

## Igbo Proverbs as Embodiments of Igbo-African Philosophy

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### Abstract

*This research studied the relationship between Igbo proverbs and the Igbo-African Philosophy. It began by studying the historical cultural roots of the Igbo people and the meaning and nature of Igbo proverbs. It further studied the nature of Igbo-African philosophy and the philosophicality of Igbo proverbs. Using the historical, expository and critical methods of enquiry, this piece discovered that Igbo proverbs are cultivated as an art and cherished as an index of good oratory and acquaintance with traditional knowledge and ancestral wisdom. It further discovered that when Igbo proverbs are understood beyond the literal and contextual meanings, it embodies within itself Igbo-African philosophy.*

**Keywords:** Igbo, Proverbs, African, Philosophy, Cultural, Historical, embodiments, dimension.

### Introduction

Igbo proverbs originated from the Igbo people and as such could be called the voice of the Igbo people- *vox Igbo populi*. It occupies a central place in Igbo discourses. It is like oil used in preparing an Igbo speech. Just like oil adds flavour and makes the soup appealing, Igbo proverbs add integrity to the speech of an Igbo person. If the Igbo speak in plain and simple language without spicing it up with proverbs, his talk will look inexperienced and childlike. Arinze (1970) avers that proverbs crystallize the accumulated wisdom of a people handed down by the ancients from one generation to another. They reveal the profound thoughts, and in fact the soul of the people, and constitute the true index of what a people hold true. They constitute the form of interpretation of the principles of life and mode of conduct upheld by a people (Anozie, 1999). They are the trustworthy witnesses of the social, economic, political, ethical and religious ideals of a people. This notwithstanding, this piece studies the nature and meaning of Igbo proverbs, with the intention of discovering its relationship with Igbo-African philosophy; and for a better analysis of this relationship, a survey of the historical cultural root of the Igbo race is fundamental.

### Historical-Cultural Root of the Igbo

A fundamental step in our study of Igbo proverbs is the identification of the spatio-cultural horizon of the Igbo cultural space. According to Onuh (1991), by way of definition, "Igbo" is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. There is however an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term 'Igbo'. In the contention of Ekwuru (2009), the difficulty of arriving at a precise etymological and semantic clarity of the word "Igbo" has its trace in the unprecise nature of the history of the Igbo people. For Afigbo (1975a), compared to the state of research as regards origin in relation to other tribes in Nigeria, the Igbo history can without much exaggeration be described as *terra incognita*. However, Afigbo (1975b) further observes that the Igbos are not indifferent to this crisis of identity. Their experience of colonialism, and even the Biafran War has sparked off in them the quest for a historical identity. It is such that Isichei (1976) avers that no historical question arouses more interest among the present day Igbo people than the enquiry "where did the Igbo come from?"

As regards the territorial identity of the Igbos, Uzozie (1991:4) observes that "To date, there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of territory". Ekwuru (2009) states that any attempt to introduce who the Igbo is poses a lot of problems in all aspects of its academic conceptualizations. This notwithstanding, Hatch (1967) describes the Igbo people as a single people even though fragmented and scattered, inhabiting a geographical area stretching from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta. They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions; they believe in a common Supreme Being known as Chukwu or Chineke.

Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, *the Northern Centre Theory* which Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermetic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the *Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland*. According to Jones (cited by Isichei 1976), the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.

Geographically speaking, Njoku (1990) posits that Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. According to Uchendu (1965), in its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westwards, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis.

Socio-politically, unlike the other tribes in Nigeria, who evolved a molithic centralized system of government, the Igbo distinguish themselves with a complicated socio-political structure which has been qualified as *republican*. The Igbo ethnic group is divided into clans, each clan is made up of towns; and each town is comprised of villages. The village is the primary social unit constituted of families or kindred. The family is the nucleus of society. Politically, the lineage system is the matrix of the social units or organization and provides grounds for political and religious structures. The traditional concepts of political power and authority is structured and determined by their concept of *umunna* and the membership of the association based on elaborate title system. Economically, Aligwekwe (1991), avers that the traditional Igbo people were sedentary agriculturists. This delimitation of Igbo land as a cultural area, helps to identify the cultural horizon for the study on the place of Igbo myths in Igbo-African philosophy.

### ***The Nature and Meaning of Igbo Proverbs***

For the Igbo, Achebe (1958) avers that proverbs are vegetables for eating speech. They are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Without proverbs the language of the Igbo would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul. Thus the Igbo would say that a child who knows how to use proverbs have justified the dowry paid on his mother's head. It is the wisdom and experience of a people, usually of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. They spring from the people and represent the voice of the people and express the interpretation of their belief, principles of life and conduct. It expresses the moral attitudes of the Igbo people and reflects their hopes, achievements and failings.

Igbo proverbs are an integral element of the Igbo-African culture and undoubtedly a strong base in Igbo-African traditional system. The centrality of proverbs in Igbo-African oral tradition is manifested in the frequency of its use by the Igbos in their conversations, speech, instructions, judgment, drama, arguments, storytelling, in fun 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. It is in this regard that Opoku (1978: 158) said that,

Proverbs may serve as prescriptions for action or act as judgment in times of moral lapses. Often a proverb, cited at an appropriate time during an argument can settle the dispute instantly, for the proverbs are believed to have been handed down by the ancestors and predecessors to whom we own our communal experience and wisdom.

In the contention of Umeh (1986: 41),

A proverb can be used as a language of diplomacy to avoid giving direct answers to direct questions. With a proverb, one can reveal a secret without being committed. A proverb is also a very simple shorthand of sending message. It is therefore a time saving devise, and helps to avoid unnecessary repetitions.

It is in this regard that Okonkwo (1977) says that proverbs help to supply a direct philosophical meaning which bears the general or universal truth.

They are sometimes employed, especially by elders while giving advice. Elders are mentioned here because they are those who by special talent or circumstance have won the approval of the ancestors to speak or officiate for the community (Edeh, 1985). For instance a stubborn child who finds it very difficult to heed instructions could be reminded of the implications of his way of life through such proverbs: "If the ear refuses to take instruction, when the head is cut off the ear goes with it."

The head and the ear are two important parts of the body designated for hearing and understanding. The metaphoric technique points to the obstinacy of the child, while the cutting off of the head refers to the consequences of disobedience. Another of such could be: "The fly that refuses to heed to advice follows the corpse into the grave". In these proverbs, there is a warning against indulging in evil.

Proverbs are particularly crucial to Igbo discourses for a number of reasons. According to Peter (1971: 98) they seem to be most frequently used "because of their literal attribute of being figurative, colourful and terse, and their earthy qualities of containing truths and hard facts borne out of experience". Okolo (1985) observed that the wordings of proverbs are as fixed as their contents and the messages transmitted in them have a cultural standardization in both form and content. This fixed nature makes for easy memorization and retention so that anybody wishing to acquire them will not have to grapple with the problem of variation.

Okolo (1985) observed that in using proverbs, it is not enough simply to memorize and recite them. A good speaker has to use them in appropriate contexts because contexts play a major role in their correct interpretation. Mere rendering of proverbs out of context not only makes the exercise boring and uninteresting, but also conceals the colour and beauty they give to language.

### ***Igbo-African Philosophy***

First of all, I would like to explain the reason for the use of Igbo-African philosophy. The idea of Igbo-African represents the generalizations from the Igbo race, which is one of the races making up the African race. According to Ogugua (2003), it is reasonable for one to make a limited generalization about Africa from what we get from the Igbo worldview because of felt similarities which exist among races in Africa.

This notwithstanding, the question of the meaning of Igbo-African philosophy is still on the looming at the horizon. However, it is worthwhile to first understand the meaning of African philosophy. Gbadegesin (1991) observes that there are four schools of thought as regarding what African Philosophy constitutes. They are as follows:

- i. For one group, African Philosophy is the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, and untainted by foreign ideas.
- ii. The second group understands African philosophy as, the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, African conceptual systems and social realities as undertaken by contemporary professional philosophers. This reduces African Philosophy to reflections by professionally trained philosophers who operate with the collaboration of traditional thinkers.
- iii. The third group understands African Philosophy as the combination of these two approaches, without suppressing or looking down on any. This would involve sifting philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc, and reflecting on them by professionally trained African philosophers.
- iv. The fourth group argues that African Philosophy is not any of the above; however, its proponents regard African Philosophy as any collection of texts produced by Africans and specifically described by their authors as Philosophy.

However, while it can be said that all these views reveal the dimensional content of African philosophy, preference is given to the first definition. The second is treated with reservation, this is, because African philosophy goes beyond the thought of professional philosophers. As regards the third, the comments for the first two definitions still apply. The fourth definition needs to be remodelled. What makes a piece philosophical is not the author. What if a person were to write a none-sense and, and call the thought philosophy, does it make it philosophy? There should be principles that make a thought philosophical.

What then is Igbo-African philosophy? It is the philosophical thought of Igbo-Africans as could be sifted from their various worldviews, myths, proverbs, etc. It further involves the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, Igbo-African conceptual systems and social realities. It is the philosophy indigenous to the Igbo-African.

### ***The philosophical Dimension of Proverbs***

Every Igbo proverb has a literal understanding; the word literal in the Greek *theoria* means sight or spectacle; it makes reference to something seen.

At the level of the literal understanding of proverbs, the meanings of the words used in the formulation of a proverb are paramount, and the meanings behind the words used are not profoundly reflected upon. The Igbos for instance, use animals, human beings, trees and other familiar objects to project meaning. Words such as *udara* tree, mango tree, kola nut, *Aligwekwe*, *Nna*, *Nne*, *Chi*, *Eze*, *egbe* etc., are employed at the literal level; they do not tell us anything apart from themselves. Everyone who hears them or reads about them knows what they are. Here the emphasis is on the general or common meaning of the proverb.

However, an understanding of a proverb at the philosophical level entails more than the literal meaning, the implications of every proverb goes further than the letters. The philosophical meaning is the meaning behind the text or words used. This is not to say that the philosophical meaning behind the text is disconnected with the literal understanding of the proverb, No! A person who does not understand the literal meaning of the words that compose the proverb cannot make a leap to an understanding of the philosophical meaning of the proverb.

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 self protective defence. Although he is naturally ugly, he is not ashamed to admit it or 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. Inherent physical limitations should not discourage anyone because one could transform those disadvantages into advantages. Thus as the monkey takes pride in himself in spite of his ugliness, individuals with comparable natural disadvantages should still be proud of themselves. At this level of understanding, one has transcended from the literal to the philosophical.

Let us further illustrate with another proverb the fact that behind the literal interpretation of a proverb lies the philosophical. *Let the eagle perch, let the hawk perch; any that wishes another the contrary let its wings break*, emphasises the Igbo philosophy of belongingness. It is further related to Igbo community consciousness and the idea of collective responsibility which are at the core of Igbo traditional life.

### Igbo Proverbs as embodiments of Igbo-African Philosophy

Literal Meanings of Proverbs	Philosophical meanings of Proverbs
1. The black smith who does not know how to fashion the gong, let him observe the kite's tail.	The universe is the best university. One should always learn from Nature.
2. Two kitchen knives are found in the home of the lazy man, the one that is sharp has no head (handle), and the one that has a head (handle) is not sharp.	Nature abhors laziness. Killing time is only the name for another of the multifarious ways by which time kills us.
3. It is from the ground that one climbs to the top of the tree.	We attain heaven through the Earth.
4. It is he who climbs with his teeth that knows the tree with bitter back.	Experience is the best teacher.
5. When God wants a creature to fly, he gives him wings.	God is omnipotent. The nature of the world is His design.
6. It is what an animal eats that is used to set a trap for him.	You will always be tempted based on your good qualities.
7. With the passage of time the child becomes like the mother	Time is the great leveller.
8. Death does not kill a person unless his <i>chi</i> gives consent.	The Power of death is in one's Chi. One who is at peace with his <i>Chi</i> is not afraid of death. He has conquered death.
9. When a child washes his hands clean, he eats with elders.	Mature behaviour entitles even the young to sit beside kings.

## Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the relationship between Igbo proverbs and Igbo-African Philosophy. It began by discussing the historical cultural roots of the Igbo people and the meaning and nature of Igbo proverbs. It further studied the nature of Igbo-African philosophy and the philosophicality of Igbo proverbs.

This piece discovered that Igbo proverbs when understood beyond their literal and contextual meanings, embody within them Igbo-African philosophy. In the area of Igbo-African philosophy, proverbs provide raw materials for philosophical reflection, and accompanies philosophy in her search for truth.

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