

Philosophy in Indigenous Igbo Proverbs: Cross-Cultural Media for Education in the Era of Globalization

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It is common knowledge among people of Igbo descent that indigenous Igbo proverbs play vital roles in speech, communication and exchange of knowledge and ideas among them. However, what may be uncommon knowledge is the fact that philosophy is the basic ingredient that savours Igbo proverbs with the taste for fertilizing ideas across cultural divides. With philosophy inherent in them, indigenous Igbo proverbs readily present itself as a cross-cultural media for educating people of African and non-African descents on the events, achievements, myths and realities of especially the people of Igbo descent. This paper examines the philosophy of some indigenous Igbo proverbs. The paper concludes that indigenous Igbo proverbs, rich in philosophy, is the surest way of educating people of other descents about the realities of the Igbo people. They are better ways of countering fallacies and rumors emanating from foreign historians and foreign media about Igbo land in particular and Africa in general. Hence, they are veritable cross-cultural media with inexhaustible resources which need to be further explored.

Keywords: Philosophy; Proverbs; Education; Globalization

Introduction

Igbo proverbs are like storehouses or archives through which one can dig into Igbo philosophy, culture, economics, technology and general worldview. Whatever can be sought for about the Igbo even if it is beyond the scope of Igbo philosophy can only be recovered in Igbo proverbs. The values of proverbs to the traditional Igbo man could be likened to the values of the Holy book to the religious leader, or to a value of books to the serious scholar. Proverbs are a body of institution as they represent the only avenues through which the Igbo man stores and retrieves his philosophy and civilization. Furthermore, Igbo proverbs represent the bed rock under which the social, metaphysical, epistemological, moral, economical and even the religious worldviews of the Igbo's are buried and could be easily excavated and retrieved at will; this is achieved only by knowing and using the proverbs. Hence, for the Igbo man, reality in itself is proverbial. Whatever does not exist in proverbs does not exist in reality and as such cannot be said to be known. If it is known, then it is real and it is contained in Igbo proverbs.

Commenting on the inherent nature of philosophy in African proverbs (Igbo proverbs inclusive) and the means of identifying them, Momoh (2000: p. 362) writes that "there are at least three options open to a philosopher who wants to demonstrate that there is philosophy in African proverbs." The first option according to him is to "collect a handful of African proverbs and discuss how philosophical or not each proverb is". Secondly, he recommends that "a handful of proverbs should be examined for their metaphysical, logical, moral and epistemological values", and the last option is "to consider proverbs that could stand as metaphysical principles". On this basis, we shall adopt the second recommendation, and examine some collections of Igbo proverbs for "their metaphysical, logical, moral and epistemological values".

An Analysis of Some Philosophical Proverbs of Igbo Extraction

Igbo proverbs, otherwise known as (Ilu Igbo) in Igbo language and culture have been described as "Mmanu ndi Igbo ji eri okwu"—"Oil with which words are eaten". The Igbos generally associate them with mature minds. In the words of Okafor (2001: p. 2), "they are the elders' ways of giving expression to their wisdom", and as a result of their vast richness in wisdom, Igbo proverbs are said to be highly philosophical. We shall examine some of these proverbs to underscore their philosophical content.

Igbo proverb: Nkita nwere ndidi n'eri okpukpu buru ibu.

Meaning: A patient dog eats the fattest bone.

Igbo proverb: Onye Kpara nku ahuhu di na ya siri ka ngwere biara ya oriri.

Meaning: He who fetches ant infested firewood has only extended an invitation to the lizards.

Igbo proverb: Egbe bere ka Ugo bere, nke siri ibe ya ebela ka nku kwaa ya.

Meaning: May the Kite perch and may the eagle perch, whichever does not want its neighbor to perch, may its wings be broken.

Igbo proverb: Mkpuru onye kuru ka o ga aghota.

Meaning: Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap.

Igbo proverb: Onye nwanne ya no n'alaeye anaghi eje oku ala mmuo.

Meaning: He whose brother is in heaven does not go to hell.

Igbo proverb: Mmadu adighi nma ilo aso mmiri maka na ochoro ka akpo ya onye oma.

Meaning: One should not swallow phlegm in the name of decorum.

Igbo proverb: Onye wetara oji wetara ndu.

Meaning: He who brings kola brings life.

Igbo proverb: Onye biri ibe ya biri.

Meaning: Live and let live.

Igbo proverb: Agwo hapu ita aru umu nwanyi ewere ya kee nku.

Meaning: If the snake fails to bite, the women will use it in tying firewood.

Igbo proverb: Nwoke o bula na ere mkpuru aja dika unu ekwesighi inwe mwuta ma O buru na enyere ya mpempe osisi n'ugwo ego.

Meaning: The man who sells sand as salt should not complain when he receives pebbles as money (Igwe, 1986: pp. 8-9).

The implications of these and many other proverbs of Igbo origin are one of rich philosophical and cultural traditions that help to define the true meaning and essence of the Igbo man. The beauty of proverbs is that the proverbs represent his total make up. In proverbs are embedded his ethics or aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, logic and culture. A cursory look at the above listed proverbs of Igbo extraction would reveal that while some are metaphysical in nature, some are ethical or moral, epistemological or even social in nature. Each of the above proverbs carries a particular message and has a particular purpose it is meant to achieve. In other words, there is no proverb without a reason, a message and a purpose. That is, Igbo proverbs are full of wisdom, and philosophy even in the western intellectual tradition is defined as "the love of wisdom". So, Igbo proverbs, in line with this thought, could be seen as "the guardian, the soul and the nucleus of Igbo philosophy" (Igwe, 1986: p. 6).

At this juncture, let us consider the proverb which says, "Mkpuru onye kuru ka o ga aghota", (meaning), whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap. This proverb is both metaphysical and ethical. It is metaphysical because every action is believed to be an invitation to a particular reaction from the (chi) personal god of the doer, as well as the gods of the land.

Thus, to the Igbo man every action attracts an equal and opposite reaction. That is, there is repayment for both good and evil done by anyone. We see this proverb as serving a note of warning with regards to the "law of karma" of scholastic philosophy. This law holds that "there is repayment for everything done by anyone whether good or evil". The proverb serves a note of warning to anyone living a lifestyle that is inimical to societal values and orientation, thus, reminding an evil doer that he would pay a regrettable price for doing evil. In this way, wrong doing is discouraged and restrained, and this brings about law and order in human society.

Secondly, this proverb is ethical or moral. This is because it reminds anyone that "whatever one sow, that shall he also reap". It goes a long way in encouraging the morally conscious person that living a good life pays at the long run. Hence, he makes very conscious effort in doing what is right so as to attract same to him and others. The proverb, in a way, encourages obedience and patriotism. It serves as an instrument for restraint and a messenger of moderation. Its implication is such that one can always weave it "in any situation to be wise, believe it always to be safe and practice it always to be holy" (Gideon's, 1899: p. I). A proverb such as this contains "light for direction, food for support and comfort to cheer". It represents "the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword", (Gideon's, 1899: p. II), and one would also add, the Igbo man's philosophy. What else could one say about a proverb that represents a tool for good governance? It is tool for good governance because anything that is useful in maintaining law and

order in society is a veritable tool for good governance. Hence, we can see from the foregoing example that the strength, power, technology, science, art, culture and philosophy of the Igbo man are inherent in his proverb.

More so, the foregoing proverbs become more philosophical and meaningful when they are woven in Igbo language. This is true, as a matter of emphasis, because the meaning and message of a proverb is sometimes twisted or even distorted in a bid to interpret it into a foreign language. Oluwole's view (1999: p. 84) lends credence to this:

Analyzing a people's philosophy (proverbs) in a foreign language involves explaining their ideas of reality in another medium which presumably expresses a totally different view of reality.

As such, one should be very careful in the bid to translate Igbo proverbs into any foreign language to avoid a destruction of its true meaning and relevance. Furthermore, we consider another proverb which is epistemological in nature. The Igbo's wove a proverb which is that, "agwo hapu ita aru umu nwanyi ewere ya kee nku". Translated literally, it means, "If the snake fails to bite, the women will use it in tying firewood". This proverb is considered to be epistemological because of the belief that women are too difficult to be understood, and control. If the woman is not carefully understood and checked, she could turn a man into a "robot" even in his own house. Hence, the man acquires wisdom from another proverb that says: "He who has been bitten by a snake has a morbid fear of an earthworm" As such, he learns that the knowledge and understanding of the woman is the beginning of wisdom and strength. In order to control the woman well, he learns to exhibit his male dominance and masculinity before the woman. He tries to prove that he is the man so as to gain respect and honor from the woman. This explains why the man would always exhibit his masculinity before the opposite sex. The man does this because of his experiences in the hand of the woman and experience, they say, is the best teacher. In all, this proverb goes a long way in explaining the psychological, epistemological, social and cultural make-up of man. It tells us why a man would behave in a particular way before a woman, the need for such behavior, the extent to which he could go and many other things that could enhance his well-being and that of the community at large.

Let us again examine another proverb of Igbo extraction which is ethical. The proverb says, "Mmadu a dighi mma ilo aso mmri maka iza onye oma" That means, "One should not swallow phlegm in the name of decorum" This proverb is used by the Igbo's to teach the youths the ideals of morality. Literally, this proverb is telling everyone, particularly the younger generation that no one should do or is expected to do what is wrong in order to be praised or called a good boy. In other words, there is no excuse for wrong doing. The proverb is used to encourage the youth to shun all vices and seek to do only what is good. Shun evil and do good is the watchword. Evil itself in Igbo philosophy and culture is seen as an aspect of reality but the fact of its destructive tendencies to both the perpetrator and the victim makes everyone afraid of it. The very fact that evil contains the seed of its own destruction and the forces of destruction of both the perpetrator and the victim necessitated the weaving of the proverb that "one should not swallow phlegm in the name of decorum".

Finally, we will reflect on the proverb which says, "Egbe

bere ka ugo bere, nke siri ibe ya ebela, ka nku kwaa ya” This means, “May the kite perch and may the eagle perch, whichever does not want its neighbor to perch, may its wings be broken” This proverb is social as well as ethical or moral. The proverb is both social and ethical because it emphasizes communality, freedom, unity, peace, progress, order and strength. It encourages unity in diversity and shows that everyone as a member of the community is very important and has a particular role he must play for the collective good of all people. This proverb could be likened to the Chinese doctrine of rectification of names where it is said that every name in social relationship has a duty assigned to it. To be able to live up to expectation, everyone must live up to the duties or responsibilities assigned to his name. In like manner, this proverb is used to encourage the people that everyone in the community is quite important and very significant. Hence, no one must be oppressed or pressurized by another person. Everyone must learn to live up to the responsibilities assigned to them. The proverb is used to tell a guest or stranger that there is dignity in labor, especially when that labor is meant for the collective good. It also teaches us that there is virtue in hard work and that everyone must enjoy the freedom to work very hard. Equality before the law is another phase we can see in this proverb. No one should harm the other person in order to attain personal peace, order, and progress. Rather, there should be tolerance, harmony, tranquility in order to enhance the development and growth of everyone in the scheme of things. Thus, when the elders say, “may the kite perch, and may the eagle perch, whichever does not want its neighbor to perch, may its wings be broken”, we can easily notice the principle underlying this proverb. It is the principle of collective peace and unity of a people. It forbids anyone from doing injury or injustice of any kind to one’s neighbor irrespective of the situation. It teaches one to be law abiding, non-violent and respectful to both friends and foes. It helps to scare away the sense of insecurity in people.

Whether a proverb is metaphysical, social, ethical or even epistemological in nature, it has a purpose to fulfill and often carries vital messages that are pertinent for educating and developing the mind of people for many generations. We can observe from our discussion so far that proverbs come in different forms and styles depending on the purpose it is meant to achieve. For instance, some are for consolation, others may be for warning, encouragement or discouragement while others may still act as “checks and balances” to restrain people from certain kinds of behavior which have been considered inimical to society. Also, proverbs could serve as an instrument for emphasizing moderation or communality in the culture where they are found and used. They may also emphasize individuality depending on the circumstances. With respect to the teaching and knowledge of science, technology, music or culture of the Igbo, the proverb serves as a reminder to the inquisitive mind that these things have been taught, learnt and documented in the nature and lifestyle of the Igbo people.

Just as Igbo proverbs have contributed immensely to the development and emancipation of the Igbo man, because in it you find his philosophy, culture, technology or science, it has equally contributed to the evil of corruption or other social or societal maladies bedeviling the Igbo society. For instance, when we analyze a proverb like; (onye nwanne ya no n’alaeze anaghi eje oku ala mmuo) meaning “He whose brother is in heaven does not go to hell”, an Igbo person will understand it to emphasize or encourage corruption. It implies that when some-

one has a brother, sister, friend, cousin, uncle or at least any relation who is highly placed in public office, he has no need to worry because his “highly placed” relation will always ensure his protection at all cost, even if it is not genuine. Such proverbs should be obliterated, rejected and cancelled from our collective psyche for the benefit of everyone.

Igbo Proverbs as a Medium for Education in the Era of Globalisation

There is the general belief among African philosophers that in African thought, “nothing is absolute” (Asouzu, 2007: p. 203). This belief becomes more significant when we make reference to Igbo philosophy which is an integral part of African philosophy. Igbo proverbs as we have argued above are rich in philosophy and the quantum of knowledge gained from these proverbs can serve as a medium for education in this era of globalization. For instance, the era of globalization is one of cultural diffusion and exchange of ideas which has some positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the diffusion and transfer of culture from one point to the other helps in building bridges of global relationship among the different peoples of the world. On the negative side, however, the problem of “subject-object dichotomy”, ethnic and multi-cultural differences, among others, tend to make globalization a burden. Here, Igbo proverbs readily offer herself as medium for new orientation, new values and knowledge that transcends the problems of globalization. If we analyze the Igbo proverb that says; Egbe bere, ugo bere nke siri ibe ya ebela ka nku kwaa ya” meaning: “May the kite perch and may the Eagle perch, whichever does not want its neighbor to perch, may its wings be broken”, we will see some invaluable solution to the problems of globalization inherent in it. First, the proverb will teach us that the problem of “subject-object” dichotomy which is a serious burden on globalization is irrelevant. We will realize that among men, there are no irreconcilable differences as “the so-called differences among men are more artificial than real” (Olu-Owolabi, 2007: p. 23). In fact, “egbe bere, ugo bere”, is a lesson on complementary reflection. It unites rather than divides us. “It helps to bring the world still nearer to all stakeholders in very significant and insightful ways” (Asouzu, 2007: p. 313). It emphasizes the need for a deeper knowledge among men that will result to a closer understanding of one another. Hence, the need for moderation, communalism and complementary reflection. The proverb is a tool for cultivating the intellect and for liquidating ignorance among men. As part of Igbo heritage, therefore, Igbo proverbs in general are relevant instruments and media for education and inculcation of knowledge across cultures in this era of globalization.

Furthermore, in the context of globalization and freedom for the African (Igbo people inclusive), Dukor (2010: p. 24) observes that, “all fields of study which are hitherto sine-qua-non to the development and maximum utilization of human capacities and resources like technology, engineering, medicine, arts, philosophy, religion and law are conceptualized and laid out within western language and education”. The implication of this is that Africans must perpetually and eternally depend on the west for education and development. But the question again is, how can Africans dismantle these obstacles against their collective freedom and progress as a people? The first answer is that Africans must go back to their proverbs to find their heritage which when properly utilized can give them emancipation

and freedom. The proverb is a complete reservoir of meanings and values that are original to all Africans including the Igbo's. The concept of *umunna* (family hood) in Igbo philosophy and culture has been emphasized by Dukor (ibid, 43) as a virtue capable of transporting the Igbo's out of underdevelopment by constantly making meaning out of this proverb of co-operation which says that; "a man cannot sit down alone to plan for prosperity". The implication of this is that people must co-operate and come together to articulate how to overcome their burden and make collective progress.

Summary and Conclusion

The values of what can be termed "the philosophical" that is contained in Igbo proverbs cannot be under estimated. Hence, the position that "there is philosophy in Igbo proverbs", to our mind, is incontestable. It is incontestable not because it cannot be criticized by those who think differently, but because any attempt at condemning or denying the existence of philosophy in Igbo proverb, amounts to a further affirmation of same position. Even a critical exposition of any kind into the realm of Igbo proverbs cannot rule out the existence of meaning, order, beauty, knowledge, wisdom, power and above all metaphysics and ethics as basic ingredients of Igbo proverbs. In the presence of all these basic ingredients, confirming and affirming the existence as well as the content of philosophy in Igbo proverb, we realize it could also be a medium and potent force for education in this era of globalization. This is so because globalization is all about cultural diffusion or exchange of ideas from one part of the globe to another. The diffusion of cultures serves both positive and negative consequences. The negative consequence is where Igbo proverbs readily offer solutions in

terms of new knowledge and education.

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