

**Proverbs As “The Palm Oil with Which Words Are Eaten” Among the Igbo, Nigeria:
Relevance for Transmission of Indigenous Values**

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Abstract

Among the Igbo, it can be asserted with all certainty that the veins of the average man are filled with proverbs, while his blood is constituted of proverbs too. In the traditional milieus of the people, proverbs have life. They convey critical meanings, and deliver indebt messages whose real semantics could be lost if conveyed in ‘children’s words.’ For the people, the use of appropriate proverbs in the delivery of the right messages on any crucial matters, conversations, discussions, and negotiations can never be done without. With the vehicle of proverbs, the Igbo drive the core message home, deliver the strong weapon in some subtle language, as well as stamp the core contents of an issue firmly in the minds of the persons concerned. Through the vehicle of proverbs, the attitude of forgetfulness of major issues is minimized to the barest levels. With the aid of proverbs therefore, knowledge is strengthened, traditional values are maintained and transferred into the hands of the younger generations, even as the art of oratory is elicited in the mental faculties of the people. Putting these into perspective therefore, it can only be added with all certainty that the claim which says that proverbs are “the palm oil with which words are eaten” by the Igbo stands correct. Putting these into perspective, it is the argument of this paper that through the medium of this quintessential indigenous heritage, the Igbo transmit their rich traditional values to generations unborn. It is therefore the target of this paper to discuss some of those key

indigenous values where proverbs play prominent roles. In doing this, some appropriate proverbs shall guide the analysis.

Keywords: Igbo, Palm oil, Proverbs, Indigenous values, Transmission

Introduction

The Igbo occupying the southeast areas of Nigeria and parts of other states that include Akwa Ibom, Benue, Cross River, Delta and Rivers the largest ethnic nation in Nigeria. Their language is the Igbo language. The people who own the language are known as the Igbo, while the land they occupy is known as Igbo land. Based on these attributes, authors and researchers concede unanimously that the concept of the Igbo is used in these three distinct contexts already indicated. Geographically, the Igbo speaking people of Nigeria are located between latitude 5 to 7 degrees north and longitude 6 to 8 degrees east, and occupy an area of some 15,800 square miles. It shares geographical borders with the Warri and Bini peoples on her western borders, while on the southern frontiers; she has the Ijaw and Ogoni nations in the Niger Delta as neighbours. On the northern frontiers too, the Igbo have the Tiv and Igala nations as next door neighbours, while the Yako and Ibibio nations share boundaries with them on the eastern fronts (Greenberg, 1949; Uchendu, 1965).

Naturally, the Igbo are a culture-conscious nation, a people who literally wear their cultures as clothes, and a nation that is widely renowned for her resilience in deploying every opportunity to celebrate and exhibit rich indigenous heritage. Proverbs constitute one major heritage inherited from the ancestors. Among the Igbo, the need to preserve knowledge, strengthen understanding, deliver messages in undiluted tones, exhibit art of oratory, and be able to remove the chaff from the grain in the course of information delivery constitutes some major reasons that support the use of proverbs in the traditional life of the people. Through the agency of Igbo proverbs too, accumulated knowledge of the past generations of our ancestors are conveniently delivered into the hands of the young generations without losing their componential elements. Despite the differences in geographical locations or the dialectal variations prevalent among the people, local proverbs still convey similar meanings wherever and whenever they are used in Igbo land (Ogbalu, 1965).

Thus, Achebe (1958) rightfully observed that among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Going by this expression, there is no doubt that the urge to use appropriate proverbs is quite natural among the Igbo. For them therefore, engaging in a conversation, discussion, argument, negotiation, settlement of issues, admonishment of persons, inculcation of traditional values and norms, impartation of skills, encouragement of honesty and hard work and rejection of indolence and dishonourable lifestyles, the language of delivering the message is usually found in proverbs. Just like “a lizard can never escape easily from the hands of its captors without having to climb a tall tree” (Ngwere gbawa ọsọ hapu ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya), the Igbo cannot make an eventful landing on any subject matter that involves verbal or even written communication without adapting the relevant proverbs.

In the traditional life of the Igbo therefore, it is an accepted fact that addressing an issue without building in the necessary proverbs amounts to simple verbal presentation by a child to children. Such an event is insignificant, irrelevant and of no importance. Therefore, an Igbo person who lacks the intellectual capacity to use the right proverbs at the right time and the right place is seen

as a child who needs to learn. Such a person, despite his age, academic exploits, economic strength, and social standing could still be counted as a little child that needs to be taught the art of oratory and skills of conversation making. However, it might be quite rare to find such an Igbo individual whose ability to lace his discussion with powerful proverbs, and be able to tap from the rich knowledge banks of the ancestors. The obvious truth therefore remains that irrespective of one's positions in the society, and not minding the length of years such an Igbo man or woman lives outside the soils of the Igbo nation, the ability to apply the appropriate proverbs at their rightful moments is simply inborn and flows in the veins (Achebe, 1958; Ogbalu, 1965; Eke, 1995).

In other words, ability to convert proverbs into powerful languages in the course of communication, both verbally and in their written forms are naturally built into the Igbo. Ability to adopt proverbs as strategic instruments in the expression of one's lifetime experiences is easily found among users. Through this medium therefore, the Igbo narrate their world by teaching their philosophy of life to younger generations, condemn or applaud behaviours of persons, stamp their history firmly on the minds of community members, educate the younger generations on the local values, as well as provide unwritten knowledge about kinship ties that sew the cords of relationships that bind communities together. By implication, the relevance and fundamentality of proverbs in the daily lives of the Igbo are quite irreplaceable, and can only be compared with the life-giving role of the blood for the survival of the human person. With these in context therefore, it can only be added that through the use of Igbo proverbs (Ilu Igbo), the people become more observant about events and developments around them, take accurate responsibility for their environments, and checkmate the attitudes of erring community members (Ogbalu, 1965).

Therefore, proverbs convey meanings which go farther and beyond the ordinary surface levels of understanding. They are central to the Igbo world of conveying effective and long-lasting communication. Proverbs identify the uniqueness of the Igbo among the divergent ethno-cultural nations embedded under the umbrella known as Nigeria. Their relevance in the transmission of strong moral values and Igbo traditional philosophies of hard work, honesty, sincerity, uprightness and respect for law and order, among several others, cannot be quantified in any way (Onyemaechi, 2021). These become quite crucial as the actual meanings of proverbs are farther away from the ordinary surface level or literal expressions which the words convey. Against this background therefore, it is quite eminent that these ageless and trans-generational language of communication convey deeper meanings and deliver critical messages in the most powerful but subtle languages. The fact then remains that aided with the appropriate proverbs; the Igbo deliver concrete messages using the powers of carefully articulated metaphorical languages which could hardly be forgotten.

Proverbs in the Traditional Life of the Igbo

The position of proverbs as an inexcusable language of communication on important matters among the Igbo can never be wished away under any guises. Families use proverbs to talk to their children and upcoming generations. Parents deploy the use of proverbs in admonishing their children on positive attitudinal conducts. Communities adapt the language of proverbs to direct their members on the need to tow the parts of peace, oneness, unity and purposefulness. Through this medium too, they educate the youth on the need to embrace peaceful resolution of conflicts instead of resorting to violence at the slightest provocation. Using the medium of proverbs too, religious leaders in churches educate their members on those strong moral values which are pleasing to God, as well as promote peaceful co-existence among community members. Putting

these into perspective therefore, Achebe (1958) captivatingly opines that “a proverb not only makes a point, it fixes it in our minds.”

In view of these developments therefore, it is not out of place that Igbo families and communities are encouraged to make the use of Igbo language a priority in the upbringing of children and other family members. It is anticipated that with a consistent deployment of this language as the primary medium of expression and communication in families and communities, chances of the language going extinct soon could be avoided. Following this development, the deployment of the Igbo language as a human language and a language whose native speakers could be abundantly found in their numbers all over the world, could continue to remain a practical reality even in this digital era when divergent digital facilities perform credible functions in areas of human communication, social contact and other forms of mass media outreach (Danbatta, 2017; Eze & Agada, 2018).

As a matter of fact therefore, the beauty of Igbo proverbs could be richly founded in the context when the language still performs its role as the medium of contact, communication, interact, and social outreach among the indigenous owners – the Igbo. The communicative power embedded within the linguistic embers of Igbo proverbs creates wider meanings and leaves stronger impacts when this traditional language is adapted as the medium of expression. It is in appreciation of these factors that an average Igbo family, kin group, village setting and local community attaches great significance to the deployment of proverbs in their everyday activities, most especially in the handling of those core traditional values which educate and train young children and the youth on the arts of initiating and managing traditional conversations, as well as several other traditional human activities which keep the community active, alive and participatory. This leads Achebe (1958) to the strong conclusion that among the Igbo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.

Traditional Relevance

Against the above backgrounds, it is quite remarkable that the normal traditional life of the Igbo can never be completed without the deployment of the appropriate proverbs at the most appropriate circumstances and stages in the course of conducting their usual human activities. It is quite pertinent that the Igbo in spite of the numerous powers of technology available in the present era still deploy proverbs as fundamental instruments of transmission of indigenous traditional values. These shall be discussed under the following subheadings:

Peace and Conflicts Resolution (Udo na Idozi Esemokwu)

There is no doubt that conflicts arise among members of Igbo families, kin groups, communities and villages. Such conflicts could be as a consequence of a number of factors which could be associated with infringements on the human rights of individual or collective members. On the emergence of such confrontational situations, the search for peaceful resolutions is usually pursued by all the right thinking persons who are involved in the matter.

Thus, at moments when the search for peace becomes a major option and only possible way out, the elders always admonished the younger generation that “*ukpara na-anaghị anụ ihe , na-ezu ike n’afọ nnụnụ.*” Literally translated, it reads that “an insect that does not hear, rests in the stomach of a bird.” The practical lesson is that stubbornness is foolhardy and often leads to self-destruction. Similarly, in the search for peaceful resolution conflicting situations among the Igbo, elders

admonish the young ones in the following words: “Ebule ga-epu mpi, ekwo siekwa ya ike.” Literally speaking, this proverb says that the young sheep that hopes to grow horns must be prepared to have strong neck also. In the real sense, the instruction is that any person who chooses the way of violence must be prepared to face the ugly consequences of his actions (Ogbalu, 1965).

Entrepreneurship and Economic Self Reliance (IDị Ike N’ọrụ na Mmadu Inwe Ọrụ nke Aka Ya)

Among the Igbo too, proverbs are used to encourage and support hard work, entrepreneurship and self-reliance. With the aid of the appropriate proverbs, children and the younger generations are motivated to embrace these strong virtues from their early years. The understanding is that hard work pays handsomely, while laziness, lousiness and indolence create favourable room for poverty, failure and destitution. Thus, starting from the younger years, children and youth are admonished with the knowledge that “aka aja aja na-ebute ọnụ mmanụ mmanụ.” Literally, this proverb advocates that dirtying the hands manifests in greasing the mouth handsomely. At the practical levels, it encourages everyone to endure hard work and engage in strong entrepreneurship skills, and reject all attitudes and inducements associated with indolence and lack of skills. In effect, it motivates the Igbo to embrace the values of dignity of labour and enduring lucrative skills.

It is against this background that every Igbo person engages his or her precious time in one lucrative skill or another. Igbo philosophy abhors laziness and inability to acquire skills. This is based on the Igbo value system which advocates that laziness and inability to acquire skills lead to poverty and undue economic dependence on the generosity of relations. Crippled by the debilitating effects of poverty and destitution, affected persons become economically stagnated and go into begging for daily survival. Considering the huge loss of dignity and crippling economic challenge which such situations often impose on their unfortunate victims, Igbo families and communities go extra miles to encourage their members to engage themselves in lucrative professional skills. Putting into context therefore, it is quite difficult to find persons of Igbo extraction folding their hands and legs idly begging for monetary on the streets of Nigeria, even in these present times when severe economic crunch tackles Nigerians aggressively (Omolewa, 2001; Njoku, 2005).

Impartation of Moral Values (IKuziri Mmadu Ime Ezi Omume)

It has been rightfully asserted that a proverb is “a philosophical allusive and metaphorical citation which gives credence to a traditional truth and wisdom”. This source confirms that proverbs are allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truth outside itself; philosophical, because it is a product of a long period of observation and reasoning. Put into clearer perspective, it needs to be added that Igbo land is a nation which attaches great significance to her numerous cultures and traditional values. This is a land that uses every opportunity to impart moral values, establish law and order, check illicit behaviours, as well as evaluate the day to day activities of its citizens. Accordingly, our source strongly confirms that the Igbo traditional philosophy is expected to elicit good morals and act as an unseen tutor to human consciences (Onyemaechi, 2021).

Thus, towards consolidating the lessons of moral uprightness and strong virtues of trans-generational moral composition, the Igbo elucidate their young ones with those proverbs which,

for instance, impart positive attitudinal dispositions, respect for law and order, sanctity of the human entity, sacredness of the human life, respect for marriage, pride in the dignity of labour, and rejection of pre-mature wealth, among several others. Guided by these core traditional values, Igbo families and communities usually admonish their members that “There adighi eme onye ara kama o na-eme umunna ya.” Literally translated, this proverb says that “bad conducts is even more disgraceful to relatives and friends, than the culprit.” As a huge moral lesson, this proverb teaches that “O bughị naanị onye mere ihe na-adighi mma ka ihere na-eme. O na-emekwa ikwu na ibe ya karia” (Ogbaulu, 1965).

With the tool of proverbs such as the above, strong lessons of strict adherence to revered traditional values are proudly fixed in the hearts and attitudinal lives of children and youth in Igbo land. This is an indication that such philosophical and metaphorical home truth could be firmly transplanted onto the younger generations of citizens without unnecessary dilutions from society and other biased social influences. With the aid of proverbs, transfer of strong moral values to the upcoming generations could be effectively sustained and spared from mental decay and corrupt civilizational innovations.

Rejection of Attitudes of Dishonesty and Criminality (Iju Ndu Ojoo na Aghugho)

Without doubt, Igbo families and communities reject all attitudes of dishonesty and criminality among their citizens and other members. Towards guarding against the proliferation of these criminal tendencies, the Igbo waste no time in sounding strong notes of warning to their members, encouraging them to avoid getting engaged in all sorts of criminal activities, most especially by refusing to partner with any forms illicit sources of wealth acquisition. Proverbs deployed to deliver such lessons include the following: “Ori ngwa ngwa na-ala ngwa ngwa” (He who endures in the acquisition of unplanned quick wealth, dies quickly too). In real practical terms, this proverb admonishes that quick wealth is evil and disastrous. It goes on to warn against partnering with persons and entities who participate in such dishonest and criminal activities in an attempt to acquire wealth for self and family members.

Patience and Endurance (Ndiri na Ntachi Obi)

Once again, Igbo philosophy and core traditional values encourage her members to always apply and adopt the principles of patience and endurance in their daily lives, attitudes and relationships with one another. In view of the crucial roles which both traditional values place on the development of persons and their families both within and outside their home community settings, members are advised to make both virtues their watchwords in their daily lives and relations with one another. To that end, proverbs such as the following are deployed as possible instruments for the attainment of these lofty goals: “Onye ndidi na-eri azu ukpo” Driven home in its literal terms, this proverb implies that a patient dog eats the choicest part of the fish). Put in real terms then, it means that patience and endurance accrue priceless benefits. Similarly, the Igbo usually admonish their loved ones that “ozi di uru ka a na-agba oso eje.” Put in its real terms, “Mmadu na-eje ozi ihe ga-abara ya uru osiso,” meaning that “we are more prepared to labour for our own good.” “Chinchi gwara umu ya si ha esogbula onwe ha na ihe di oku ga-aju oyi,” meaning that “Patience is the key to life” (Ogbalu, 1965).

Active Participation in Community Development (Inye Aka na Mmeppe Obodo)

Towards encouraging their sons and daughters to take active parts in community developmental matters too, Igbo families and kin groups convey strong symbolical and metaphorical messages to them using proverbs. Through those proverbs, community members are brought to the awareness that it is their responsibility to contribute their resources, talents and skills in the development of their home communities. Among the Igbo, engagement in these activities is very significant, most especially as the people hardly fold their hands while waiting for the state or federal government to deliver some desperately needed social amenities such as electricity, pipe borne water supplies, construction of markets, building of tarred roads and installation of healthcare centres within the community, among others. This challenge becomes as critical as community members place strong faith in the traditional Igbo philosophy of “Ibu anyị ndanda” (Unity is strength; Mutual cooperation leads to success) (Njoku, 2005).

Guided by this principle therefore, community members usually feel motivated initiate and execute community development projects with or without government sponsorship. Thus, proverbs such as the following are used to deliver the message to all and sundry: “onye ka e tinyere nnu n’onye ọ si na ọ dighi ya mma?” (Everybody likes good things). “Ọ dighi ụzọ e si jee Onitsha ọ di nso” (There is no easy road to success). “Aka weta aka weta, o ju onye” (Solidarity of purpose usually manifests in the attainment of greater positive results) (Ogbalu, 1965). It is proverbs like these which are usually deployed by Igbo communities to spur wealthy members into engaging themselves actively in development projects that help their communities grow up with speed.

Support for Continuity of Bloodlines (Nkwelite aluṃ di na nwunye)

It is without doubt that Igbo families and communities usually go the extra miles in encouraging their members to go into marriage at the proper time. In the traditional milieu of the people, the essence is to ensure that family bloodlines are not closed abruptly. Local value systems consider it as a responsibility on parents to train their children in this direction and ensure that they (boys and girls) marry at the proper age, and beget children who could sustain generational lines. To that end, proverbs such as the following are usually given to young men and women in the course of their training and preparation for marriage: “Agwa nwaanyị bu mma” (A woman’s beauty is founded in her good manners). Were ehihie chọba ewu ojii maka chi ojiji (A stitch in time saves nine; Make haste while the sun shines).

With these proverbs usually given to unmarried young men and women in the course of their conversations with family members and other relations, the lessons of going into marriage at the appropriate periods in life, becoming good parents, as well as respect for the sanctity of marriage are kept in their minds. The implication is that parents and kinsmen and women are quite aware that it is through marriage that generational bloodlines are sustained. For them too, it is understood that it is through marriage that children give birth to their own children, and in the process produce the next generations of families that could sustain population growth in communities.

Support for Justice and Fair Play (Nkwado Eziokwu na Ikpe Ziri Ezi)

Every human society abhors acts of injustice and unfair treatment. These often come in the way of denial of legitimate rights. As a matter of fact, every Igbo community rejects all acts which could deny any member of his or her full rights as a human being. Thus, the protection of all persons

from all acts of injustice and wanton denial of rights counts among the core traditional values which the Igbo philosophy of life protects with keen dedication. That being the case, families and communities, in the course of literally using the palm oil to eat their own words, admonish their members in the following proverbs: “Enwe si na ya agaghị agoro nwa ya kwọ n’azu ma ọ rachara ụtụ, n’ihi na ya amaghị ma ọ setiri aka ghorọ ụtụ”, meaning that “The onye maara ka ọ ga-ekwu maka ya” (One can only speak of what he is certain about). “Uka a kpara akpa a na-eji isi ekwe ya”, meaning that “The ekwekoritara na ya adighi ara ahụ omume” (Mutual agreement is key to success). “Onye aruruala lie onwe ya, otu aka ya esee n’elu”, meaning that “E nwere ihe otu onye na-enweghi ike ime” (Doing evil is not good) (Ogbalu, 1965).

With these proverbs and several others, Igbo families encourage their members to be upright, avoid undue injustice and apply the principles of fairness in the treatment of one and all – all the time. By that, attitudes of undue favouritism, abuse of power and miscarriage of justice are discouraged among kits and kin anywhere in Igbo land.

Humility and Uprightness (Umeala na Ikwuba Aka Otọ)

As well, in the course of literally eating their words with palm oil, Igbo families and communities teach their members acts of humility and uprightiness. Armed with the appropriate proverbs, parents, family heads, religious leaders and holders of traditional institutions admonish their members to apply these rare virtues in their daily lives, relationships with one another, as well as conduct themselves appropriately in both public and private places. In their efforts to deliver these lessons firmly, the following proverbs are often: “Egbe bere, ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela nku kwaa ya.” In real terms, this proverb advises people to “live and let others live” (Ka ndi mmadu na-ebi n’udo, ma onye ju, ihe idiri la ya mma”. “Adighi ere okuko ukwu aru n’ulo.” This proverb explains that one can hardly deceive one’s own neighbours. (N’uzo ka a na-ewepu ihe di njo). “Qchu nwa okuko nwe ada, ma nwa okuko nwe mwemwe osu. The real meaning of this proverb is that “the just shall always prevail” (Naani gi nwe imeru aru mgbe i na-achu onye o dighi ihe o mere gi) (Ogbalu, 1965).

Thus, it can only be added that the option of adopting proverbs as the language of conversation in the impartation of traditional values to the young generation emanates from the facticity of the economy of words which they offer. Against this background therefore, the non-verboseness of these metaphorical and philosophical conversational tools enable easy recall and faster recovery from the memory banks. Through the auspices of proverbs therefore, waste of precious words is minimized, with the effect that ability to always remember is ensured. It is in appreciation of this fact that families and communities deploy some informal occasions such as traditional marriage ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, New Yam Festivals, meeting forums of various kin groups, titles-giving ceremonies, reconciliation events and oath taking moments to implant on the youth the cultural values of humility and uprightiness in their everyday activities (Achebe, 1958; Ogbalu, 1974).

Respect for Law and Authority

At the different levels of the traditional Igbo society, lessons of respect for law and authority are imparted to all and sundry. Families educate their members on this important Igbo traditional philosophy. Kin group leaders address their members on this crucial subject too. As well, different community heads, traditional rulers and even religious leaders take ample time to sink this

fundamental lesson into the hearts and minds of their members. Behind these initiatives is the awareness that engagement in law breaking and other criminal activities dent families' good images, damage their reputations, destroy their chances of raising their heads with utmost pride and dignity in the gathering of the comity of the Umunna (people who share close blood ties), as well as eliminate the ugly chances of being associated with persons who have criminal records within the community. Putting these into perspective therefore, Igbo families waste no words in cautioning their young and old members that "ihere onye ara bu nwanne ya ka o na-eme" (The indignity associated with criminal behaviour falls upon the close relatives of the culprit).

To that end therefore, Igbo families and communities waste no chances in reminding their members that "Okukọ ntị ike na-anụ ihe n'ite ofe agadi nwaanyi". The real lesson is that "Onye na-enupụ isi na-anata ugwo oru ya" (It does not pay to be disobedient to the laws of the land). Another similar proverb is that "A hu ma e kwughị mere okenye. Ma e kwuo ma a anughị mere nwata." The raw lesson is that "Onye okenye ga na-agbaziri umuaka ime omume di mma, ma ha nuru, ma ha anughị" (Elders are duty bound to give advice to the young, whether they adhere to them or not). Similar proverb given says that "Ekweghi ekwe na-ekwe n'ute ekwere." For them, the learnt taught is that "Inupụ isi nwere njedebe" (People cannot always escape punishment for their evil deeds) (Ogbalu, 1965).

Conclusion

Having arrived at this stage, only a few critical concluding comments need to be added. It is quite eminent to appreciate the fact that Igbo land represents one unique part of the globe where enormous significance is attached to indigenous values. It is such values that guide the conducts and activities of citizens. As such, there are virtually no aspects of local indigenous patterns of doing things, religious practices, festivals and other cultural activities that are not influenced and dictated by cultures and traditions. In the traditional milieus of the people, it is in the conduct of these indigenous practices that the Igbo art of conversationalism acquires wider coverage, thereby creating the most convenient platform for the literal eating of words with the raw red palm oil in the course of transmitting accepted indigenous values unto the hands of Igbo citizens.

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