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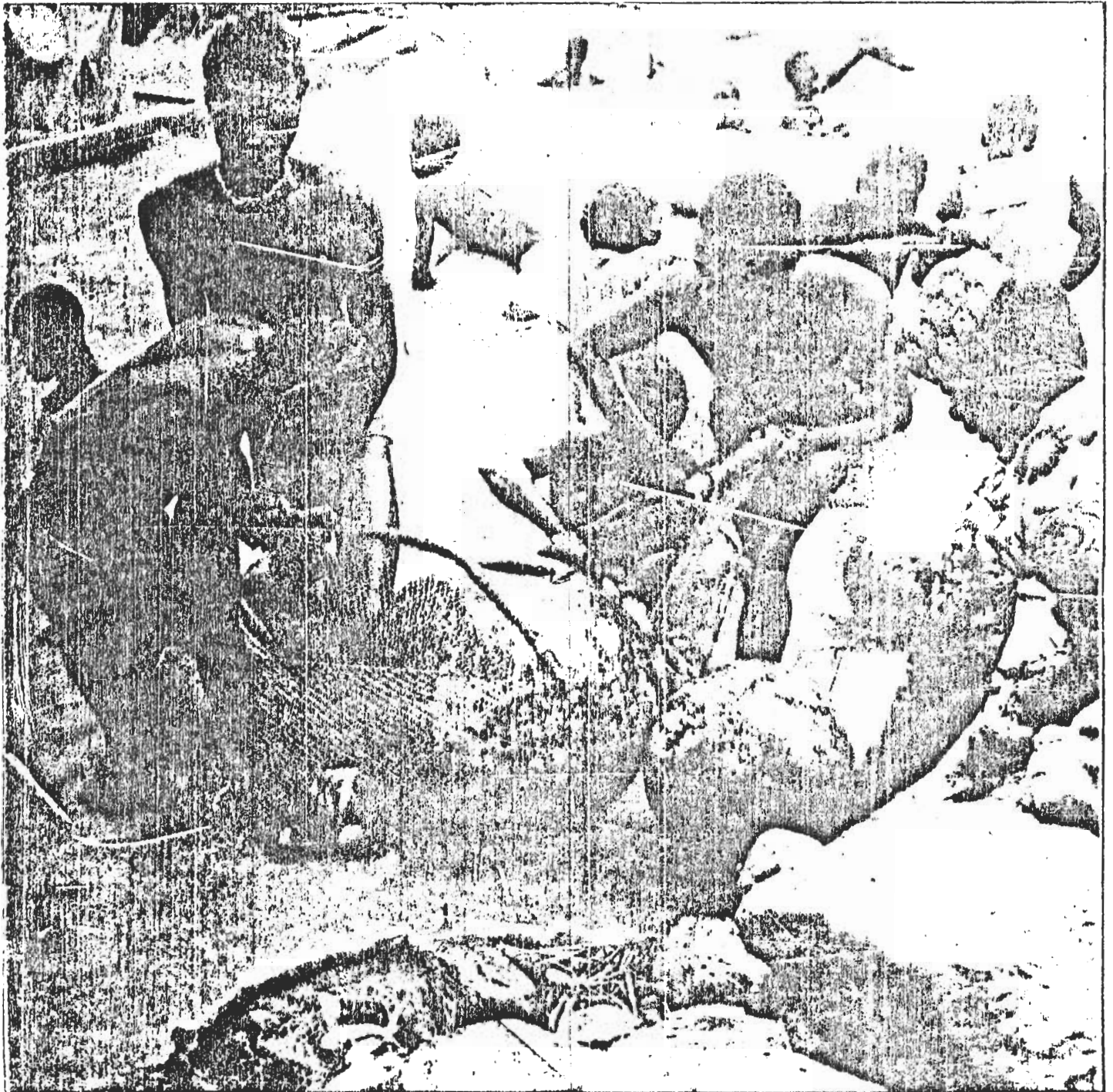


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The Igbo Proverb: A Wider Perspective.

By
Inno Uzoma Nwadike

Introduction:

The Igbo are known for their proverbs and for their insistence on their apt use. As someone has correctly observed, "an Igboman's reputation as a good speaker, or as a successful oral artist, to a large extent, depends on his ability to use *ilu*."¹ Any speech or literary composition that is not punctuated with apt proverbs and idioms is regarded as 'naked'; that is, as lacking in that expressive force which makes a listener nod his head in approval and admiration. Such unadorned expressions are seen as roughly equivalent to a pot of watery soup lacking in the necessary ingredients.

The need to acquire the ability to understand and use proverbs in the language cannot be over-emphasized. It is for this reason that the people use the following proverbs or their equivalents to ridicule the ignorant ones: (a) *Onye nzuzu jere ikpe, biliri ila mgbe o huri ka ndi ozo na-ala, ma na-aju mgbe a ga-ebi ikpe* - The unintelligent who attended a gathering for the settlement of a dispute rose to go when he saw others do so but wondered when a decision would be given (because proverbs were used, he failed to understand when the ruling was given). (b) *A tuora omata, o mata, na a tuora ofeke, o fenyee isi n'ohia* - Speak a proverb to him who knows and he knows, but speak a proverb to the uninitiated and he flees into the bush.

Commenting on the acknowledged importance of proverbs, Rev. G.T. Basden (1966:273) noted:

Proverbs, fables and stories enter very largely into the ordinary conversations of the people, and some acquaintance with them is absolutely necessary in order to take an intelligent interest in any subject of discussion.

In fact, the Igboman does not only punctuate his speeches with proverbs, he can go on talking for a length of time without using plain language.

Like the parables of Jesus Christ, proverbs look superficially as if they are meant to hide the truths in them. This is not so because, also like parables, they serve to teach. (Wood: n.d. 81)

It is because of this high regard which the language and its users place on proverbs that we shall take a look at the Igbo proverb from the stance of its definition, derivation, origin, users and functions. While I take cognisance of Professor Emenanjo's (1982) distinction between proverbs and wellerisms, this paper will however discuss Igbo proverbs on a wider dimension.

Proverb - A Definition:

Simply put, the proverb is a form of speech which is pregnant with meaning. More often than not, it confounds the unintelligent and even the intelligent who is not used to the form. Hence it is said:

A tuora omata, omata ma a tuora ofeke, ofenyee isi n'ohia.

(Say a proverb to him who knows and he knows but say a proverb to the uninitiated and he flees into the bush).

OR

Onye maru asu, ya suo n'ikwe Ma onye amaghi asu, ya suo na mbara ala.

(He who knows how to pound, let him pound in the mortar, but he who does not know how to pound, let him pound on the bare ground).

Rev.G.T. Basden attesting to this aspect of the nature of proverbs said that the meaning of some of the proverbs is clearly obvious, but others are quite enigmatic.

Seeing the proverb from other angles of definition, it is said to be a tool for linguistic expression and compositions for the purpose of rhetorical adornment and persuasion (Egudu, 1977). Yet, it is said that proverbs are the kernels

which contain the wisdom of the traditional people. They are the 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 (Obiefuna:1975,156).

Igbo people themselves would define the proverb as "*abubo e ji eri okwu*" (Obiefuna: 1978) - (Proverbs are as condiments to speech). Professor Chinua Achebe (1958:6) has the English rendition as "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". And Professor Nnabuenyi Ugonna (1974) after a comprehensive description of the concept of *ilu*, sums it up as a kind of mirror which reflects human experience.

Derivation

It has been observed that the phraseology of many of our proverbs has been influenced by our natural environment which, in turn influences our cultural attitudes and systems of values (Obiefuna,1978). Igbo proverbs are drawn from the wide gamut of Igbo cultural experience which include folklore, beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and the entire system of thought and feelings; Igbo flora and fauna and natural elements (Finnegan 1976: 422; Obiefuna 1975: 156). These are a few examples:-

(a) *Mmadu anaghi anyu nsi ebe ohia ka ya elu.*

(A person does not pass excreta where the bushes are taller than him).

(b) *The proverb - Anu laa taa, echi bu nta.*

(If the game escapes today, tomorrow is another hunting day), perhaps arose from hunting experiences which are pan-Igbo.

(c) *Ihe egbu huru gbuchie nkiti ku okuko huru na-atu.*

(What the goat saw and kept silent, the fowl saw and started to cackle).

(d) *Egbe bere, Ugo here.*

(Let the kite perch, and let the eagle perch-live and let live).

In cultural attitudes, riverine towns that do a lot of fishing will have proverbs connected with this; for example:-

(e) *Onye ndidi na-eri azu ukpoo.*

(The patient eats fish caught with hook).

In the hinterland where people carry out arable farming, many of their proverbs are related to the type of crops they produce, for example, the proverb:-

(f) *A na-asoro isi ji, isi ede asi na o bu ya ka a na-asoro.*

(When the head of yam is respected, the head of cocoyam claims the respect) is typical of yam and cocoyam producing communities.

(g) *Onye kwe, chi ya ekwe.*

(If one says yes, one's chi says yes also).

(h) *Udara si na o bughị naani ya mutara nwa a na-apịwa onu.*

(The apple says she is not the only one who has begotten a child whose mouth is broken).

This is saying that no one person in particular is marked out to suffer misfortune and tribulations.

(i) *Oku na-enwu gidigidi na-anyu piatapiata.*

(The fire that burns very fast dies down very fast).

This proverb illustrates the view that hasty decisions and actions are bound to have disastrous effects.

Striding across inter-cultural boundaries, a similar thing can be seen in the parables used by Jesus Christ of Nazareth (some call them proverbs, others anecdotes, similes or metaphors), which referred to things His audience were very conversant with. He often spoke about livestock (goats, sheep, lamb, ass), the mustard seed, the fig tree, the farmer, the birds of the air, etc., things very common in the environment of His listeners. He never used any symbol that was outside their geographical location and experience.

Another dimension to the issue is the people's systems of values. Igbo people being lovers of large families, always portray this social value in proverbs like:

(a) *Gidigidi bu ugwu eze.*

(The king's fame depends on the number of his subjects).

(b) *Nga ogu dimkpa no, ogu pam di ya.*

(Where there are twenty young men there are twenty pounds (sterling)).

Among the Izii people of Abakaliki² we have a people who love and guard jealously the female genitalia. On account of this therefore, they have many proverbs connected with them; for example:-

A hafuru atashi ikpu bu ya ba a luuru nwaanyi?

(Does one have to abandon sex just because a woman has gonorrhoea, afterwards was the woman married for gonorrhoea?)

Or as Igbo people are great devotees to God and to His intermediaries, and often offering sacrifices to the deities, they have many proverbs connected with sacrifices:-

(a) *Onye na-ako ugwo m ji Agwu o na-akokwa nke o ji Amadioha?*
(Arinze:1970).

(The person who talks of what I owe Agwu, does he talk of what he owes Amadioha?)

(b) *Mmuo na-eri asaa e nye ya asato o ju.* (Arinze:1970)

(The spirit/ deity that eats seven if it is given eight it refuses).

The emphasis here on derivation is that it is not possible for a people to have proverbs quite unconnected with their environment and culture.

Origin

Igbo proverbs seem to have originated from four main sources:

(a) a hand-down from time immemorial, hence they have been characterised as the distilled wisdom of the ancestors (Obiefuna:1978);

(b) crisp, mature and witty observations made by the sane and the insane;

(c) social contact, social change and acculturation;

(d) Igbo praise names.

Looking at the first source more closely, it will be observed that like the Igbo folktales, most of the proverbs have existed for so long now that their authorship can no longer be ascertained and so have become the property of the community whose collective or folk wisdom they are presumed to express. It will not sound absurd to assert that in different generations these proverbs were rendered by known persons who were often quoted by their contemporaries. But with the passage of time, it became highly impossible for the later generations to remember such names. Hence nearly all our proverbs are employed without reference to those who contributed them except with wellerisms whose matrix clauses have stuck fast. (cf. Emenanjo: 1982).

The second source will, however become clearer as many of us are living witnesses to those who rendered them, or have people who still remember and quote such contributions. As pointed out earlier, witty statements of individuals have turned out to be grouped as proverbs. In fact, often times, the mentally deranged among us, in their balderdash, have made some statements that are very meaningful, and to that effect, their communities have incorporated such statements into their speeches. In this case, they quote for example, "*Ugbala, onye ara* (or any other mad fellow in any given community) *siri na ihe ya ga -eme di otutu, tiiri egwu ya ga-agba n'ahia na ndi ya ga-atu iche*".³ (Ugbala, the mad woman said that she has many things to do, including her dance in the market square, and the pebbles she will have to throw at people). Whenever one employs this proverb one is simply referring to the many fishes one has to fry.

Or "*Jandum*⁴, *onye ara no n'Ekwulobia gwara ozu: 'a juo gi elu, juo gi ala, ngi kpochik-pochi*". ("*Jandum*, the mentally deranged from *Ekwulobia*, once said to a corpse, 'whatever they ask you, keep very very silent') - and as he said this, he knocked his two knuckles together, signifying total silence). This proverb explains that in all provocation, silence is golden. Or that it is better to keep sealed lips than to reveal secrets or talk senselessly. The same *Jandum* was quoted to have said: "*E kee ogiri abuo, m buru ukwu ya*".

(If a woman is divided into two halves, I will carry her lower half). The meaning is that people opt for the more rewarding aspect of things.

Still on the insane, Nwosu saw a man who had hydrocele or scrotal elephantiasis and declared: "*Dasrat. Owu otu a ka amugana-aha*".⁵ (That's right. All scrotums should be of this size). This proverb points to consequences resulting from foolhardiness. In another sense it illustrates a simplistic equation of size to values.

Passing from the insane to the sane, we often hear some people make statements that they attribute to their fathers, grandfathers, relations, friends or other important people in order to underscore their points. In this case one often hears: (a) "*Ogo m nwoke, Iwudibie Duru kwuru si, onye m gwara ekwekwala ma ihe m kwuru mekwaa*". (My father-in-law, Iwudibie Duru said, let not my advisee heed to my talk but let what I said happen). This is a way of saying that he who does not want to hear will be made to feel. (b) "*Omenuko si na ndi oji oso agbakwu ogu amara na ogu bu onwu*". (Nwana:1963) (Omenuko said that those who rush into fights do not know that fight is death). This points to the risks involved in hasty and thoughtless decisions. (c) "*Enyi m nwoke onye Umuahia si na tupu afo agamie, mmiri ezoo*". (My friend, a native of Umuahia said that before the year goes far, rain must fall). This is a comforting piece of advice which has the expectation of a bright future despite the prevailing misfortune or hard times. It can also be put in the milder sense, for example, of one promising to fulfil unfulfilled promises.

All of the above are people seeking authority to buttress their arguments or statements. Eventually, these and those made by the insane find their way into the repertoire of proverbs and, thus, become acceptable.

The third group of proverbs are those that have resulted from social contact, social change and acculturation. The Igbo having had social contacts with other peoples; having experienced social changes in their life style, and having imbibed other people's cultures, especially the Western technology, and having had a detailed observation of the above for a long time, have built up new proverbs which they have embodied into their already existing rich corpus of proverbs.

Proverbs based on social contact:

(a) *Ozu nwa Bekee, e bulie ya elu, mba, mba, mba; e bu da ya ala, mba, mba, mba.*

(The whiteman's corpse, if it is carried up, it is no, no, no; and if it is carried down, it is no, no, no).

The background to this proverb was as a result of villagers conveying British administrators in hammocks from one village to another during the early stages of British rule in this part of the country. But the villagers who did the conveying discovered that the conveyer who did no trekking at all was not comfortable, hence he shouted no, no, no either when he was lifted up or lowered down. This proverb then points to the insatiable nature of most people despite all well-meaning efforts to satisfy them.

(b) *O teela anyi huwara Awusa na uka.*

(For a long time now we have been seeing the Hausas with bows and arrows).

The Cattle Fulani whom the Igbo regard as Hausas have always carried bows and arrows as they traverse the Igbo country, driving their cattle, but they have never been seen to shoot. So the Igbo liken boasters and threateners who would not perform to the 'Hausa' bow and arrow carriers who would never shoot.

Proverbs based on Social Change:

(a) *Ndi mekaniik ekwezighi anyi mara ndi bu ndi ara.*

(Motor mechanics have not allowed us to know the mad people).

(b) *Ndi kwaya ekwezighi anyi mara ndi bu ndi grajuzeti.*

(Choristers have not allowed us to know the (university) graduates).

The linguistic interplay is that mad persons are known for their dirty rags, but in recent times, motor mechanics have assumed the posture of mad people by way of their dressing, and very often, they are mistaken for the mentally deranged. Formerly in the Igbo society, only mad people appeared in tatters. The same goes for choristers who by their wearing of "academic outfits"(cassocks) look like graduands, and thus bring confusion as to who is a graduate and who

is not. The proverb therefore reminds us that there must be detractors on our paths.

Proverbs based on Acculturation:

(a) *Nkita si na ezigbo aha ya bu Job mana ndi kporo ya ugwo nà-akpo ya doogu.*

(The dog said that its proper name is Job but those who hate it call it dog).

The linguistic interplay here is that the dog is a replica of patience, and likened to the Biblical Job, hence the proverb; "A patient dog eats the fattest bone". And the sound of the word "dog" is the same as the Igbo imperative- "doo.ogu" (engineer/promote fight). And the Igbo having imbibed the Biblical literature and the English language can now play on the two words: Job and Dog. This proverb warns us that even though we may be loved by many people, there are those that hate us.

(b) *Mmadu anubeghi tii ya achowa ovatii.*

(One has not taken tea and he starts looking for ovaltine)

The semantic overtone, as the "native" Igbo believes is that ovaltine beverage is super tea, and is therefore much more costlier, is that one should not be over ambitious. It equally instructs or points that one should live within one's means. It equally applies to achieving small things first before the big ones.

(c) *Lee m, lee motosaikoro:*

(*Look at me and look at motorcycle*).

This rather comic proverb evolved as a result of the common man owning a motorcycle and spending beyond his means to maintain the vehicle. And in his state of despair, he responded: "Lee m, lee motosaikoro" to a "How are you?" question. "Lee m, lee motosaikoro" is therefore a statement that imagines one's pitiable situation.

Igbo praise names adopted by many people in our midst constitute the fourth source of our proverbs. These names are either so poetic or so funny that our people quote them freely as proverbs. They are in most places in two parts: the call and the response.

(a) *Call: A nà-asu achara..*

As the grass is cut

Response: Achara ana-cruchi.

Grass springs again.

(b) *Call: Mbidebe ogaranya..*

Living near a rich man..

Response: Ma o bughì uru, o buru ahuhu.

If it is not beneficial, it is suffering.

(c) *Call: Ikuku bugarichaa odu igu..*

Wind after tossing the palm frond's tail..

Response: O hapu ya.

It leaves it (unharmed of course).

(d) *Call: Nwoke luchaa ogu..*

When man fights the fight..

Response: Nwaanyi enwere akuko

Woman tells the story.

A thorough observation of these names will reveal that their bearers must have in one way or the other had confrontations and difficulties from which they emerged victorious. This applies to the first and the third while the second might have tasted both the sweetness and the bitterness of life involved in one's association with the plutocrats and the aristocrats of the society. The fourth is satirising the indolent. And so, in answering these names, the framing came to mean much to the contemporaries of the bearers who, in their speeches would quote them to buttress their argument. Then it would run thus:

Otu nwata ala anyi zara n'aha:

Ikuku bugarichaa odu igu, o hapu ya.

(A youth from our land has his name as:

The wind after tossing the tail of the palm frond about, leaves it). This is a defiant statement.

Users Of Proverbs:

Proverbs are regarded as only appropriate to adult life (Obiefuna: 1978). While however, the art of speaking in proverbs is not the exclusive right of the elders, it is often frowned at, and regarded as social disrespect by minors to speak in proverbs before the elders. The following proverbs are cited against minors who speak in proverbs or try to assume the role of elders:

(a) *Okoro etoghi, ato wara ogodo, ufere buru ya o buru ogodo ya.*

(When an immature person ties on a wrapper, the wind carries him and carries his wrapper).

(b) *Nwa aturu ga-epu mpi ekwe kak-waa ya akaa.*

(The lamb that will put on horns should have a stiff neck).

(c) *Nwata tinye onu o tinye aku.*

(If a child contributes in a discussion he contributes money).

(d) *Nwata tuo ilu nna ya turu, ya kwuokwa ugwo nna ya ji.*

(If a child cites the proverbs his father cited, let him pay the debts his father owes). These are ways of telling the minor who is believed not to be fully capable of following intelligently in discussions dominated with proverbs to wait and grow in wisdom until he is mature enough to cope with proverbial situations, for while he may be reciting them by rote, he is not yet capable of following intelligently when others use proverbs in different situations.

Even in some parts of Igboland the menfolk frown at their women speaking in proverbs. Ngwaland is a typical example, and for this, they have this proverb to dissuade the women from using proverbs in their discussions with them: "*E were ilu chaa ikpe ndi ndom agbara aka ikpe laa*". (If proverbs are used in deciding cases, women go home empty handed).⁶

The use of proverbs, therefore, is the exclusive right of men- elders, traditional leaders, titled people; the initiated, and in some places, elderly women.

Functions:

Every Igbo proverb or group of proverbs has a function to perform. They are not cited in isolation to life, or what can be called 'citing for citing sake'. Each in its own genre has some thing to underscore such as caution, praise, encouragement, dissuasion, children's upbringing, self-control, thrift, hard work, etc. While the particular functions of proverbs are best treated in respect to their types, the following are the more general ones:-

They are employed in communication for the purpose of embellishment and reinforcing the power of argument. (Egudu:1977).

People respect the wisdom embodied in proverbs for they strike like arrows into the heart. (Obiefuna: 1978).

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. And of their nature, they perform an ideological

function by making available the ideas and values encapsulated in these memorable and easily reproduced forms.(Obiechina:156).

As well as conveying linguistic reality, proverbs can become an artistic device for giving complexity to narrative, unity of form, coherence and pattern to action, and direction to moral and social insight. They can also indicate force and resourcefulness of character: the strong mind can manipulate the repertory of proverb to its own advantage. (Obiechina:157).

Proverbs are used to express the morals as well as the ethics of the society. They are the convenient standards for appreciating behaviour in terms of the approved norms; and because they are pungently and wittily stated, they are ideally suited for commenting on, and correcting the behaviour of others irrespective of their age and dignity. (Obiefuna:20).

"For purely dramatic purposes, proverbs can be a defining point of a novel's action and so serve the dual interest of aiding plot development and heightening emotional response to the action. A good example is the cluster of proverbs which issues from the Ogbazuluobodo in the final ritual run that heralds the end action in *Arrow of God*, p.283:

When a handshake passes the elbow it becomes another thing. The sleep that lasts from one market day to another has become death. The man who likes the meat of the funeral ram, why does he recover when sickness visits him? The mighty tree falls and the little birds scatter in the bush.. The little bird which hops off the ground and lands on an ant-hill may not know it but is still on the ground... A common snake which a man sees all alone may become a python in his eyes.. The very thing which kills Mother Rat is always there to make sure that its young ones never open their eyes... The boy who persists in asking what happened to his father before he has enough strength to avenge him is asking for his father's fate... The man who belittles the sickness which monkey has suffered should ask to see the eyes which his nurse got from

blowing the sickfire.... When death wants to take a little dog it prevents it from smelling even excrement.

"The Ogbazuluobodo is speaking these proverbs within the tradition of gnostic boasts proper to it as a fierce midnight spirit, and the effect of its language is to heighten the awe produced by the Ayaka in the population. The gnostic virtuosity is admired, as is the physical prowess of the run itself, but in the novel these elements are reinforced by using the run and the proverbs together to build up to the final tragedy" (Obiechina, p.159)

And finally, proverbs serve to exclude others from conversations or topics in which they are not wanted. In this case, no matter how versed one is in proverbs, a proverb cited in place of ordinary language, can very easily displace one from gaining an insight into what had passed before or during the course of the conversation.

CONCLUSION:

Although we have scanned the wider horizons of Igbo proverbs, we believe that more "revelations" will still be made in the future as more researches are carried out into Igbo oral literature. Since their significance both as tools for linguistic adornment and as a distilled package of wisdom from our forbears cannot be overemphasized, it behoves us as teachers, students and lovers of Igbo language and literature, to leave no stones unturned to ensure their collection and preservation in written form. Teaching them in schools, colleges and universities should take a wider dimension in order to instil into our students the practice of employing them in their conversations, public speeches, essays and compositions, and indeed in their own creative works of literature. Neglect will lead to forgetting them, and which will eventually result in losing them as is the case with most of our folktales where we have preserved a few in writing. What we have, let us hold!

NOTES

1. During my NYSC service year (1977/78) at 'Teachers' College, Kafanchan, Kaduna State, my fellow youth corpsers and some other members of the staff from the North, expressed their appreciation for the way the Igbo frequently made use of proverbs in their speeches. They were keen at listening to me whenever we gathered to chat, for I always employed proverbs to put my points across.
2. I spent over fifteen years in Izii, schooling and teaching, and have a very good insight into the ways of life of the people. They are very generous and humorous but very much stick to their guns as far as customs and tradition are concerned.
3. Mr. Keven Keke, a native of Ahiara in Mbaise often made references to the statements of this mad woman.
4. Jandum (now late) was a common feature at the Ekwuluobia motor station in Aguata Local Government Area, Anambra State. He was famous for his humorous but meaningful statements.
5. Nwosu, a well-known madman was a native of Isu in Nkwere/Isu Local Government Area, Imo State.
6. Interview with Dr. P.O. Iheakaram, a lecturer at Alvan Ikoku College of Education Owerri, and a native of Ngwaland.

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