

Dynamic Resilience of an African Proverb-Culture against the Lingual Colonialism in Westernization (A Case Study of the Igbo Language)

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Abstract

This Paper sets out to state *inter alia* that as essential elements of a language in particular and consequently a culture in general, the proverbs and proverb-culture of any society can easily be used to chronicle, measure or evaluate its tracks of culture-contacts or consequent culture-changes. To do this, it uses the Igbo language of South-eastern Nigeria as a case-study. Once more, our aim includes to plumb the lines linking language and culture-contacts as manifested in the dynamics involved in the evolvment, use, spread of and changes in proverbs and proverb-culture, as a possible index to the cultural changes that occur, when cultures encounter each other in culture-contacts experienced in and by any society. It all hinges on the fact that language itself is a natural bearer, preserver and transmitter of culture. Thus, it is and remains a major and ineluctable player in any game of culture-contact.

Introduction

Most African languages tend to possess well-developed and essentially useful proverb-cultures.¹ A typical example here is the Igbo language, spoken by the Igbo tribe of the present South-eastern Nigeria. Though native to and majorly inhabiting this mentioned part of Nigeria with a total population of well over twenty million people, at least a quarter of the speakers of this language are currently scattered and living all over the globe. Though as the altruistic and good mixers they naturally are, many Igbos have not only migrated to, but settled and established themselves in different lands and climes; they still often maintain constant or at least intermittent contacts with the beloved homeland. For, even in the diaspora, the Igbos have been known to still dedicatedly identify with their home-culture in one concrete manner or the other. For instance, they often establish and maintain socio-cultural groups of their home-towns, which are popularly known as Development/Improvement/Town Unions. These are generally aimed not only at unifying them in the diaspora but especially for the purpose of coordinating their efforts towards the infrastructural and general development of their homelands. There in the diaspora sometimes, such unions also organize their native cultural festivals like New Yam Festivals, Mmanwu, Okonko etc. Sometimes, they even chart the way forward and animate their native towns politically too. Some have even established Igbo schools in America for instance, where children of Igbo parentage though born and bred in the USA can still learn the Igbo language and culture.

In these respects of cultural resilience, even in the diaspora, we would like to point out that it all

¹Ikenga-Metuh, E. *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes*, Jos, 1991, p.23

²Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, UK, 1997, p. 53

corroborates Huntington, when he speaks of “Europeans who... are likely to be surprised by the creativity, resilience, and individuality of non-Western cultures.”² As a matter of fact, the choice of Igbo people and their language as a case-study here is further strengthened, for instance, by the manifest creative resilience with which the Igbo proverb-culture met and has been encountering Westernization for over a century now. For, unlike some other cultural dimensions, this particular aspect of Igbo culture has so creatively and immensely withstood a total conquest by the colonizing European language culture, as to generally serve as being exemplary for such resistances. Of course, another cultural area of similar feats is the field of music. But that falls outside the immediate concerns of this present presentation. Yet on the other hand, concerning Igbo dynamism and creativity with reference to the colonial days, Ndiokwere explanatorily testifies that, “Ndi Igbo were ready to accept changes, abandon old and primitive ways of life and embrace anything they found useful in the white man's religion and government.”³ It is in this connection therefore, that we once more underscore that a people with such progressively creative and dynamic characteristics like the Igbo must indubitably make a good specimen for a study in linguistic cultural dynamics.

Language: Veritable Purveyor of Culture

The word 'language' probably has its roots in the French word *La Langue* – the tongue; a major human organ of speech. It is a system of communication among humans consisting of words, speech, writing, gestures etc, used in a structured and agreed manner. As a social construct, it always belongs to a particular group or society that actually authors it. Man is naturally a speaking being – *animal loquens*. This human characteristic both complements and confirms the other fact of Man's natural make-up as a social being – *enssocialis*.⁴ For, he is a being that essentially lives and survives within society, needing as well as being needed by the other. All that make communication in every imaginable form, a human necessity. Armed with the ability to speak, a human being is able to vocally express and communicate meaning, sentiments, judgements, facts e.t.c to and with one another. In saying this however, we agree "that language is not simply the spoken but all the communicative signs and gestures."⁵ Speech is surely the basic and major medium of human communication. But then, there are many other effective ways of human communication: pantomime and mimicry, writing, natural signs and symbols, music and arts etc.

Naturally, language is almost as old as humanity itself. While Huntington opines that, "language is second only to religion as a factor distinguishing people of one culture from those of another,"⁶ we would rather say that it even comes before religion in these respects. In fact, language is a very important part of culture that often so differs from a culture or cultural area to the other, from tribe to

³Ndiokwere, N.I. *Search for Greener Pastures: Igbo & African Experience*, Nebraska, 1998, p.31

⁴Ukeh, C.O., *Quietude: The Fertile Desert*, APT Publications, Owerri, 2018, p. 12

⁵Nwamiro, C. U., *Incidentally I Am Igbo (Call for Igbo Reorientation)*, UgweBen Prints & Publications, Owerri, 2011, p. 29

⁶Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, UK, 1997, p.70

tribe, and people to people. The consequence of all this lies partially in the fact that there are almost as many languages as there are nations, tribes or ethnic groups on earth. To this effect, we need to add that languages also exist in sort of families, when they develop from one another while retaining identifiable kinship with their parent-stocks. Thus, we have the Romanic language group in parts of Europe or Kwa language group in parts of Africa.

Language is not only an essential element of every culture. Being naturally a major medium and instrument of human communication, it is also axiomatically a formidable purveyor of culture. For, "culture is expressed in language. When a people lose her language, she equally loses her culture and identity thereby."⁷ In fact, language is not only a purveyor of culture but understandably a powerful vehicle of civilizations too. With and through it, a culture not only expresses itself but also goes into dialogue and encounter with other cultures. All this is because, "it is the passcode to people's thought, culture and values."⁸ That may also explain why David Crystal summarily speaks of "the value of languages as expressions of identity; as repositories of history; as part of human knowledge...."⁹ Language thus belongs to the core and innermost identity of a culture. Understandably therefore, it is a very strong and veritable agent of culture and culture-change.

Being thus such an important part and so belonging to the heart of every culture, it is not surprising that it also shares in most of the major characteristics of culture. For instance, language is dynamic. It changes and grows with time and through various cultural encounters and influences. With each passing generation, it either expands, shrinks or even gets corrupted. As a cultural element, its characteristic dynamism is often manifested in and through the changes and expansions of its vocabulary, poetry, grammatical structures, idiomatic expressions and even treasury of proverbs. One only needs to consider the computer industry today, in order to understand this. Just imagine how various English language computer vocabularies have suddenly become at home in other languages: German, Spanish, French, Italian etc. Long before that, we note that due to the historic roles of ancient Greece and Rome in the development of the sciences, one cannot successfully study or practice law today, without at least a smattering knowledge of certain Latin words and phrases: *corpus habes, audi alteram partem! subpoena* etc. Most technically medical words and expressions like names of sicknesses, drugs, treatments etc do have Greek and Latin etymological roots: *euthanasia, rigor mortis, therapeutic* etc.

Furthermore, a language can understandably also mutate into a new one. Modern Italian language for instance, is said to be a corruption of the Latin language of the ancient Roman civilization. Thus,

⁷Nwamiro, C. U., *Incidentally I Am Igbo (Call for Igbo Reorientation)*, p. 29

⁸Okeke, B., "Inculturation in the Liturgy: Nigerian Experience Twenty-Five Years After the First African Synod" in Anthony Osuji & Chibuike Ukeh (eds.) *Synod for Africa: 25 Years Later (Context and Pastoral Ministry in a Post-Synodal Local Church)*, Iykememo Productions, Enugu, 2019 (94-123)103.

⁹Crystal, D., *Language Death*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

it still bears repetition to underscore that like culture itself, a language lives and grows. Whatever lives and grows can also die. It dies, indeed! Understandably therefore, in certain cases, a language dies too. Such becomes the case, when the language is no longer in daily use. More often than not, this happens so gradually and stealthily, that people may not actually notice that such is happening. Perhaps the most surprising paradox about such an unfortunate phenomenon is that the very owners of the language are most often guilty of this *linguicide*. For, it often results from a sustained and gradual negligence of the language by its very owners or speakers. However, we cannot deny the fact that a most glaring and common cause of language-death is often found within the violent circumstances of conquest through wars or even forced subjugation through colonization of the speakers of the language. The Latin language of ancient Roman civilization is a typical example of a dead language.

Howsoever it happens, the fact remains that it is always a great misfortune, whenever a language die. For, it may simultaneously imply the deaths of its particular culture and mentality, worldview and legacies etc. A whole lot gets lost, if and whenever a language should actually die. All the same, it is always amazing, to notice how the proverbs, wise sayings and idioms of a language perdure and survive, long after that very language is dead and no more in daily usage. Once more, the Latin language is a perfect example of such enduring survival and continued relevance of a long-dead language's proverbial wisdom and culture: *Nemo dat quod non habet; Caveat emptor; Lex credendi, lexorandi* etc. Really, there must be something peculiarly resilient about proverbs, that endows them with this exceptional ability to perdure. Does it probably lie in their concise and mnemonic characteristics? Is it perhaps their catchy and often short forms?

Proverb as an Element of Culture

From the Igbo-African perspective, we would roundly agree that, "proverbs are the kernels which contain the wisdom of the traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words, and they form a mnemonic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory. Of their nature, they perform an ideological function by making available the ideas and values encapsulated in these memorable and easily reproduced forms."¹⁰ Proverbs thus belong to the idiomatic treasury of any language. The ability to know and employ proverbs also marks one out as intelligent and brilliant among the Igbo people. In speaking and in transmission of meanings as the essences of language, proverbs are indefatigable tools. Thus, a proverb is an important element of the communication-culture and subsequently of the language of any human society.

Certainly, some languages possess richer treasury of idioms and proverbs than the others. The Igbo

¹⁰Obiechina, E. *Culture, Tradition & Society in the West African Novel*, London, 1975, p.156.

language is among these richer ones. Though originally belonging to oral tradition of the society, Igbo proverb-culture has since advanced beyond such primitive levels. Most Igbo proverbs have found their ways into modern African literatures. They have not only been compiled into books¹¹ but have also become inevitable in anthropological, philosophical, theological, sociological, linguistic etc. studies of the Igbo people. Thus, Igbo proverbs have proved to be veritable materials and instruments of academic researches. As a matter of fact, in creating and employing proverbs as tools of communication, Igbo people have proved to be at their best of ingenuity and creativity.

As if in a confirmative acknowledgement of their academic worth, especially as *locus theologicus* and their general cultural relevance, Bevans while summarizing the opinions of various authors wrote that, "in an African culture... the best form of theologizing might be collecting, creating, or reflecting on proverbs."¹² There may be some degree of exaggeration here. Yet all the same, it remains true that though characteristically short, witty and often garnished with some dint of sarcasm and even humour, one proverb constituting of a sentence or two could actually tell something for which one would have had to write a whole paragraph or even a full page, in order to communicate. They also come very handy in the choice of titles for books for instance: *Isi akwu dara n'ala...*; *Ukpana Okpoko buru...* etc. Of such weighty academic research-import could an African proverb be that Kris Owan is also of the opinion that "African proverbial wisdom, like its biblical counterpart, encompasses the whole gamut of all that makes up wise sayings, riddles, myths, fables, parables, stories, allegories, puns, puzzles, apothegms (aphorisms), jokes, anecdotes, and even poems, prayers and songs. This repertoire of the African oral artistic and cultural traits can, and should be useful in understanding what the African Soul and Being are all about. Here the educational value of the African proverbial wisdom in many of its nuances opens up possibilities for one to see how it can invite biblical wisdom for trans-cultural cohabitation and eventual marriage in the task of Evangelization."¹³ These are no mere ambitious claims.

In fact, we can never over-emphasize the linguistic and communicative relevance of proverbs in the Igbo culture and society. But then, with such sturdy characteristics and properties, how has the Igbo proverb-culture actually fared in its centuries-long encounters with the West, western cultures and languages? In other words, how has it weathered the storms of Westernization; thereby swallowed up or has it visibly survived the shock and cultural onslaughts of colonization, cultural iconoclasms and conquests?

¹¹An example is Patrick Ik. Umezi's *Oba Ilu Igbo (A Collection of Igbo Proverbs)*, Ndenwo (Revised Edition), Otek Publishers, Enugu, 2007

¹²Bevans S. B., *Models of Contextual Theology (Revised & Expanded Edition)*, Orbis Maryknoll, New York, 2002, p. 17

¹³Owan, K. "African Proverbial Wisdom and the Good News of Christ the Wisdom of God" in: J. Brookman-Amissah et al. (ed.) *Inculturation & the Mission of the Church in Nigeria*, CIWA Port Harcourt, 1992, (111-132) 129-130.

Westernization: What is That?

To define Westernization, we must first of all be clear on what the West implies here. To this effect, we accept that the West here refers to "Europe, North America, plus other European settler countries such as Australia and New Zealand."¹⁴ In other words, it is not necessarily a question of a geographical unity or entity. It is rather a case of cultural kinship and civilizational unity or identity of the mentioned lands with a common European roots and heritage. Taking cognizance of this therefore, we consequently note that, "as the first civilization to modernize, the West leads in the acquisition of the culture of modernity. As other societies acquire similar patterns of education, work, wealth, and class structure, the argument runs, this modern Western culture will become the universal culture of the world."¹⁵ Thus, as a working definition, we would maintain that Westernization refers to the mindset and every factual support to universalizing the Western culture or civilization. It includes perhaps that utopia of a one-world culture based on or taking off from the Western culture.

It is therefore not a mere coincidence that the principles and activities of the mentioned European colonialism tended to share much kinship with those of Westernization. Summarily put, for its encounter with most of Africa south of the Sahara, Westernization initially rode on the wings of European colonialism. This is hardly surprising. In fact, it is even on record that "European imperialism brought Christianity to most of the continent south of the Sahara."¹⁶ Thus, in the Nigerian case for instance, it is also a fact of history that Modernization and Westernization came to the country on the wings of the twin European projects of colonization and Christian missionary activities starting especially with the 18th century. We are hereby partially interested in what language has got to do within these setups. For instance, how may language have been instrumentalized in the process of European colonization in these parts of the globe? If yes, was such an instrumentalization a smooth ride or rather a bumpy one? Was such in any way advantageous or rather an ill-wind, blowing no-one no good? Is it perhaps still ongoing or not? And the way forward, in all this?

Lingual Colonialism: Language as a Tool in Colonization

Colonization is the act of a particular society politically overrunning or administratively annexing another given society to itself. This can happen through military conquest or even any other more rarely peaceful means. However, our major concern here is that howsoever it may happen, it necessarily involves and entails some sort of culture-contact. This is because in each case of colonization, the culture of the colonizing society automatically conquers at varying degrees, the culture of the colonized society. But then in human history, experience shows that because language

¹⁴Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 46

¹⁵Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 68

¹⁶Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 47

is an established and unavoidable purveyor of culture, it consequently plays a major role in any process of colonization. How? "History has shown that the destruction of a people and her culture involves also the destruction of her language.... To destroy their identity, people were denied the freedom to speak their language."¹⁷ Generally therefore, colonization often begins lingually, with the conquest of a society's language and imposition of a conquering language on it. In other words, colonization hardly occurs without some degree of suppression of the language of the colonized society. Naturally, the conqueror always encounters – in varying degrees – some resistance and opposition from the society being so overrun. However, is it possible that the language of the conquered or colonized may sometimes also colonize or conquer that of the colonizer or conqueror; no matter how or how much such may happen?

It is on record that in the European Christian missionary days in Igboland "...becoming a Christian meant literally being 'born again' because converts were expected to wean themselves of their 'old self' and become 'new creatures'. They were required to drop their first names during baptism irrespective of their age and were given European ones. They were taught to speak only the European language, in this case, English language."¹⁸ The effect of such suppression could sometimes become so drastic as to lead to the total annihilation of the suppressed language or even its entire culture. The full import of this lies in the unfortunate fact that the European missionary activities in Igboland were (advertently or inadvertently) sometimes heavily instrumentalized to promote European colonialism in this same area, since coincidentally, both European projects of the 18th and 19th centuries were contemporaneous bed-fellows in Igboland.

Often however, there arises simply the situation whereby the language of the conquering society becomes the official language or the so-called *Lingua Franca*¹⁹ while that of the colonized is – with manifest denigration – just described as *vernacular*. From experience too, the colonized people especially often tend to forget that, "a lingua franca is a way of coping with linguistic and cultural differences, not a way of eliminating them. It is a tool of communication not a source of identity and community."²⁰ This is often to the detriment of the local language. Thus, till today for instance, it is unfortunately of common-place experience that some Nigerian schools would even punish pupils and students for speaking their mother-tongue in the school. So much emphasis is unabashedly laid on passing English Language in School Certificate Examinations, that one is considered unqualified, if he or she does not score a credit on it in the examinations. Unfortunately, the mother-tongue does not enjoy even half of such recognition and emphases. Paradoxically too, without

¹⁷Nwamiro, C. U., *Incidentally I Am Igbo (Call for Igbo Reorientation)*, p. 29

¹⁸Unegbu A., "The Igbo Clergy and Inculturation (The Journey So Far)" in *Oche Amamihe – Wisdom Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, 2019, (57-77) 60.

¹⁹"...throughout history, lingua franca emerge, Latin in the Classical and medieval worlds, French for centuries in the West, Swahili in many parts of Africa, and English throughout much of the world in the latter half of the twentieth century." Huntington, S. P., Pp. 60-61

²⁰Huntington, S. P. p. 61

passing English Language in the School Certificate Examination, one may not even gain admission into the tertiary institution for a degree course in his or her own mother-tongue. Some Nigerian parents even pride themselves over their children's proficiency in the English Language while they rather tend to feel little or no remorse over the fact that the same children cannot speak their mother-tongue well or at all; though they may be understanding it. Summarily put, political colonialism may have officially stopped, but only for lingual colonialism to continue unabated in Nigeria.

Dynamic Resilience of the Igbo Proverb-Culture

It is therefore interesting that despite such suppressive attitudes towards the Igbo language – both from within and from without – thanks especially to European colonialism and Christian missionary activities, its proverb-culture has continued to survive. This sub-culture has also been rather so creative as to have been neologistically developing itself further. In fact, it has been appropriating categories and nuances from Western culture and languages to its own advantage and growth; partially thanks to that innate energy and dynamism that every human language possesses as an element of culture. But it is also thanks to the highly famed Igbo industry and characteristic creative resilience in progress and self-development.

Thus, we gratefully note that according to Huntington, westernization has often met with varied responses from world cultures and societies. These can be summarized in three groups: "rejecting both modernization and westernization; embracing both; embracing the first and rejecting the second."²¹ The question here is as to how one would then characterize the response of the Igbo language and society of South-eastern Nigeria, our case-study, to westernization. In other words, under which of the three mentioned response-typologies do they fall? In trying to answer this question, we shall understandably narrow it all down to our theme of proverbs. Coincidentally, the English language also boasts of a rich proverb-culture. This is a welcome development in its encounter with the Igbo language at the culture-contact occasioned by European colonization of Nigeria. Consequently, the Igbo people and culture have not only embraced westernization, modernization and the English language, but just like some other West African societies, the Igbo have also gone on to linguistically acculturate a lot.

The British people who have English language as their mother-tongue may have colonized Nigerians. But the paradox is that Nigerian languages rather seem to have actually colonized the English language!!! Or is it rather perhaps a case of a simultaneously mutual conquest? The Igbos for instance, have so incorporated the supposed conquering language into their everyday communication by combining its vocabularies with those of their mother-tongue to produce what has been described as *Engligbo* or *Ingligbo* (almost comparable to the German *Denglish*). However, we must be fast to indicate here, that this development is presently more in the direction and form of

²¹Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 72

acculturation than conquest of the host-society's language. Though we cannot totally exclude the future possibility of the later, the good news is that with sufficient enlightenment campaigns and counteractive programmes, such an unfortunate possibility could ever remain only a possibility. Understandably therefore, the so-called *Engligbo* tendency is presently vigorously under attack from Igbo cultural revivalists, who with steadily growing apprehension, fear that such a development may ultimately lead to the death of Igbo language. In fact, these largely justifiable apprehensions have even crystalized into a theme for indigenous music and other arts. *Onye a suzina Engligbo!!!* – Let's stop speaking *Engligbo!!!* This has even inspired many a radio programme. Yet daily, the trend has unfortunately continued almost unabated.

All this is hardly surprising, since it is on record that, "English is indigenized and takes on local colorations which distinguish it from British or American English and which, at the extreme, make these Englishes almost unintelligible one to the other...."²² The point is that it is axiomatic that every language has its own mentality. Thus, these colorations occur as a result of trying to unconsciously impose the peculiar mentality of a particular mother-tongue upon the English language while speaking it; in other words, speaking English from the mentality background of a particular *vernacular*. Partially, this is a practice that could be technically akin to what happens when one actually transliterates instead of translating.

However, the truth is that the ingenuity in these local colorations is such that some of them actually end up becoming greatly unintelligible to the normal British or Americans themselves; though they will surely recognize them as forms of the English language still. A typical example here is the so-called Pidgin English of which Huntington writes, "Nigerian Pidgin English, Indian English, and other forms of English are being incorporated into their respective host cultures and presumably will continue to differentiate themselves so as to become related but distinct languages, even as Romance languages evolved out of Latin."²³ However, thanks to the characteristic dynamism of culture and its elements – like language, this is hardly surprising. But then, most Igbos and Nigerians in general have embraced the *Pidgin English* a.k.a *Broken English* which is actually a corruption of English Language, ensuing from a mixture of it and various African languages and sometimes even French (*beaucoup* or *bokwu*), Spanish and even Portuguese.

But then, one of our major interests here, is that the Igbo people have even extended this cultural ingenuity to their treasury of proverbs. As a matter of fact, a new set of Igbo proverbs have even come into existence, that incorporate or appropriate a lot of *Westernisms* – ideas, expressions, categories etc. The point is "that *Ilu Igbo* (Igbo Proverb) is so rooted in the people's life and value-system that it could be claimed that it has, up to some measures, survived the negative influences of

²²Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations*, p.62

²³Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 62

westernization. It has rather neo-logically incorporated *Westernism* to its own advantage. Its dynamism is evident in the new proverbs that daily come into use. In fact, one can contend without fears of equivocation that a successful study of culture contacts and changes among the Igbo could be made, by scientifically observing the growth and changes in Igbo proverbs."²⁴ The import of these claims for our immediate concerns here, lies in the fact that most of the cases of such neo-logistic creativity and ingenuity generally grow out of the new ideas and developments consequent on the contacts between the two cultures and their languages. Another importance of these developments is that evidently such creativity has not always been mutual. It has rather been and remained one-sided to the advantage of the Nigerian side. In other words, there is no commensurate development of what may be termed an *Igbenglish*. One could even summarily dare to claim that the Igbo language has rather much more *colonized* the English language, than vice versa!!!

To this effect, we note that a neo-Igbo proverb goes, *Hapuihe e derena Moto, baa na Moto! O wu ma Ambulansi?* – Don't mind the inscription on the vehicle; just board it! What if it is an ambulance? This dramatized proverb has the message of *Look before you leap*. In it, someone purportedly advised the other to just board a vehicle without minding the inscription on it. But the addressed cleverly retorted that he or she would first of all make sure that the said inscription does not designate the vehicle as an ambulance; generally meant for transporting severely wounded or sick people; or even dead people. The neo-logistical significance of such a neo-Igbo proverb lies in the fact that mentioning motor vehicles, this proverb is evidently a result of the contact with western civilization.

There are even *Engligbo* proverbs. For instance, '*Get away*' a *wughi Ikwu! O dipendiri n'otu e si dowe onu kwuo ya!!* 'Get away!' is not necessarily berating/insulting; it depends on the tone with which it was said!! Furthermore, "the Igbo of today have incorporated bits of Christian thoughts into their array of proverbs.... *Onye Nwanneya no n'Eluigwe, a naghị a ga Oku-mmuo* – Someone, whose relative has made it into heaven, should not go to hell. The import of this becomes clearer, when one notes that the Christian concepts of heaven and hell are lacking in the Igbo traditional worldview or concept of Perfection."²⁵ Though coming from the religious point of view, this is definitely an *acculturation* resulting from the encounter between the Igbo worldview and the Western *Christian* worldview. We say this because, "...behind this particular neo-Igbo proverb are to be found glaring in a perhaps negative sense, the traditional nepotistic tendencies of the Igbo. But then, on a still positive sense, the characteristic Igbo communal spirit and family value is here very evident."²⁶ In other words, the Igbo language has enriched itself and its proverb-culture by thus tailoring and making a western Christian viewpoint over to its own advantage.

²⁴Ukeh C. O., *Spirit – Between Man & God, (An Igbo-African Christian Appreciation)*, IKO-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, Pp. 49-50

²⁵*Ibid.* P.50

²⁶*Loc. Cit.*

Dynamic Resilience of Cultural Traits: An African Philosophical Appraisal

Especially among African youths today, there is this trending feeling of disappointment, if not outright betrayal being generally exhibited towards the West and her culture. In fact, there is this palpable ill-feeling variously arising from and in most areas of human existence. This could be as trivial as the disillusion over the condemnation by the European missionaries and colonialists of the naïve and innocent nudity they met among the Africans on arrival and the impudence in a ubiquitous shameless exhibition and glorification of nakedness in the media today in the name of fashion. There is also that European hypocrisy in intentionally introducing and establishing a systematically vitiated and unproductive education system to Africans, that offers mere paper qualifications without commensurate capabilities and employability. There is the glaring betrayal too, of the colonialist abolishing of African historically tested and stable systems of societal organization and governance; just to replace them with western democracy, that is so easily manipulable for neo-colonialist ulterior and exploitative purposes. The list is endless.

Of course, spurred on by superior political muscles and inordinate capitalist avarice, Western culture has dealt devastating blows on the African society and culture. However, culture and cultural traits generally have this innate dynamic resilience, thanks to which they often successfully withstand the adverse effects and pressures that often accompany culture contacts and clashes. Sylvia Leith-Ross knows what we mean here. With particular reference to Igbos, she once wrote, “Nevertheless, every now and again, one has a sense of an older culture lying behind what one sees, long forgotten by the people themselves, grown so faint that it is only in certain lights that one catches a glimpse of it, but the glimpse is of something so rich, so vital, that the present sinks into insignificance besides it. I heard it twice in a woman's song; saw it once in a woman's dance, once in a ritual gesture of embrace, once in the shape and decoration of a water-pot, once in the mural decoration of a *mbari* house.”²⁷ Such discoveries and rediscoveries are not peculiar to the Igbos. For, there is also this story of a Western anthropologist who purportedly wanted to introduce a new game to some East African children of the Xhosa tribe. Placing a basket of edibles at a distance, he challenged those children to run to it, with the promise that the first of them to get to it, gets it all for him/herself alone. Definitely to his disappointment, the children simply ran together to the basket; sat in a circle and commensally shared the edibles among themselves. Questioned by the foreign anthropologist, the children simply chorused, “Ubuntu” that is, *I am because we are!* It was thus a case of altruistic African Communalism as against exploitative Western Capitalist Individualism. This could easily pass for another instance of those noble African traits *grown so faint that it is only in certain lights that one catches a glimpse of it*.

Today in Africa, there is to these effects, a slow but steady cultural reawakening or revival that is

²⁷Sylvia Leith-Ross *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, (NY, Frederick Praeger Publishing) London, 1939, p.55. Quoted by Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 1981, p.vi.

getting louder by the day. The point is that, if one can still catch glimpses of the richness and vitality in these indices of cultural dynamism and resilience, then they can still be recovered and revived for good. It is this cultural dynamism that we have tried to trace in the Igbo proverb-culture. We want to place it on the same level of significance or similar pedestals with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Fortunately, it is not even yet long forgotten. We have tried to show, that in its innate dynamism and resilience, the Igbo proverb-culture is even breaking new grounds, while defiantly incorporating new cultural traits resulting from its encounter with the West, to enrich itself. This is encouraging! However, there is a *caveat*. While we are against swallowing everything from the West hook, line and sinker, we are also against any ultra-cultural revivalism that may try to idolize and canonize everything in African culture and traditions in a bid to spite the West. That would be another wrong extreme.

Conclusion

Actually, most of what is discussed in this essay and its claims may not be necessarily peculiar with the Igbo-African experience. They are generally natural human givens, which often result in the area of human language, at most normal intercultural encounters between societies and generations. Our aim here is rather to simply present a possible instance of the actual responses of most non-Western cultures and societies to the West's concerted efforts, to mutate itself into a universal culture or civilization – i.e. Westernization; by forcing itself and its culture on the world; in an effort that can only be described as utopic.

At this juncture, we insist that we have surely not said it all. Thus, we would gladly invite you all to not only continue this discussion but to also draw your own conclusions therefrom. This essay is *inter alia* a clear raising of red flags against the imminent death of some African languages. It is a call to cherish and preserve these, since their death would have enormous consequences: the extinction of whole cultures and societies, even mentalities and civilizations, peoples and tribes etc. Yet on the other hand, it wanted to underscore the fact that globalization does not necessarily imply a one-world culture. Globalization also rather brings the cultural diversities on earth to light. Once more, it wanted to remind the colonized peoples that among many other things, "a lingua franca is a way of coping with linguistic and cultural differences, not a way of eliminating them. It is a tool of communication not a source of identity and community."²⁸ In order to do these, it tried to use the Igbo language and its proverb-culture as an example of what has been done, what is being done and what can still be done in these respects.

Finally, may I humbly suggest that in line with the positions of this paper, a tertiary institute of studies in Humanities like Seat of Wisdom Seminary Ariam can also encourage local languages and their

²⁸Huntington, S. P. p. 61

proverb-cultures by establishing General Studies courses in Efik and Igbo languages, for instance. It may also establish a Linguistic Academy with emphasis on local Nigerian languages for hobby-linguists interested in in-depth knowledge of the idioms, oratorical and proverbial wisdom of these languages; since it mainly trains professional public speakers. Such an academy may also engage in the collection and publication of Nigerian local proverbs, wise sayings, idiomatic expressions (*Redewendungen*) etc.