

PHILOSOPHY OF IGBO PROVERBS: THE LOGIC, ETHICS AND ESTHETICS IN IGBO CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophy of Igbo proverbs. Igbo people are known for their proverbs which deepens into their everyday life. It takes a very high premium in their linguistics, literature and all other aspects of their culture. It seems that, these proverbs can no longer withstand the test of time and changes affecting the world over. It became apparent that the meaning, nature, classification, values and the philosophy behind the Igbo proverbs be exposed in order to retain its essence. The paper adopts the use of oral interview and critical discourse and so discovers that Igbo proverbs are inseparable with Igbo man and his life activities. Further, the Igbo world view, reasoning, understanding and their philosophy are better understood through their proverbs.

Introduction

Igbo proverbs are the wisdom of the people that are in a concise form, which play a very important role in their lives. From the onset Igbo people had no means of recording important facts, history, ideas, knowledge and traditions. However, information is passed on from one generation to the other through oral traditions. In order to retain its originality, these important facts are summarized in a plain and simple manner and yet a hard nut that says a lot about the purpose it is meant to serve. A reliable source indicates that these sayings are the accumulated treasure of Igbo philosophy throughout the ages. It further states that proverb contains the observation, knowledge, wisdom of the forefathers who not having developed the art of writing were compiled to condense what they would have put down in writing into a short form that could be easily remembered and passed from generation to generation. Culled from

the internet.

The true nature of Igbo proverb invokes a direct similarity between the word used and the thing it is describing and therefore cannot be restated in different word. When this is done, the real meaning is lost. Lawal (1992:19) views proverb as containing the richest pool of pragmatic factor since a proverb properly contextualized, provides data that are at once linguistic, philosophical and cosmological. Proverb therefore deals with practical and realistic ideas. It deals with real life situations. Anozie (1999) in Kanu (2015:302), states that proverb

reveal the profound thoughts,
and, in fact, the soul of the
people, and constitute the true
index of what a people hold dear.
They constitute the form of
interpretation of the principles of
life and mode of conduct upheld
by a people. They are the
trustworthy witness of the social,
economic, political, ethical and
religious ideals of a people.

Despite the values of Igbo proverb the younger generation could not use the Igbo proverbs, since they do not understand them. Some could give only the literal meaning negating the philosophical meaning which is the essence of the Igbo proverb. In view of this, the lessons thought by these proverbs are left untapped. According to Onyeagba (2015) reciting the proverbs is as effective as not using them. It is important to always know the appropriate event and time to use proverbs in order to communicate the appropriate message and achieve the desired result.

It is therefore necessary to explore the Igbo proverbs which will eventually lead to an apprehension of an Igbo man and understand his reasons for his actions. Research has proved that an understanding of Igbo proverb will automatically lead one to and

understanding of Igbo man's philosophy of life, tradition, culture and mode of living since it is in them that the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, religious beliefs and experiences of Igbo man through his history have been embedded and preserved.

The Concept of Igbo Proverb

Proverb is a wise saying that needs a critical thought to understand. It is oil that nourishes Igbo word. It is a means of making a word or sayings appreciated. It gives flavor to words and sounds good to people that hear them. Proverb is an expression that translates a basic truth which may be applied to common situations. In view of this, Ngoesi (2000:128) referred to proverb as a short clever saying, full of wisdom, it portrays the thought and belief system of the Igbo especially their mode of life, behaviours and human relations. Thus proverb is a rule of conduct and behaviour. It is a veritable means of molding character, and Igbo people value proverb a lot. Writing on values, Okoye (2009:63) states that “values as the greatest single factor that mould character, conduct, culture and world view are central in the life of any people”. However Igbo proverb is central in all aspects of Igbo man's life in that, they cannot do without it because of its numerous values.

Igbo proverbs, according to Kanu (2015:302) “are the wisdom and experience of a people, usually of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression”. He goes on to state that proverb spring from the people and represent the voice of the people and express the interpretation of their belief, principles of life and conduct. That they express the moral attitudes of the Igbo people and reflects their hopes, achievements and failings. Igbo proverb constitutes their entire world view, belief system, culture and tradition. The totality of how they live their lives can be expressed with proverb and the knowledge it impacts is enormous. Mbiti (1981:7) affirms that “In proverbs, there is a rich deposit of the wisdom of many generations”.

Ejindu (1977) in Okafo and Ewelukwa pointed out that proverb is

like a weapon used in speeches, for explaining oneself and to know a powerful and skillful writer. Orators are known for their fluent use of proverbs. Igbo people refer to proverb as “mmanu e ji eri okwu” meaning literally as the palm oil with which words are eaten. One that speaks with proverb is regarded as a wise person that is close to ancestors and has full knowledge of tradition. Kanu (2015:304) observes that “a good speaker has to use proverb in appropriate contexts because contexts play a major role in their correct interpretation”. The user, however should be mindful of the representation and philosophies behind the proverb in use as Onuekwusi (2011) affirms that a proverb is a

Philosophical allusive and metaphorical citation that gives credence to a traditional truth and wisdom. It is allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truth outside itself. It is philosophical because it is a product of a long period of reasoning and observation which expresses some timeless truth.

In using proverb, an object is presented as a representation of a real situation. It is expected that a real Igbo person would be able to decode the meaning and learn something valuable from it. No wonder Igbo people use proverb to teach, admonish, direct, explain facts, and give reasons and answers to questions. For instance the proverb that says “Awo adigh[agba oso ehie n'efu” literally translates as a toad does not run in the afternoon in vain. Toad is used metaphorically because normally it is hard to see a toad in the afternoon unless something is pursuing it. Therefore the real meaning to this proverb is “nothing happens without a cause” or an English equivalent “There is no smoke without fire”. In line with this, Peters (1971:98) states that proverb has the “attribute of being figurative, colourful and tense, and their earthly qualities of containing truths and hard facts borne out of experience”.

Wisdom embedded in proverb are the sum total of human experiences accumulated over time as Kanu (2005:vi) rightly states that,

Proverbs are veritable source of wisdom, philosophy and common sense. They constitute a potential force in the study of our oral traditions. A proverb is a short witty popular saying, full of wisdom, embodying some familiar truth, practical precepts, and useful thought in expressive and often picturesque language.

There is no doubt that the wisdom of a particular group of people could be found in their proverb. Proverb of a group has also a lot to say about their philosophy of life. Obiechina (1975:156) opines that proverb is “kernel which contains the wisdom of traditional people”. He also states that these proverbs 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. Proverbs emphasize upright living and high moral standard and since it is organized in few words. Since the knowledge of proverb is not so difficult to acquire; it became very easy to transfer it from one generation to another. It is a major tool in the upbringing of a child. Chukwu (2013:16) affirms that proverb is an instrument through which an African child is instructed and educated. He further states that it is a base of the African or Igbo intelligence, moral, ethics and embodiment of wisdom.

Proverb expresses people's opinions to their belief system, rules of life and actions. It deals with the principles of right and wrong in behaviour, especially for teaching right behaviour. Proverb mirrors into people's expectations, success and weakness/defect. Okonkwo (1977) however declares that “proverbs help to supply a direct philosophical meaning which bears the general or universal truth.”

Igbo Proverbs Classified

Among the languages of the world, there is probably none in which proverb plays an important role it does in Igbo language. Proverbs are classified according to their values and functions they perform. Mbiti (1981:7-8) observes that,

There are proverbs which teach new things to the hearer and other which warn him against evil conduct; some proverbs are used to encourage people in doing something, while others show what is bound to occur in certain circumstances. Proverbs fit into particular situations of life, and most of them have been formulated from human experiences and reflections throughout the ages.

The use of proverbs as an instrument that directs man's activities cannot be over emphasized. It penetrates all circumstances, deal with situations and proffer solution to problems. Some proverbs set to encourage. As people meet with difficult situations, they tend to show withdrawal. These groups of proverbs stand to encourage the person to move on, to acquire and complete the stipulated project. For instance, “onye nna ya ziri ohi na-eji ukwu agbawa uzo”, literally means that a person whom his father sent to steal breaks the door with his leg. “Onye aririo mebe ihere, aguu egbuo ya” literally means that if a beggar becomes ashamed, he will die of hunger.

However, some proverbs warn against laziness. Igbo culture abhors laziness. One is not expected to be idle when others are working. For instance, “Ngana kpuchie ute aguu ekpughee”. That is if laziness covers a mat, hunger will open it. “Ike oru gwu nwata, ike ogu adi ya”, A child that is tired of work, proofs tough in fighting.

Some Igbo proverbs say a lot about wisdom and foolishness. For instance, “Ijiji enweghi ndumodu na-eso ozu ala n'ili.” Literally

means that a housefly that does not have an adviser usually ends up in the grave with a corpse. “Anya ka okenye ji eke ihe di n'ofe.” An elder shares the things in the soup with his eyes.

Proverbs that discourage disobedience include “Okuko nti ike n-anu ihe n'ite ofe.” Literally means that a disobedient fowl rests in pot of soup. “A gwa nti ma o nughie gbupu isi nti anu ihe.” If ear does not heed to advice, when the head is cut, it will hear by force.

Most proverbs emphasize the need for preparedness. It enables one to be on alert and precautions. “E ji ihe a na-agba na nti agba n'anya?” You do not use what is meant for the cleaning of the ears for the eyes. “Nwa agu adighi eme anya ura.” A baby lion does not feel sleepy.

Some proverbs are used to teach people the need to do things on time and so classified as such. “Ka a bia, ka a bia mere awo epula odu.” It is too much delay that made a toad not to have a tail. “Onye bido n'ututu tutuwa, tupu chi ejie o tutujue ukpa.” A person that begins early in the morning to pick will fill his basket before dark.

Some proverbs teach the need for contentment. “Mmmiri nwere awo nwee mbara, Ihe na-ekwere ya egwu e zuela oke”. A stream that had toads and frogs has had enough singers.” “Ebe aka ruru nwaanyi ka o ga-atukwasa di ya.” A woman will hold her husband where her hand can reach.

Igbo Proverbs and its Philosophical Aspects

Igbo proverb is metaphorical in nature. It uses a lot of representations to draw its real meaning. Names that are prominent in Igbo proverb include God, animals such as tortoise, toad, dogs, rat, fowl; human being such as old woman, mad man, king, mother, father, parts of the body like hand, feet, head. Certain objects such as knife, basket, and mat could also be used. These items are used in figurative terms; they give literally meanings but do not portray the philosophical meanings of the things said about them. Kanu

(2015:304-305) contend that “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.”

To recite the proverbs is as good as not using them. The most important thing about proverbs is the underlying meaning. However, one must have an idea of its literal meaning since understanding the philosophical undertone means that one should start learning from known to the unknown. These proverbs are not vain words; some are deeply religious and say a lot about God, man and his environment. Mbiti (1981:24) discovers that,

They contain religious beliefs, ideas, morals and warnings. They speak about God, the world, man, human relationships, and the nature of things. They are set within a cultural and social environment of the people who have produced them and use them.

Since Igbo proverbs were developed within the locality, it is assumed that every Igbo person should be able to know them, decode and use it in its correct form. This could be the reason for this assertion “Onye a tuuru ilu kowaara i mara na ego e ji luo nne ya lara n'iyi”, which translates literally as if somebody says a proverb and explains it another, it means that the money paid for the person's mothers bride price was in vain.

Igbo philosophy on God tells much about the nature and attributes of God. Kanu (2015:62) reveals that “it embodies a profound reflection on God, such that when unraveled in philosophical terms would file into volumes of books.” Igbo people believe that God is unseen, He created all and takes care of His creatures and rewards each according to his deeds. An illustration of a proverb on God says “Aka Chukwu adighi n'izu ihe a gaghi eme gi.” Literally translates as if God's hand is not in any plan, nothing will happen to you.

Igbo Proverbs and their Philosophical Interpretations

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	Literal Meanings	Philosophical Meanings
1	Onye biara be awo na-ana ya oche q huru nke o ji noro ala.	Whoever that comes to a toad's house and demands for seat; does he see the toad sitting on a seat?	Somebody that is demanding from someone, what he does not have; does he want him to go and steal.
2	Ohia na-aso nkata epukwala ero	Any bush that abhors basket should not germinate mushroom	Whoever does not want insult should not do what will lead to his insult .
3	Nku a kpara n'okochi ka a na-anya n'udu mmiri	One uses the firewood he gathered in the dry season during the rainy season.	The effort one made when he is still strong/young is what he will ripe in his old age.
4	Oke soro ngwere maa mmiri o koo ngwere q gaghi ako oke.	If a rat follows the lizard to swim, if the body of lizard dries up, that of rat will not dry.	If a foolish person follows the wise one to do something evil, the wise will escape but the foolish will be cut.
5	Ugwu tee aka, o dika o ruru n'igwe.	If a mountain becomes too far, it seems as if it will reach to the sky.	One cannot tell the magnitude of what he does not see.
6	Ejula kpuru isi woro onwe ya nri.	A blind snail denies itself food.	One suffers the outcome of what one does to himself.
7	Onye huru ebe nkita na-eri nsi ya wepuru ya anya.	Whoever sees where a dog is feasting on excrement should overlook it.	One should not involve oneself in what does not concern him.
8	Nwaanyi na-achọ	A woman that will	A person who does

	ka di na-eweta na-esinye ite okpọọ n'ọku.	want her husband to be providing everything normally cooks an empty pot.	not make his own effort suffers.
9	Ka ahxchataşı a mere mgbo ji tuq enwe n'isi.	For the want of seeing everything that caused the monkey to receive a bullet on his head.	Somebody that is so inquisitive normally meets an obstacle.
10	Aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu.	A sandy hand leads to an oily mouth.	Whoever that works hard shall eat.
11	A naghı eji aka ejide agu.	A loin cannot be cut with hands.	Things are not so easy to do.
12	Ubochi onye chi ojoo ji acho nwaanyi ka ndi ara ji acho di.	The day an ill-lucked person starts to look for wife, the mad people will begin to look for husband.	What somebody does not want normally comes to him.
13	Ike agu di agu na mbọ.	The lion's power is in its fingers.	Everything has its originality
14	E zie m ozi zie eze, ezie m, ma a si m gwọọ aju bute eze, aju m.	If I am sent to deliver a message to the king I will do so, but if am told to make a pad to carry the king and bring him, I will refuse	Let no one do what he will not be able to do.
15	Ewu anaghı ata ahıhia sowe nke na-ata ahıhia o mụta.	When a goat that does not eat grass begins to follow the one that eats grass, it will learn how to eat grass.	Evil behaviours are learnt so quickly.
16	Agadi nwaanyi huru onye na-ele ya nka şiri na-	An aged woman who has people readily attending to her claims	Somebody who is well to do or has somebody who

	agbọ ha anaghị aka nka.	that people in her lineage never gets old.	provides all her needs boost as if things are not difficult.
17	Ukpána okpoko buuru ntị chiri ya.	A grasshopper cut or killed by barking or noisy hound was deaf.	It is important for someone to make use of advice given to him.
18	Nkita taa onye nwe ya, ọ bughị ara; ọ buru onwu na-agu ya.	If a dog bites the owner, it must be rebid or it is asking for its death.	Whenever one is doing anything should always think of the possible outcome.
19	Nwa ewu tiwara ite no n'ahuhu.	A goat that broke the earthen pot is on self inflicted suffering.	Whoever flouts the law will face the wrath of the law.
20	Mmanwu na-agba egwu asara m aka, eji m ya ugwo.	A masquerade that dances and stretches its palm to me, do I owe it?	One should not be carried away by sentiments
21	Utu onye adighi na ya, ọ na-asị si tso ofu isi, ofu isi.	One will suggest a levy of one human head each when he is not involved in paying the levy.	One does not feel the gravity of whatever that does not concern him.
22	Anataghị dike mma mgbe ọ no n'ura, ma ya fodusia mgbe ọ mu anya.	One was not able to snatch the matchet from a brave man when he was sleeping, let alone when he was awake and alert.	One was not able to do something when it was easy, let alone when it becomes difficult.
23	Ubochi a ga-achọ mma ekwu achọ ka a ga-ama mkpa ọ di.	The time you will look for a kitchen knife is when what it is used to cut will be	If you ignore someone when what he will do comes up, you will be forced to

		revealed.	looked for him.
24	Nwaanyi lelia di ya, ike a kpuu ya nku.	If a woman neglects her husband, her buttocks will emaciate.	Whoever ignores what makes him to be respected will lose his respect and honour.
25	Ahia oma na-ere onwe ya.	A good product sells itself.	A thing of beauty is a joy forever.
26	Oke ichefu ihe ka aturu ji chefu mpi be ndi ogo ya.	Too much forgetfulness made sheep to forget his horn at his in-law's place.	Too much of everything is bad.
27	Nwata rie ihe o na-amuru anya, ura eburu ya.	If a child eats what keeps him awake, he will sleep.	When a person attains his dream, he will have a relaxed mind.
28	Dibia gworo ozo, mana ozo gburu dibia.	A herbalist cured a certain disease and another disease killed the herbalist.	Nobody will be able to know everything.
29	Ihe niile tara n'abali buru anwu nta.	Let's take everything that bit in the night as mosquito.	Forgive everyone the wrong things they have done to you.
30	Otu onye gbaa izu o gbue ochu.	If one person takes decision alone he will commit murder	One person does not know everything. Two heads are better than one.

The true meaning of proverbs lies in the real meaning. It is difficult for the younger generation to use the proverb because they cannot understand and explain the philosophical meanings of these proverbs. Some parents do not bring their children to sit around them, to tell them folk stories in which these proverbs are imbibed.

Philosophically this proverb portarays the ultimate power of God against any other power. He oversees the activities of His creatures. He sees the heart of men and most secret things they do. There is sure security for one who lives an upright life and was at peace with God.

Other illustrations of proverbs are “Nku di na mba ba-eghere mba nri.” Literally means the firewood in one's town is enough to cook for them.” The implication of this proverb is that whatever a town has or whatever that is in their locality is what they use to solve all their problems. Those things are what they use to provide all their needs. It could also be applied to an individual in the sense that, it is what one has, that he uses to solve his problems.

Okenye ji abali eri oke, mmadu ahughi ya, mmuo huru ya.” The literal interpretation is an elder that eats rat at night; if human beings do not see him the spirits will see him. The philosophical interpretation portrays the Igbo belief in the spirit world. They are more powerful than humans and know whatever they are doing at any point in time. And so this proverb means that whoever does evil in a secret place should not think that no one sees him. It also portrays their belief that whoever defies the land shall be punished by the land. Therefore anyone that does good or evil whether in the public or in a secret place does for oneself. Since one must surely receive his reward for good or evil.

Most parents prohibit the speaking of Igbo language in their homes. Some still, send their children to schools where it is mandatory to use only foreign languages. Also some younger ones were not brought up in Igbo land. They therefore could not mix up with people of the same cultural background with them. They however speak other languages outside their mother tongue. They learn other peoples culture. All these negate the knowledge of Igbo proverbs.

Research findings have shown that the younger generation is disgusted with Igbo language. They neglect and look down on their

mother tongue, thereby not having interest in the knowledge of Igbo proverb. They however lost the roles it can play in their lives.

Suggestions

Proverbs are wise sayings. Wise people breeds progressive nation. Igbo nation would want the younger generation to follow the footsteps of their predecessors in moving the society forward. The younger generation should therefore imbibe the use of proverbs, since it provides adequate knowledge, wisdom and understanding, which will enable them in taking the right decision.

Parents should use proverbs when talking or discussing with their children. They should bring their children home during vacations, i.e. to their various villages, to mix up with people. They would be able to increase their knowledge of proverbs through that means.

However the teaching of Igbo language and culture should be made compulsory in all the private and public schools in Igbo land. Since proverbs are found in the people's language and culture, the students will therefore learn these proverbs in school.

Conclusion

Igbo proverb is the wisdom of the people. The true relevance of proverb is only in its philosophical meaning. Ability to apply this relevant knowledge to different situations leads to the solution of many problems that face man. Proverbs have specific roles and purposes which they serve in Igbo culture. Igbo proverbs therefore touch every aspect of the peoples' culture and the search for Igbo philosophy is traced through the proverbs.

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