverbs have been neglected in both our social gatherings and schools. There is no doubt that Igbo proverbs, when understood beyond their literal and contextual meaning, serve as an integral part of Igbo philosophy. “Onye na-amaghi ihe onwere, o gaghi ama uru o bara” – he who does not know what he has, does not know its value or worth. Igbo as a society is richly blessed with whole lots of cultural heritage that are encapsulated in proverbs and then clearly made known through her language.

Okuko hapu kwom, o ji gini zuo umuya? Igbo language is our language. We cannot substitute it with another, for it is in the wisdom

of our forefathers that this language is sustained and transferred to younger generations; ihe anyi na-cho n'uko elu no n'uko ala. The Igbo philosophy is an embodiment of knowledge. It is now our duty to nurture, harness and keep it alive as our own. Thus, *o buru na mmadu ekwughi ebe ono, onweghi onye ga-ama na ono* - if one does not say he is nobody would say he is. Ndi-Igbo, to save our dignity is to save our philosophy. To save our philosophy is first through recognizing the Igbo language by popularizing it with the culture that formed it.<sup>13</sup>

With Igbo proverbs, a lot can be taught about life. Igbo proverbs have a contextual meaning that spells out man's situation and fate in life. For example, in terms of encouragement and determination; aka aja aja na- ebute onu mmanu mmanu – success is the fruit of persistence and hard work; in terms of co-operation, oko kowa mmadu, ibe ya akoo ya - be your brother's keeper; in terms of justice, egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebena nku kwaa ya - live and let live. This paper concludes that Igbo philosophy is rich in indigenous Igbo proverbs and serves as a sure way of educating people of other descents about the realities of the Igbo people. They are better ways of countering fallacies and rumours emanating from foreign historians and foreign media about Igbo land in particular and Africa in general. Hence, they are veritable cross-cultural media with inexhaustible resources which need to be further explored.

Therefore, if Igbo language dies, then its ingredients would die as well. A proper recognition of Igbo philosophy as a compendium of Igbo proverbs and cultural pedagogies demands sustaining the Igbo language by making it a compulsory subject in primary, secondary and university levels across the Igbo territory, because the Igbo would say that *anya nnekwu na-echebe akwa ya* (The eyes of the hen protect its eggs). By this, those who studied the language as a course should be encouraged by offering them jobs in our various institutions of labour.

## Endnotes

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