

# PROVERBS AND TABOOS FOR A SUSTAINABLE VALUE: MORAL IDEAS AND HEALTHY ETIQUETTES OF THE IGBO

**Florence Dakoru Anuonye & Eneremadu Queen E.C.  
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri**

## **Abstract**

The ethos of the Igbo has been threatened with the infiltration of the western culture. Modernization has legitimized the marginalization of the Igbo standard etiquette and morals. This calls for re-orientation of the people. This paper has presented optional instruments of communication for the transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of the Igbo. It submits that proverbs and taboo have the implication of sustainability in this direction

## **Introduction**

For a start, this paper argues that modernism encouraged by language contact and Westernization are the source of contention for the marginalization of the Igbo standard cultural value. The vehicle on which Westernization crept into the Igbo society was colonialism. It was used by the missionaries as a vehicle of implementation of cultural imperialism in Africa (Igbo inclusive). Colonialism perceived in this context, is an imposition of foreign rule over indigenous traditional setting and foreign dominance and subjugation of the people in the spheres of their social, political and cultural civilizations. Western culture began in Africa as a whole, first, with language contact of Europeans with Africa.

Language contact as noted by Nelde (1997) exists only between speakers and language communities not between languages. It always result in one of the languages being dominant. The language that is associated with social prestige usually dominates the other. Agbo (2011) posites that when the CMS missionaries became interested in Igbo, the historical antecedents of English

automatically placed it over and above Igbo language. The education ordinance of 1882 as reported by Oraka (1983) discouraged the teaching of the mother tongue and this resulted into the disempowerment of the Igbo language which in effect reduced the fortifications of her values.

The big masquerade that stands tall with its intimidating structure is modernization which is the off-shoot of colonialism. It has so much marginalized the cultural values of the Igbo. Fuery (2001) posit that; “Modernisation is a way of engineering new cultural values to replace inherited ones that were thought exhausted and discredited (P 105)”.

Their line of argument shows that Modernization is in conformity to modern ideas, practices or standard. Though the researchers agree that language and culture could change to meet new needs and purposes, the above illustration could be seen in the process of acquisition of new items of vocabulary for new and novel things and meaning. According to Mc Gregor any item that changes in a language has its effect and relatedness to the other linguistic items. This is because most items in language go in sequence.

Just like language contact poses a lot of linguistic problems, Modernization give rise to culture clash that encourages the extinction, extinction of culture and devaluation of people's natural cultural values. The trend in Igbo society currently is westernization which over – emphasizes materialism capitalism. It is much more silent over the continuity of the inherited culture, which has cut it off from its values. But this paper thinks that modernization does not mean the abandonment of one cultural value. In fact, the view of Wieneceke (2005) who says; “In the attempt to solve the problem, experts have turned their attention to the traditional world views and ways of life in which human lived close to nature” (p 70).

He appreciates a more traditional world view and human living

close to their natural inherited way of life. The questions are how do we emphasize this? What tools can we use to put this in place? We need to find ways of propagating the traditional views in our Igbo society to ascertain the sustainability of cultural value.

With Igbo subjugated and dominated, the Western culture so much thrived over the Igbo culture like in the whole of Africa. Our cultural practice having paved the way for foreign way of doing things as the Igbo becomes fully 'westernized'. The frontline civilization is now the 'Western culture'. Igbo ways of doing things became primitive, archaic and regrettably unacceptable in public domain. Not only were certain aspects of the material culture lost, colonial societies also lost the power and sense of cultural continuity to the extent of being practically impossible to recover to ability for cultural progress. As argued by Mimiko in Arowolo (2010) that “the social fabric was completely devastated and a new culture of violence was implanted. Traditional African systems of conflict resolution were destroyed and in place, nothing was given (P. 641). From this argument one can infer that the hidden side of modernization was materialistic interest. Westernization is just another concept of domination; and the imposition of another culture over traditional cultural values. Therefore it is important to note that urgent and more decisive steps need to be taken to reorder and reverse what has been endangered by propagating some of the fabrics of the Igbo cultural value such as proverb and taboo for the transmission of cultural, social morality, manners and ideas of the Igbo.

In order to achieve the objective, this paper has been divided into two sections: Western civilization and Culture, and the accommodationist behaviour of the Igbo man; a conceptual framework of proverbs and taboos and its implication and application.

## **Westernization and Culture**

### **Definition of Culture**

Many people conceptualize culture in a monolithic manner. It is not about costume and dancing alone, neither does it have to do with, just celebrations, rituals birth and marriage. Culture is about people's total way of life; the way they live, eat, worship, produce, create and recreate. Arowolo defined it as “the totality of a set of bequeathed ideas, belief system, values and norms, which constitute the common bases of generally agreed social action” (3).

Culture is the characteristic and knowledge of a particular group of people defined by everything from the language, religion cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Charles A. Ellwood, an American sociologist brings out the multifacetedness of culture by defining it as:

“... a collective name for all behaviour patterns socially acquired and socially transmitted by means of symbols; hence a name for distinctive achievements of human groups, including not only such items as language, tool –making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals and religion, but also the materials, instruments or artifacts in which cultural achievements are embodied and by which intellectual cultural features are given practical effect, such as buildings, tools, machines, communication devices, art objects, etc.... the essential part of culture is to be found in the patterns embodied in the social traditions of a group, that is, in knowledge, ideas, beliefs, values, standards, and sentiments prevalent in the group; The overt part of culture is to be found in the actual behaviour of the group, usually in its usages, customs, and institutions .... The essential part of culture seems to be an appreciation of values”

Cited in Amponsa, (2010:597). Culture can also be shared patterns of behaviour and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social pattern unique to the group. It could be conceived as the collective human activities and general principles that tend to guide ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are passed on, instilled into generation and reinforced by members of the group (sustainability).

### **What is Westernization?**

In today's context, westernization refers to the wide spread presence and adoption of western customs and traditions and standardization of those customs and traditions to the point that they are expected to be in use everywhere. It means assimilation of western culture; the social process of becoming familiar with or converting to the customs and practices of western civilization, the social process of absorbing one cultural group into harmony with another.

In the context of this paper it is visualized as a particular way of life, considered as superior and advanced, identifiable with the people of the west. It places ones natural way of life into a disadvantaged position. Infact westernization is a clearer picture of Modernisation which jeopardizes the people's normal norms.

It is a kind of cultural ethnocentrism; the belief that ones own culture is supperior to that of other cultures; a form of reduction that reduces the other's way of life to a distorted version. This is particularly important in the case of global dealings when an individual is imbued with the idea that the methods or ideas that worked in one home country will also work in another ignoring the environmental differences.

The Igbo in particular have a way of encouraging ethnocentrism. This is deepened by their accommodationist attitude towards visitors. Their over –convergent behaviour may be perceived as

patronizing and ingratiating and sycophantic. The 20<sup>th</sup> century generation of the Igbo has a divergent attitude towards our customs and tradition. Their divergence could be perceived as deliberate, un-cooperative or antagonistic to anything Igbo culture. The totality of our culture is now visualized as obsolete, old school and archaic.

Unimaginable style shift has resulted to having a by-cultural Igbo. There is now a divided attention. They are neither here nor there. They are victims of western civilization. A little on the left and a little on the right which they dance, has tremendously threatened the ethos of the Igbo and her moral and healthy etiquette. So measure has to be taken and that's the reason for advocating the implementative tools (proverbs and taboos).

### **A Conceptual Framework of Proverbs and Taboos: Its Implication and Application**

This section discusses the meaning of proverbs and taboos as well as their potential moral and communicative values towards the achievement of a sustainable earth among the Igbo.

#### **The Concept of Proverbs**

According to Akmajiam, et al (2004): “ proverbs are traditional saying having a fixed general Sentential form alluding to a common truth or general Wisdom, with some literary values, used to guide action, explain a situation or induce a feeling or attitude”. (p.385)

It is a literary form which has proved itself to be of great continuing relevance to modern man. Akporobaro (2006) says that; “it remains a most powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, social morality, manner and ideas of a people from one generation to another. (p.69)

Many authors share the opinion that in both the traditional and the modern context, the proverb fulfills its social and communicative

functions in a very complex form. It offers the speaker a veritable medium for the projection and the fulfillment of a variety of socially designed goals.

Proverb belongs to the category of figurative and aesthetically concealed forms of expression like metaphor, simile, and hyperbole and others. It only differs from these other forms in its explicit truthfulness of what it states and the tenseness and quality of its style and form of statement. In forms, it expresses the truth of experience. The truth presented in the proverb is not a logical, a prior or intuitive truth: it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people's experience of life, human relationship and interaction with the world of nature.

Ruth Finnegan observe that; “The proverb is a saying in a more or less fixed form, marked by Shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth expressed in it”. Slightly different from this is Holman's observation of proverb as the connection between the truth of observation and the oral mode of transmission in the observation that the proverb is a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some reorganized truth or shrewd observation about practical life which has been preserved by oral tradition.

Proverbs anywhere, are very much determined by socio-geographical experience of the place. The imagery in which they are expressed, the forms and situation of experience through which their truths are conveyed reflect the nature of natural environment in which the people's life is lived. Most of the proverbs reflect the people's social occupation. It is also good to note, in the words of Akporobaro that “the tone, and attitude of life expressed in a community's proverbs do very much reflect the joy and sorrow inherent in life as a result of the conditions imposed on the people by their environment.

There has been an implicit progressive rather than fatalistic attitude

to life, a belief in the possibility that any condition of man can be altered for the better through the proper application of common sense, self-discipline and by adherence to the natural wisdom inherent from the forefathers and enshrined in the proverbs and wisdom of the people.

There is an implicit belief that people fail because of lack of natural wisdom and from lack of listening to the wisdom and advice of the old. Like the Igbo proverb says, 'A fly that does not have an adviser is buried with the corpse in the grave.' When a man says yes, his chi applauds him. There is progressive spirit that is implicit in the proverb.

Finnegan says that proverbs are used on particular occasions by individuals in a particular context and their wit, their attractiveness, their insight even their meanings must be seen arising from the context. For instance, there are several communities who live in erosion threatened areas that causes fear in them. For such people, the proverb in context should be. *A child who holds a delicious white piece of yam in his hand must learn to cover it with his palms.*

The lesson passed on here is that joy and success can easily be turned into sorrow if a measure is not taken. It becomes a warning advice for the people to take a measure. Wisdom will make them to plant trees, heap sand and probably plant grasses to wedge the erosion as it is obtainable in our geographical environment.

### **The Igbo Proverbs and Sustainability of Value**

The striking thing about Igbo proverb is that for any question in life which has to be decided, there are always proverbs that suit it. This is why Achebe wrote in his "Things Fall Apart, that among the Igbo proverb is the oil with which words are eaten". Of the most characteristics of the Igbo culture, is the wealth of the Igbo language in proverbs and idiomatic expressions. A knowledgeable Igbo man can not make sentence without punctuating it with a proverb. It is also expected that every Igbo man understand the proverb, if not, he



would be regarded as being foolish or a man without sense. It is said that if you use a proverb on a person and explain it for that person, the bride price paid for his mother is a waste. In the gathering of the elders in Igbo land, proverbs are used in formal discussions to explain issues or settle misunderstanding or to communicate ideas. For instance, when there is looming problem that may take a long time, in such discussions, the corresponding proverb in an Igbo man's discussion could be in the mist of others:

*Let's continue visiting the farm while the yam matures.*

This type of proverb pedagogically points at being patient, persistent and industrious. Different from the behavioral value it teaches, is the imagery of 'farm' and 'yam' and the relationship between the two. It informs one that yam is cultivated in the farm land; that the yam has to be continuously tendered to maturity. The hope of the man who cultivates the yam is to harvest 'fat yams' and for this to be achieved, he has to tender the yam repeatedly. The survival of the yam which is our staple food depends on the several visits of the farmer.

The allusion that is in some Igbo proverbs also encourages the planting of trees. Using these proverbs:

*If you want to rest under a tree during your old age plant one*

Literarily this proverb encourages the planting of trees realizing that the trees are cut down for use and should be replaced for future use. This shows that proverbs can actually inculcate the idea of tree planting which in actual sense prevents environmental hazards.

*A good farmer never expects a bumper harvest from a poor soil.*

The teaching here is that we need to enrich the soil for it to yield; tubers, roots vegetables, fruits and many others that the farmer plants. The existence of healthy living so much depends on a rich soil. It also teaches that rather than deteriorating the soil, we ought to enrich the soil.

*However a society is, it is of their making*

*If you destroy your mat you sleep on the floor*

These latter proverbs buttress the point we are making about

the farmer and his soil. Where he fails to enrich his farm, he does not expect a good harvest. We are not saying that this is just the contextual meaning of these proverbs. Proverbs have dual meaning but the usage must be at right with the context. One sure valuable teaching here is the sustainability of life, wealth, environment and others, depending on the situational focus.

There are many proverbs that point at sustainability, like;  
*You don't always go to barn and get yam.*  
*A fallen dry leaf is a warning to green warns.*  
*He who says tomorrow tomorrow may find his farm overgrown with weeds.*

One observable thing about Igbo proverbs is that they are of great value in that they present very clearly possibly and ready-made answers and advices to the multiplicity of human situations, whether environmental or otherwise. Proverbs to the Igbo is a source of moral learning and wisdom. In fact the proverbs are used to bridge the line between the known and the unknown. It is an instrument for taking the hearer from the known and the familiar state to a less well-known and unfamiliar sets of practical wisdom. It interprets the familiar with the unfamiliar, making the less familiar comprehensible, imaginable and acceptable in a delightful and concrete manner. This is how it serves as an instrument of learning. The similarity between the primary literal meaning as the vehicle or mode for communication on the one hand and the real substantive argument or thought gives it pedagogical features.

### **The Concept of Taboos**

Taboo is derived from the Greek word 'tabu' which means forbidden. In Igbo language it is called 'nso'. It is a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted traditionally as instruments for moral motivation, guidance and have the objective of protecting the sanctity of the land. It can also be applied to any sort of social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, action, events and people. The Igbo man regards 'taboos' as that which is forbidden or prohibited. The prohibition

could be against very serious or extraordinary moral evils such as murder, suicide, rape, incest and religious sacrilege.

There are serious and unserious taboos. For instance in Igbo land, it used to be taboos for a child to 'eat meat'. Presently, the Igbo man has realized that for health reasons, the old does not need meat as much as the young, and so the young is now fed on meat. This type is graded as unserious. The violation of the serious ones attracts penalty which may involve blood sacrifice to appease the gods. They are really taken seriously that the gods need to be appeased for forgiveness otherwise they incur wrath on the living in the form of epidemics, drought and infertility etc. the offender is usually sanctioned till the sacrificial rituals are done, consequently the value of taboos as a source of moral guidance and motivation for social order cannot be easily dismissed.

### **The moral values of Taboos**

Every community in Igbo land has her different taboos in which the offenders face the community's penalties on the offences. They represent the source of guiding principal regulating and directing the behavioural patterns of people and the Supreme being the gods who also are the ancestors in the traditional society. The motives for abiding by the principle are provided by sanctions from the gods and ancestors. The cultic ethics serve as standpoint in determining who breaks the law, the penalty it attracts and how to ensure that the offender faces the wrath. In Okwudor community, killing of python is a sacrilege. This is also in Awo, Nkume and Ekwe communities in Imo State. An offender in any of the communities is made to bury the python like a human being with other rituals involved to appease the goddess of the land. Still in Okwudor, is the taboos called 'nso nwanyi Okwudor". This taboo bares a married woman from committing adultery. The implication of this is death of the husband, the woman or the elders. The goddess kills the husband or elders when they hear and neglect it. The woman is made to go naked with open confession. The moral value that goes with this is that it keeps the women on their toes not to flirt and prevents them from contact

diseases. It also helps to preserve the snake specie called python from extinction.

There are so many taboos, some of them are general. For instance, incest which is a serious taboo, explains that a sexual act within the family is an abomination. The experience over the years as reported by elders of the land is that such intra-family sexual intercourse brings conflicts that could break up the families and could also bring abnormal birth, death and disease. This then serves as a deterrent to the family members. It also has scientific implication genetically.

Different taboos among the Igbo pedagogically have different moral values. So to say taboos have different implications.

### **Taboos and their Enhancement of Cultural Value**

Taboos are classified into groups according to how they are used in traditional societies for promoting morals, ideas and healthy etiquette. This then upholds that they have profound scientific or rational explanations with notable implications for cultural values. These groups of taboo are;

#### **Economic Taboos**

Some taboos have the implication of influencing people's means of production, distribution and management of wealth. These characteristic implications make them appropriately termed Economic Taboos. Examples of such among the Igbo are

- Stealing of people's cash crops
- Uprooting of planted crops
- Shifting of farm boundaries without the community's agreement
- Eating of yam seedlings
- Cutting of timber when not matured

Any effort made by anybody or group towards economic growth and the fair distribution of resources is an acknowledged step towards the development of the states life in general. These taboos protect private and commercial property and also ensure that no one

monopolizes the land which is a natural asset in the economy of any community. These taboos are beneficial to the economy in the sense that they serve as economic security towards wealth preservation. It is straightened with their existing vows, oaths and ritual sacrifices that face the offender

### **Environmental Taboos**

Environment taboos according to Osei are: “Taboos intended by tradition for the regulation of the ethical use of the environment in view of its resources for the ecology and a sustainable earth”.

They include:

- Clearing of sacred forest or bushes
- Killing of python in the communities where it is forbidden
- Eating of sacred animals

### **Cutting firewood from general yam barns without communal authorization**

The violation of any of these springs forth the wrath of the earth goddess on the offender. Of course this sanction has the implication of preserving the forest, continuity of life for the python so that it will not disappear from the land and also ensure that the future generations are not deprived of rare plants and animals. It balances the existence of both plants and animals as well as human and their needs for food.

Evident in the wisdom of this group of taboos is the provision of forest for wind breaking and the well being of plants and animals, some of which at long run may serve educational purpose.

### **Medical and Health Taboos**

These are taboos aimed at promoting and protecting human.

Examples are:

- Intra-family sex (incest)
- Having sex in the bush
- A woman not covering the head before cooking for the husband

- Entering ones house without washing hands when one returns from a burial place
  - Talking while eating
  - Having sex with a woman during her menstrual period
- Having sex in the bush, the Igbo say offends the earth goddess who may kill the offenders. But in the real sense of it, this is used to prevent disease which the offenders may likely be exposed to in such an exposure. They may also be beaten by insects in the act. The taboos serve as a measure to ensure the good health of human being. All the other taboos have their health implications which is the value.

### **Security Taboos**

These taboos sanction the killing of people. The Igbo call it 'ochu' They include:

Committing murder Anyone who kills a person faces the penalty of death by hanging (Nkwugbu). If the offender is not killed as such, the wrath will be visited on the community. For suicide, the offenders are not buried but rather thrown into the forest for animals to devour. This also brings shame to the offender's family. It doesn't stop at that; ritual sacrifices will also be enforced to appease the earth goddess.

### **General Discussion on Proverbs and Taboos**

Sustainability of values as used in this paper, does not mean just economic or environmental growth alone but the total sum of a races well being virtues which is enshrined in the moral values of both proverbs and taboos used to promote the well being of human being like, good health, provision for future benefits, encouraging posterity, planting of trees, preservation of animals, provision of food through farming, peaceful communal living and many others. Like the Igbo will say, the taste of yam is in the pudding". The efficiency of the taboos is in the punishment it attracts to the offenders which is expressively embedded.

Unlike the taboos, proverbs is word of wisdom which inculcates good moral and healthy etiquette in the mind sets of the users, thereby bringing them to conscious healthy living. No wonder Wienecke say that: “Values towards the use of natural resources were inculcated in traditional African societies from generation to generation by means of proverbs... religious or rituals”.

### **Conclusion**

While we say that the ethos of the Igbo has been threatened with the infiltration of the western culture, we still advocate that we uphold the good virtues of the Igbo culture as enshrined in the annals of cultural values. These values ought to be promoted by still bolding the depicted values to high esteem. It should not be thrown into the whirl wind and dumped at long run. My point remains that “the fire wood in a community cooks their food better. Modernization should rather encourage our ethos using instituted values which should continually be passed down to the younger generation and the yet unborn through the right traditional communicative channels. If this is not done we loose our characteristic behaviors that mark us out as the Igbo race and become “Onyeocha idiot”.(not conforming to the western culture fully or strictly following our Igbo culure). This situation becomes a misnomer

## References

- Akaajian, A Etal (2004) *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication* Prentice-hall of India Private Limited Dehi.
- Akporobara, F.B.O (2006) *Introduction to African Oral Literature*. Princeton Publishing Company.
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Educational Limited.
- Maduabuch Agbo (2011) *Power Dynamics in the Early Development of the Igbo Language*” paper in *English and Linguistics* (PEL) Vol. 12. (No 16. PP 248-260).
- Miniko, N.O. (2010) 'Would Falola Frustrations suffice?: Tradition, Governance Challenges and Prospects of change in Africna' in Niyi Afolabi, ed. Toyin Falola: *The Man, The mask, The Muse* North Caroline Academic Press.
- Nelde, (1997) *Language Conflict*. In Colmas Florian (ed). PP. 189-209.
- Osei, J. *The value of African Taboo for Biodiversity and sustainable Development in towards the Philosophy of Development: Africans Dilemma of Development and the way out: International Third World Studies Journal and Review* Vol. 7. 1995.
- Osuji, C. (2009) *Foundation of Igbo Traditional and Cultural Opinion Research and Communication* Owerri.
- Oraka, L. (1974). *The Foundations of Igbo Studies: a Short History of the Study of Ibo Language and Culture* Onitsha Varsity publishing Company.
- Ruth Finnegan (1970) *Oral literature in Africa*. Oxford University Press: Nairobi
- Wieneke, M.A (2004) “*The Role of Biological Diversity and Sustainability in conservation and preservation of the Environment: Journal for sustainable Development in Africa*” Vol. 6. London: Wilson.