Igala Proverbs as Bastions of Societal Harmony

Egbunu, Fidelis Eleojo (PhD)

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria

Email: frfidele@yahoo.com

Doi:10.5901/jesr.2014.v4n6p259

Abstract

This paper “Igala Proverbs as Bastions of Societal Harmony” is fundamentally a brisk quest into this all-interesting and all-important genre of communication among the Igala people of eastern Kogi State of Nigeria. This language group, like many of its counterparts in Africa has many of their moral, social, spiritual and sundry values embedded within these proverbs. Our principal task in this paper is to attempt searching into the deeper signification of such proverbs by means of dialectical and phenomenological methods of investigation. This would enable us educate our audience on the riches of the Igala culture, with the overarching aim of not only keeping records on such value-laden aspects of our culture for the sake of posterity but also focusing on the different dimensions of the usage of proverbs for societal harmony.

Keywords: Igala, Proverbs, Bastions, Societal Harmony

1. Introduction

The impact of proverbs on the life of people generally within the African setting cannot be overemphasized. This form of communication in the traditional society carries with it some enormous advantage. In what follows, we have a modest attempt to journey through a few proverbs within the Igala environment. This language group is found on the eastern flank of Kogi State of Nigeria. And they are highly esteemed among fellow Nigerians as a culturally oriented set of people. Proverbs form a most central genre of communication in this particular cultural milieu. They are means of forging harmony in various aspects of life. This is especially true as it relates to the sacredness of life and its preservation, respect for the elderly, communal cooperation, solidarity, etc. In what follows, therefore, we desire to give, first and foremost, a working definition of our subject matter, then we shall locate the place of proverbs in the peoples lives before we go through the various contours of sampled proverbs, especially as they relate to the art of human harmonious living.

2. Proverbs Defined

Proverbs (ità) are basically, short, popular expressions that give practical admonitions on life. They may come in the form of adages, idiomatic expressions, aphorisms and are generally shortened forms of known myths (hiala), legends, folktales, etc. in any particular cultural group. Ehusani describes proverbs as “store house and medium of transmission of accumulated wisdom from one generation to the next” (153). In other words, they are short articulations of folk-wisdom, a compact presentation on God, the universe, humans, relationships, destiny and life in general, aimed at instructing, motivating or inspiring people from one generation to the other. They are some sort of condensed philosophical truths which have gone through the test of time. Oduyoye defines proverbs as “short, popular often used sentences that use plain language to express some practical truth that results from experience or observation” (55).

3. Roles/Usage of Proverbs

Several proverbs started as ordinary stories in which the proverbs themselves were often the essence or the moral (Kremeneiel 149). Some of them are prescriptive while others are evaluative in outlook. And “through their normative force, serve as a rule of life in the society, giving directives to both young and old” (Madu 196). And for Pogweni, they “are learned, pithy expressions of the wisdom and knowledge of elders” (3). They mirror societal values and articulate cherished virtues. They possess the advantage of being “dynamic and malleable” (Oduyoye 20). We may refer to them as the memory bank or fountain of wisdom and to a certain degree, a measure or yardstick of the people’s wisdom.
Chidili was right when he stated that it has to do with the people’s collective memory, “the authoritative source for decision-making, mirror of life from which societal ethics is gauged or couched” (169). The Igbo ethnic group, for instance, term proverbs “the oil with which words are eaten” (Mbaegbu 24, Osuji 137, Ehusani 154, Okoro 340). Some see proverbs as salt which enhances the flavor of food (Orji iv). Yet others call them the kernel which contains the wisdom of the traditional society. The Yoruba, on the other hand, see it as the horse of the word. In this sense, when truth gets lost, people ride towards it through the vehicle of proverbs. It is also considered by some other Africans as the walking-stick for the aged. For the Igala people, proverbs are considered the soup for swallowing yam-fufu and the water that naturally goes with medicine (for the Igala, ita ch’omi kima biogwu). And any adage that does not apply to human life is not true to its name. As they would put it ita noma ofen (proverbs are not associated with royalty). Again, eju ki ti ta akpita i (it is from constant observation and experiences proverbs emanate). This, to a certain extent, explains why elders are considered as repositories or custodians of wisdom. Elders are seen as mobile encyclopedias. Apart from the moonlight fora, occasions for learning proverbs include different ceremonies such as naming ceremonies, puberty rites, marriage ceremonies, funerals, festivals, settlement of cases, etc. Proverbs are particularly “pivotal in the formation of human person” (Chidili 173). They could be sourced from daily events of life which are often spiced with wise-sayings in a typical traditional environment. Often enough, proverbs are usually suffused with exhortatory, motivational, educative, philosophical, imprecatory and downright spiritually loaded points. As Owan opined, “In one fell swoop, the African proverb can educate, entertain and inform. It can warn, advise, encourage, direct and facilitate one’s social and spiritual journey through the twists and turns of life” (xiv). Okere’s view on this issue is very illuminating, “they are very relevant to any effort to build up a philosophy… and rank already as sayings of wisdom. They are aphorisms evincing a sure knowledge of men and the world” (467). This literary genre is highly loaded with wisdom borne mainly either out of the common experience of the people or the experience of the individuals concerned. Consequent upon their different contexts, they are “capable of multiple base meanings” (Madu 194) perhaps, due to the use of metaphor. Therefore its symbolism or signification cannot be solid or fixed. Rather, “they are semantically indefinite” (Madu 198). Suffice it to have a cursory look at some examples as the Igala proverb has it, ona ma gbeju kere b’oran ya gbeju kere b’ita (if a child never grew up to meet the father, he/she would meet proverbs) in which case, proverbs exist in order to make those who care to be edified by their fount of wisdom.

4. Igala Proverbs and Their Connotations or Denotations

The human person in Igala thought has no equal among the animate and inanimate objects in creation. Therefore, both in status and value Ma d’onewunefu omin – One does not use the human being to measure the depth of a river; in which case, the use of human persons for ritual purposes or even the scientific usage of human beings for scientific experiments is seen as not only condemnable but highly abominable, since human life is seen as sacred. It is also said, Abudu kon nya ya li ogale – No matter how short a person is, he/she too can see the sky. In other words, nobody is to be despised, even a pauper today may turn out to be the future messiah of the society. In other words, Ènêke kaluka eyo kidelu ëhia, ama øneke kaluka øhia monu kidelu øyo wn – You can count the seed in an apple but you can’t count the apple in a seed. Again, Abudu konë k’o¿ge k’jëwun kpaì ukóqó òrida tonë gbege n – Teach a monkey how to eat with a fork and spoon, it will never turn into a human person. There is something innate in man which can never be found in all lower animals and even other higher vertebrates, no matter how relatively sensible or sensitive they may seem. Ma dala w’anyan – There exist no just parameters for comparing the sheep to a horse (especially in running). Or rather, as it is also wittily put, a lizard cannot be a snake. The human person remains the center of focus in the universe, no matter how elegant other creatures might turn out to be.

In relation to the criteria for degree of personhood in Igala thought, it is stated Ichalu konë gbogba chumọplan/ugbejun – Height does not necessarily symbolize growth in a person. Thus, in identifying a person, you do not rate an individual by his or her physical appearance. In other words, do not judge a book by its cover. That explains why it is often said Efẹnọ li ibema – Not all that glitters is gold. Ènê kpa kaa chojoji w’enẹ gamaa – The bigness of a person does not imply his genuineness.

260
No amount of material riches or wealth is of greater value than the possession of human persons. Anọnọ tanọkọle – wealthiness in human resources is greater than material wealthiness. It is also in this light it is said Ọmányọ tọkọle – The child is greater than money. Ọmачọko – The child is greater than all treasures. Agwọọ ọdị ma ọzọma – No smith can fashion a child; Ọnọ nyo tọkọle – the human person is greater than money; wealth is therefore considered ephemeral in relation to the facticity of human existence. And so the rhetorical question, Odogo meni onye aje ile kiagọtajia ọdie? – How long will one last in this world that he would order for an iron hat? becomes very crucial. Put differently, Ọnụ ọchọje kiama ile n – Nobody is like food that lasts through all ages.

In stressing the need for a focused and result-oriented life, it is said Alụ konọ ọdị ọzọ ma ndị – The way you make your bed is how you lie on it. Or rather, Alụ konọ d’ọjì wụrụ ndị maka – It is the way you place your head that it would be barbed. There is therefore every need for self-restraint; Abia ọbịa na ọmu aje ndị – If the dog does not control its appetite for meat, it would become a fulltime hunter.

According to the old adage, ‘The child is greater than money.’ Therefore, it is submitted that it is better to yield good fruits in season and out of season.

In another case, it is mostly by their roots they are known, not necessarily by their fruits. It is often stressed therefore that it is better to train children by showing them good example. As it were, example is better than precepts. The general rule in this case seems to say Icho ọma ndị aja – It is not only an individual who bears a child; Iko kọma defu iche ọja, iye fubi imudeyi ọja – A child in the womb belongs to the mother, after birth, it belongs to the entire society. However, no matter what the influence of the society is, Orọ ọgba ọna ọka wi – The Okro shrub does not grow taller than the person that planted it. It is in this vein therefore that it is believed, Ma keja ọgbẹn – A fish is better straightened when it is tender and flexible. A stitch in time saves nine. Alternatively, spare the rod and spoil the child. This is of great significance because invariably, Omebune kia ndị na ala ọgụ – Omo ma mọ –Morning shows the day.

Children are often cautioned to be obedient to their parents because there are enormous evil repercussions on the stubborn person. Oma ki ma gholan ede ndị ma ndị – A child who does not listen grows beards only in the grave. In other words, Oma jiki ọma ndị ala ọzọ na onye ọma ndị – The child who says its mother would never sleep throughout the night, must also stay awake. On the other hand, great rewards await those who are humble and obedient. Ọmọtọ kifọọ ọnwụ ndị ọgụ na ọma ndị ọghọ – A child who washes his hands clean could eat with elders.

People are admonished to be patient and enduring. As such, they are told, Ẹwọn kidabai kia kọma ọchọtọ – Even the biggest fowl that crows the loudest was once a common egg; every fat chicken has its beginning in an egg. In other words, Ọma kia na ndị ala ọgụ ndị ma nwere – The way you place your head that it would be barbed. There is therefore every need for self-restraint; Abia ọbịa na ọmu aje ndị – If the dog does not control its appetite for meat, it would become a fulltime hunter.

On the need to educate the younger generation adequately or for passing on good skills to youngsters, it is stated, Ome-ọpọpọ iye ọghọ – Success without a successor is failure. Uchii ki nwere ndị na ọzọ na atakan – A yam with seedlings never goes into extinction; Agaị leku ine ndị ugwu – When a barren woman dies, she lacks the person to see her off. Therefore, it is submitted that it is better to yield good fruits in season and out of season.

To a typical Igala, character defines a person. Alụ maka na kunọnọ – It is character that matters, not beauty. People may behold and admire beauty, but it is seen as something temporal and deceptive. But Alụ dabu efo enyo, alụ numajam - A person’s character is like pregnancy, it cannot be hidden for too long; Alụ nyo ọgụ – echenyọ eche welo wo, echewolawo – Character is a god, it supports you according to your behavior. And good character entails giving helping hands to neighbors, knowing one’s capacity and having the readiness to take on responsibilities accordingly. Iko gbẹ ọdị ọghẹ gbẹ olawọ – One good turn deserves another; Enẹ kia buọọ ọgụ – whom the cap fits, wears it; Enẹ kia na ọdị ọzọ kia ọzọ na ọzọ – whoever wants what is on the ground must bend. Uchii ki nwe akọlawo moli – Good nature is never hidden. More so, it embraces knowledge. And such valuable knowledge is garnered through what looks like Socratic questioning, Atene alan – He who makes enquiries hardly goes astray; Enẹmali – onye mali matene amuna – with others around, confusions are remedied; Emọga dumaya ongwọ lenọ – He who hides his sickness hides the medicine man; Amẹ, amọla kọlaw kpaie amẹ amọla koja kọ – No matter how intelligent you are, you learn from others. This is because, Udaba aji adeju kater – The riverbank can never be only on one side; there are two sides to a coin. Aliwo kia m’ọkọpọ kia teyi atawon le - If you don’t move out of your mother’s kitchen, you would always think she is the best cook in the world; Ibe takpa efuwọ ọma – The loss of thoughtfulness breeds disaster. On the need
for indepth observation of reality, the Igala would say, Agobie – Look thoroughly before you leap. They also believe that knowledge is an aid to virtuous living, Amanyi, ene kima ya nji gen – he who knows the rules should keep it; it is also rendered appropriately as Umoche – Who knows it does it; Egba magba kpa ma mọla kpan – Physical maturity does not imply fullness in wisdom.

In life, there is every need to discover or discern one’s allotted space: Ökpọ maka ebina n’adọto; Omọre nọgba agbọre nubi – Everything occupies its divinely assigned space. Yet, one has to be prepared for eventualities, One agwura ya gwutu - You do not put your eggs in one basket. Ogwu kuma juka ajẹnẹ - The war that is announced does not consume a cripple; to be forewarned is to be forearmed. The need to strive strenuously in order to make ends meet is seen as a sine qua non for authentic existence. Oli adọji ụba anụta etsan – No pain, no gain.

The traditional Igala believes anybody can bloom wherever he/she is planted. Therefore, it is necessary to strive through thick and thin. Ugbọ du kọnọ ẹ̀gà yàlì ọchụ – Every land has its own sky; Ene ọ kwu kate onwu abodu ayọ nwu – It is only the dead person who has everybody on his side; Ukpa chi kete omi ichọka imelo ẹche ẹn - A calabash does not need magic to stay aloft; Ọwailo ẹni onwu awe le tetete n todu una ki dẹtẹ ajalọ – The Chameleon says that he will not alter his dignified manner of walking just because the forest is on fire.

Igala people place strong premium on the need for diligence, mutual support, prudence or reciprocity in love, this also falls under the umbrella of the practice of justice and fair play, both to oneself and others. Tekemi olubọ oọọ ologbo wẹ, foli ka gbẹ engini – If you want to rest under a tree during your old age, plant one now; Abia kigbọwọ odo madikpala tojọφa – Put a rope round your neck and many people will be happy to drag it; One kpoli una ejẹ ƙijoru wọ – Nobody should be deprived of the fruit of his or her labour.

Truthfulness, sincerity, and honesty are virtues which are held in high esteem. In this respect, it is often said, Ajala jegbe kima jìlí wọ – No matter how the harmattan fire burns the grasses, it can never finish its roots; Afu ademọ kima dokọta – No matter how the wind blows, it can never lift the stone. In other words, truth is rock-solid and as heavy as the stone, it can never be really tossed off or totally contradicted. Alukaka ma dalukukan alukaka fẹnọ kpa – Breaking of oath kills. It is as a result of this that whoever is notorious in the community for broken promises or speaking from both sides of the mouth is considered not only unreliable and insincere, but also considered an inconsequential individual.

Igala people believe so much in communal living and the common fatherhood of God. Everyone is an island; those who urinate on one spot make it foam. If I help you make it, then I have made it.

Therefore, the wise person should avail himself of this by drinking from their fountain of wisdom. Every kọgọ dachi anẹ kili imọtọ nọgọ eronu mọla ilin – what an elderly person sees while crouching or lying down, a child cannot see even when he stands up or tiptoes nine times over. In other words, the heights attained by the elders are considered as mobile encyclopedia of wisdom. Therefore the wise person should avail him/herself of this by drinking from their fountain of wisdom. Ewọn kọgọ dachi anẹ kili imọtọ nọgọ eronu mọla ilin – what an elderly person sees while crouching or lying down, a child cannot see even when he stands up or tiptoes nine times over. In other words, the heights attained by great men were not by sudden flights. Ako chana ekọ magoji wọ gen – when the cock begins to crow, they do not ask whether it is mature; Ugbọ kọgọ de anẹ abiẹn

Ọnụ anẹnụ ọfọ ata akpatọgbọn – Goats never get caught in a noose when elderly people are around; a she-goat should not suffer the pain of child birth tied to a post while an adult is present. Simply put, to have somebody in the
Children are cautioned against the spirit of stubbornness because it carries devastating repercussions. *Aka magbọ onwu n'ukwu imbọ* - A stubborn fly ends up with the corpse in the grave; *Ukwu atene kpe i'omu bunye eti* - That which will kill a man will first block his ears. And for the fear of nemesis, people are cautioned to practice justice, live in peace and harmony with others. *Ọwọ ki wura ejo alop* - ashes spread towards the direction of the thrower; One who excretes on the road finds flies when he returns; A man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards. *Icherche ku ma jitolu katete alin* - as the rain beats the slave, it also beats the slave driver; a person holding his challenger down on the ground is also holding himself down; *Ojukpologwu ajuya che k'egbe* – the fighter's frontage is full of weeds; the snake that bites the tortoise shall only harm itself; the person who spits at the sky ends up soiling his own face; ashes always come back to those who throw them; the hen that defeacates inside the soup-pot is visited by lizards. *Ọma kidefụ iye ụgba kpe onwe obuaka* – A child in the womb is never worried about how smoky the mother’s kitchen is; *Ọma kidubi iye ụgba kpe onwe obuaka* – the child who is carried on its mother’s back does not know how long the journey really is; *Ọma chagba* – a child is the handcraft, with it, you do not move out at your wish; *Udachi iy'ejima ch'ajinga* - the mother of twins should have impartial breasts; *Abọ k'egwu ubi ajewu n'ewa* – it is the rightfu...
human followers that constitute the power of the masquerade; Ewn ki ane ule ma min uwe onugo amin – if what is pursuing you has not relented, you cannot afford to slacken your pace; Obepi jen akpo jen anhianyi wa - Endless disagreement breeds trouble; Uja obuka anakanya wa; Eju we magbodudun ekpo bejuwe tẹ - If you cannot withstand smoke, stay afar off from the chimney; Ekpa mi ekp'odu min – You may kill a man, but you cannot kill his name; Ajoji an'eti akoya, Ola achọla chiịa ija – Clear conscience fears no accusation; the criminal runs when no one pursues him.

There are yet other forms of figurative expressions with some sort of cultural resonance which are solid metaphors relating to animals or plants. Such imageries carry a lot of connotational meanings when used in Igala culture. A few examples include:

Ikeleku (Rat) – deceitfulness/trickiness
Abia (Dog) – sexual promiscuity/shamelessness
Obala (Cat) – doggedness/discreteness
Ewo (Goat) – stubbornness/greediness
Iga (Weaver-bird) – noisiness/rowdiness
Olijo (Adder) – deadliness/poisonous
Anjeje (Tortoise) – Cleverness/trickiness
Owallo (Chameleon) – Unsteadiness/inconsistency
Igbi (Snail) – Slow/slippery
Ochachakolo (Deer) – Pace-setter/go-getter
Obuko (He-goat) – Womanizer/shamelessness
Ajuwe-fulu (White Fowl) – Showy/overbearing
Ido (Bat) – Indecisiveness/Vacillation
Ikeneni (Canary Bird) – Gifted Singer/soothing presence
Afofo (Mr. Hare) – Big ear/inattention
Idu (Lion) – King of animals/conqueror
Eje (Leopard) – Fierceness/tactfulness
Ododo (Flower) – Beauty/Temporality
Obobo (Baobab) – Protection/Security
Ogbakolo (Commercial fig) – blossoming/fruitfulness
Uloko (Iroko) – strength/resistance
Ekpẹ (Palm-tree) – all-rounder/docility.

5. Conclusion
As can be easily gleaned from the above excursus through this genre, the Igala language group possesses an inexhaustible reservoir of wisdom in their proverbs. These proverbs are not only of much value to the elders whose speeches are most often garnished or embellished with them in their bid to draw home their messages in season and out of season. Proverbs, as it were, also enable them to relay very significant pieces information among their peers without unnecessarily divulging their secret codes to the uninitiates. More so, this has over the ages the advantage of not only edifying their audiences but also making them able to keep some good records of the people’s customs and traditions from one generation to the next. By so doing, an enormous deal of harmony, peace and understanding is easily forged among the people. Put differently, to be equipped with them in the Igala, nay African society is akin to possessing enough arrows in ones quiver at the war front.

References
Orji, E. 1350 Igbo Proverbs, (No publisher and Place), 1984.