

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

KEEPING IGBO PROVERBS ALIVE IN CHILDREN THROUGH MUSIC: A STEP TOWARDS SUSTENANCE OF IGBO CULTURE.

Raphael Umeugochukwu & Cordis-Mariae Achikeh

Abstract

The basic identity of a typical Igbo man is speaking with lots of proverbial embellishments. He is always known to refer to his ancestors either by quoting them directly through proverbs or making reference to an earlier practice of them. They understand and appreciate the value and relevance of past experiences especially when they have a lot to teach the present. Igbo proverbs, therefore, can be said to be philosophical statements of past experiences which are used in the present to foster an awareness of the possibilities of life – living (Ibi ndu) and to be exposed to arrays of choice towards experiencing a healthy social environment. This choice as well comes with freedom however with varieties of experiences both as knowledge acquired from tutelage and that from observation and participation. Since it is necessary to pay great attention to one's experiences, it is also important to note that certain factors over time tend to have a reasonable amount of control over one's action – this could be as a result of our actions and experiences over time which could entail the activities of the people we meet every day, the discussions we engage in, what we listen to, what we are made to listen to etc. All these experiences come together to produce a particular type of individual. On that note, this study has selected two parts of the above-listed activities which are what we listen to and what we are made to listen to. This research tends to harness the power of music to consciously and positively affect the habit and attitude forming process of every growing up Igbo child. In addition to the normal encouragement of their parents to help build the culture in them, they are also exposed to different kinds of music of Igbo proverbial essence. They grow up listening to it either by choice or by continuous tutelage.

Keywords: Music, Igbo proverbs, Sustenance of Igbo culture and Children's upbringing

Introduction

Change they say is constant; that means change will never change from changing. In the area of development in the standard and quality of material living, technology has brought great change over time. This change over time has made a 'double-edged sword' impact on the lives of people who have experienced it. The technological changes are applauded for the roles of its enlightenment opportunities, easy access to information, and improvement in livelihood to mention but a few. However, it did not fail to also rub off its negative peculiarities on society. Related more to this work would be the negative impacts on children in terms of moral decadence and irresponsibility attitudes; the idea of what they are easily exposed to like the use of the internet and the television culture which tend to be more in use in the negative essence especially by the children. The idea is to expose them to other options of activities which will help to strengthen their foundation, present them with arrays of choice and equip them with the right knowledge, skill and help direct their intellect to make the most appropriate choice while they grow. It has always been perceived that the days of our fathers

controlled a more responsible and morally conscious society. This was believed to have been achieved through the nature of the environment they had lived in and what they were earlier exposed to. There were strong philosophies of hard work, integrity and morality. They worked so hard to preserve those virtues no wonder there is a saying that “*ezi aha ka ego*” (good name is better than money). The Igbos educated themselves even before the emergence of the colonial masters. According to Okafor and Osondu (2013), “The Igbo pass on their culture, (i.e.) educate their young through their traditional education system, which comprises child-rearing practices, age-grade organizations, apprenticeship system and various initiation ceremonies, which order man's relationship with the supernatural and with fellow human beings”. They also stated that “the Igbo traditional education can be described as a system whereby those who know pass knowledge to those who do not”.

In the above case, the community and not just the parents play active roles in the training of the growing Igbo child. The child's training is a communal business which explains why a child could be named “Nwaora” which means child of the community. The earlier Igbo community as such determine basically what the child is exposed to at every point in time either through “*egwuonwa*”, or through communal fetching of water from the stream, or communal fetching of firewood from the bush, or communal picking of snails from the bush (*ikpa ejula*), especially at night. These activities most times also had special songs that casually accompany them. Perhaps another study could be to dig up these different songs because they will make a good repertoire. The first education of every child comes from the parents or either of the parents or any parent figure as the case may be. This particular education is as important as it can be if not the most important because every other form of education is built on that foundation. There is also a great need for a continuum of these practices in great essence because in a mere play of words one can seriously say that *the grandparents of yesterday were the children of days before, the parents of today where the children of yesterday and the children of today will be the parents of tomorrow*. While it may be true that history has a way of repeating itself as is seen in the case of fashion, for instance, there is a great need for conscious and intentional approaches to flow with the trend of folklife (the indigenous communal life of the people) of children to make it a life they live, a choice they will gladly make and an experience they will effortlessly pass on. In this case, whether the trend comes back or not, ie the perceived better lives of our fathers, this age must have had a life born out of past experiences which they live because they choose to live it not because someone still pushes them to live it.

According to Nwachukwu – Agbada (1990), “the proverb in the Igbo social matrix remains documentation of the lives of the people at a particular time”. He also recorded that “just like every other oral form, it records the history, experience, the trauma, and the tension of society at every stage in its evolution.” This work advocates for the quality upbringing of the Igbo child making use of powerful instruments around him/her. First is harnessing and infusing the power of music in sustaining the interest of the child. Studies have been made highlighting the role music played in child development. Second is highly influencing the textual content of the music in this case; using the Igbo proverbs. This is just one of many

ways to solve the perceived problem.

Why Proverbs?

Since the beginning of this article, the importance and relevance of the proverbs in Igbo culture have been the song. The Igbo – English Dictionary (*okowa okwu*) by Eke (2001) in Umezinwa, C. E. (2012), defines proverbs as “popular short wise saying with words of advice or warning”. This explains the ethical values of the proverb. According to Umezinwa, C. E. (2012), “in them are capsules of wisdom about practical life”. The Igbo proverbs cover a vast area of human life. A saying goes thus in Igbo land that “*Nwata oḅyila a tuḡḡ ilu, kḡwaara ya, mara na ego e jiri luḡ nne ya lara iyi* (any child that was addressed in proverbs and given the meaning as well should consider his/her mother's bride price a waste). This implies that by the virtue being Igbo, one is expected to be familiar and conversant with the proverbs. The proverbs demand wisdom for its understanding. This is the reason why the younger ones should listen to the elders for there is saying in Igbo that “*isi awo na egosi amamihe*” (the grey hair is a symbol of wisdom). Durant (1959) states that the old Igbo traditional education had the philosophy of catching people i.e. starting to train them while they were still young for, “if a child washes his hands, he would dine with the elders or with the aged” – *nwata kwochaa aka o soro ogaranya rie nri*.

We cannot overemphasize the volume and value of treasures encoded in the proverbs. We also cannot deny the fact that foundation plays a great role in the upbringing of the child – what he is naturally exposed to in terms of the environment in which he has no choice but to live in which could entail his immediate family and sometimes friends from the neighbourhood; then what he is consciously exposed to in terms of the school he goes to, though still inside the school, the child is exposed to another environment which he or she has no choice but to stay in. In this case, we understand the role of humanity entirely in the formation of the child at one point or the other. Joyce Penfield and Mary Duru mentioned in their article “Proverbs: Metaphor that Teach”, that language plays a great role in the development of children. They emphasized the relevance of Igbo proverbs being used in social interaction between *caregivers* and children. If an adult should have a good grasp of the use of proverbs, it is very pertinent that the person should have developed proverbially overtime from childhood.

Furthermore, Bascon (1995) in Joyce Penfield and Mary Duru (1998) outlined some vital functions of proverbs in African societies. The study maintained that:

- (a) the metaphorical nature of proverbs introduces children to abstract thought as well as moral stances in a highly naturalistic and integrative fashion in spontaneous, informal instruction;
- (b) the use of proverbs in interaction simultaneously socialize the children into the “way of culture,” emphasizing the appropriate role behaviour, values, ethics, social relations, rules of etiquette and pragmatics of language; and
- (c) children learn to appreciate the connection between social and religious rituals and language usage.

A lot of factors play roles in the upbringing of children. It has been mentioned earlier the influence of the immediate and distant or not too distant environment. Also pertinent are the intentional and non-intentional formative activities and approaches surrounding the child. Both are very necessary however one is achieved through the other. It is through intentional activities that the non - intentional activities derive from. In other words, the quality of the foundation laid (intentional) in early days will determine a lot what naturally happens overtime (non – intentional).

The Way Forward

Music of proverbially textual essence is one of the ways forward. Music possesses great power over a human being and more influential on children. A child always unconsciously imitates almost every sound he or she hears including the textual content. They continue to imitate sounds until they come of age to speak and begin to talk and sing what they must have unconsciously listened to or have been made to listen to overtime. Those experiences form the repertoire of his speech and music. The researcher believes that proverbially influencing the content of what these children sing and listen to will expose them to the benefits mentioned earlier in this work as pointed out by Bascom (1965). In addition to the practice of proverbs being used in communicating with the children, the researcher also recommends that the children get used to it in music as well as through performance.

Obviously in Igbo society, the child is not expected to address an adult in proverbs but since the child will one day become an adult, he/she must get so familiar with the proverbs not by addressing people especially adults with it but by encountering them in songs which tend to be a neutral ground of expression. These songs should serve as a basic content of the child's music repertoire. In this case, the child is informed by what he or she listens to and sings. Also, Okafor and Osondu in their "*Ilu Igbo*" (2013) mentioned that learning about proverbs starts early when children compete among themselves in the recitation of the proverbs they had heard from their elders. Well, we just have to hope that they are still surrounded by elders who speak with proverbial embellishments. Okafor and Osondu (2013) also maintained that the learning runs through life as they meet the proverbs in folk songs and folk tales, and begin to apply them contextually when dealing with their peers or people of younger age. It is now obvious that studies have been made to encourage the child's acquisition of proverbial knowledge as well as contextualizing it in their life – living. This article goes further to encourage the act of being more intentional through compositions in addition to the already existing folk songs, to make more music of great proverbial essence to add to the already existing repertoire of Igbo music that fosters a holistic formation of the Igbo child.

Since proverbs contain high philosophical elements, it is necessary they are exposed to them in a way that fosters their comprehension of the proverbs since at their level, they are required basically to comprehend them than to use them just as stated by Penfield and Duru (1994) that "Children are expected to acquire these sociolinguistic skills (referring to Igbo proverbs) to some degrees by the time they are adults but most of these acquisitions only involve the comprehension of proverbs used to them or in their presence since children are

not permitted to address proverbs to adults. However, if children are forbidden to use proverbs especially before an adult, they are not forbidden to sing folk songs or songs of proverbial essence.

The knowledge of proverbs is also said to improve the language quality of children. Penfield discourses the semantic ambiguity and linguistic difference of proverb from the surrounding discourse in which they occur referred to proverbial value as foregrounding. She went ahead to state that it is the foregrounding quality of the proverb that draws the attention of the children and forces them to process language literally.

Conclusion

The service towards humanity through research is intended to always add value to the already existing values. These values are also expected to propagate to other areas of life they seem to be lacking. The idea is to always have a proper foundation on which these values can be harboured and nurtured effectively. Children are very promising ground on which this foundation can stand strong if effectively established. The journey to the future started yesterday but today is most valuable. To build a better future, it is most pertinent to capture the present having learnt from the past. The children of today are the present, proverbs are seemingly the past and the present and music is the effective vehicle according to the researcher to drive this message home. Let music and proverbs marry to give birth to a process and style; the type that will contribute to the holistic formation of children; Igbo children. These children will eventually be exposed to growths; growth in the indigenous language, growth of skill in speech embedded with wisdom, growth in behavioural consciousness, growth in making choices out of wisdom which is brought about by varieties effectively and consciously established. All these and many more will come together to form a particular type of individual; an individual that possesses the necessary qualities to give out effectively to the community and society that made him or her. It is through this process that society will grow continuously in highly wetted human and social values. The Igbo culture will also be promoted and sustained by the tenets of its highly valuable proverbs.

References

- Penfield, J. & Duru, M. (1998). Proverbs: Metaphors that teach. *Anthropological Quarterly*. 61, 119–128.
- Umezinwa, C. E. (2012). Igbo proverbs and the emergence of a metaphysical model of music. *AFFREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 1, 331 – 356.
- Nwachukwu, J. O. J. (1994). Proverb in the Igbo milieu. *Anthropos*. 194–200.
- Okafor, R. C. & Osondu, (2013). *Ilu ndi Igbo*. Enugu: Academic Printing Press.