

Selected African Proverbs

From the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria

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Dedication

To my parents Mazi Stephen Onyemaechi Azuonye and Ezinne Hannah Egwuime Azuonye who always used proverbs in conversations, instructions and admonition . How I wish I listened more and laughed less.

**“A child whose father suffers from
scrotal elephantiasis is never afraid of
the scrotum of an adult.”**

An Igbo Proverb

PREFACE

The arrangement of the proverbs in this edition is aimed at easy reading by both Igbo speaking and non Igbo speaking readers. Each proverb has an Igbo text, followed by an English text and an interpretation in italics. Despite an Igbo proverb that proverbs should not be interpreted, the author found it necessary here to interpret the proverbs for a global readership and understanding of the wisdom behind the proverbs.

As much as possible, the proverbs have been told in the dialect used popularly among Igbo people to tell them. There has been no attempt to use a particular Igbo dialect or to use any form of central Igbo dialect that may lead to loss of meaning, content and humor in the popular dialect. The dialects used here are derived from Isuikwuato, Aro Ndizuogu, Onitsha and slangs.

The proverbs have not been arranged in any particular order or category. This is a reflection of the role played by proverbs in the society where a proverb pops up in a conversation to clarify a dragging issue from an angle that throws surprise and humor into the conversation.

There has been an attempt to make the English text as close as possible to the original Igbo text. There are many Igbo expressions that cannot be interpreted into English without loss of meaning.

This slim volume of Igbo proverbs is better seen as a collection of urban proverbs. Most of the proverbs used here find applications in business, modern challenges, city life and humor. This is only a little collection from a huge vault of Igbo proverbs told over centuries in a myriad of dialects.

Uzoma Azuonye

August 2013, Kaduna Nigeria.

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I will not thank my late mother Hannah Egwuime Azuonye enough for the contribution she made to this work by her frequent use of proverbs when we were growing up. My thanks also go to my brother Chief Adindu Azuonye who in his traditional role makes use of proverbs very often in the course of a discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are used frequently by Igbo people to enrich conversation and to make their points with very few words. Igbo people live in the South Eastern part of Nigeria and across the River Niger to the West. Despite the myriad of dialects of the Igbo language, most of the proverbs in this collection are shared by Igbo communities far and wide.

Traditionally, Igbo people are ruled by a parliament of elders who meet frequently to discuss matters ranging from warfare to trial and punishment. During such meetings, proverbs come up very frequently for inspiration, morale boosting and justification of community action.

Proverbs are also used during negotiations for marriage, payment of dowries and settlement of disputes. On personal grounds, knowledge of proverbs can provide the necessary wisdom for action or inaction, relationship, courage and reconciliation between friends.

Readers will find some of the proverbs vulgar. Despite the offensive nature of such proverbs they are still used by elders even in the presence of young adults as long such proverbs are the only ones capable of making a particular point indisputable.

Women are excluded in most traditional Igbo meetings. Most of the proverbs featured here are used mainly by men. It is worth noting that when women meet, they make use of proverbs as much as the men folk irrespective of whether such proverbs are vulgar or not.

With the growth of Pentecostal Christianity and the emergence of a revolutionary born again culture in Nigeria, the use of proverbs in Igbo land would have been expected to be on the

decline. The use of proverbs has not been threatened by pious Christians as much as by the decline in the population of Igbo people willing to pass on the culture to their children. In some cases, pious Christians who wish to hang onto the traditional proverbs without being vulgar adapt them when speaking in public. For instance instead of saying that one vagina kills the penis the person would say that One thing kills the thing and the point would be understandable to all present.

Enjoy the proverbs and make the most of the wisdom, humor and laughter the proverbs are bound to provoke.

Uzoma C. Azuonye

Kaduna Nigeria 2013

1.0 Agwa ogbenye ihe eji aba ogaranya, osi ka ora ka ora.

If a poor man is told what it takes to become rich he says he is satisfied with his present situation.

The road to fame, wealth and power is not an easy one to follow. Knowledge of what is required may discourage aspirants. This proverb is mainly used when held in awe of spectacular achievements.

2.0 Eziem ozi zie eze, agam ezi ya, mana asim kputa ya akputa agam asi mba.

If I am sent on an errand to the king, I will go. If I am sent to arrest him, I will say no.

It is always wise to know our limits and to know when we are being misled by others or our own ambitions

3.0 Onye fee eze, eze eruo ya.

He who worships the king becomes a king.

We are expected to be respectful to God, our elders and our superiors in our work places. Such respect is often rewarded in many ways by God and by our superiors.

4.0 Onye gara uno akwa gara uno akwa nke ya.

When a man attends a funeral, he is also attending his own funeral.

The benefits of staying close to families, friends and acquaintances cannot be overemphasized. This proverb is about relationship and the need to re-

main close.

5.0 Nwa mkpi si na umunwanyị ezuru ya oburu nke oji eme ogo.

The he goat says he has not got enough female mates to start worrying himself about sisters-in-law.

At times a man finds himself under pressure not only to satisfy himself and his family but to meet the needs of his extended family and community. This proverb is often used by people under such pressure to show their dilemma.

6.0 Onye nzuzu amaghi na nwanne ya nwanyi bu obia.

It is the foolish man who does not realize that his sister is a visitor to the family.

This painful proverb is about relationship and trust. It becomes necessary at times to call a spade a spade and to decide and define boundaries of relationships.

7.0 Ejighi ihe eji agba na nti agba na imi.

We do not employ what we use in cleaning the ear to clean the nose.

We should always be aware of danger and should avoid getting into situations with potential harm to ourselves.

8.0 Onye nwuru anwu si, “The ibu, abugom. Ihe mbu ka i ka ga abu.

The dead man says, “What you are, I have been,
what I am you are yet to be.

People who are boastful of their early achievements in life are often short-sighted. They fail to realize that for every achievement they boast about they are often a hundred challenges ahead of them.

9.0 Ebe enwe no ka olete cha ihe nile na eme ka mgbo ji
tuo ya na isi.

It was while the monkey was insisting on seeing everything in a procession that a bullet hit his head.

This proverb is the Igbo version of the English proverb, “Curiosity killed the cat”. The proverb also warns people to know when to let go and to always avoid digging too deeply into matters.

10.0 Enwe si na otu unere si atu ya egwu ka ya si kwa atu
unere egwu.

The monkey says he is as scared of bananas as
bananas are scared of him.

We should never make assumptions of our safety in any situation we find ourselves. A woman afraid of getting HIV from a man should realize that the man is also afraid of catching it from her.

11.0 Ikwe na aka gafee nku aka ya aghoo ihe ozo.

When a handshake goes beyond the elbow, it becomes
a different thing.

Despite the liberal nature of the Igbo people, respect for age and hierarchy

is not negotiable. Taking advantage of a humble gesture to become over familiar is often frowned at. This can also be extended to taking undue advantage of a trusting friend or colleague.

12.0 Onye ugha na agba oso, onye ama ana eso ya.

When a liar is on the run, a witness is following him.

It is very difficult to get away with wrongdoing no matter how we try.

13.0 Aga ekwo mgbagbu ghara ogu?

Should we for fear of being killed abandon a battle?

We should never abandon a project we have embarked on. The fear of failure should not discourage us to aspire. This proverb is used to inspire and to build up morale when doubt sets in.

14.0 Ana achu aja ikpe ana ama ndi mmuo.

When a man makes a sacrifice, blame is passed to the gods.

We should always make effort to achieve our goals. We should never leave anything to providence until we have tried. In the end what ever result that comes out of our efforts should not be for lack of trying but the will of God in his plans for us.

15.0 Uwa onye ujo adighi mma, isi egburu egbu na ogu akwuru laa.

The life of a coward is not good. He fails to realize that any head killed brings the end of a war nearer.

Get up and get on with the job. Whatever you achieve in a day adds to the cumulative of your eventual achievement in life.

16.0 Onye ara nyuru aru si na, “nka agaa.”

The mad man farted and said, “That one is gone”.

This is about project management. Every stage or phase successfully completed is gone and will not be revisited.

17.0 Nwa okuko anaghi echefu onye foro ya odu na udu mmiri.

The chicken does not forget the person who pulled off the tail feathers during the rainy season.

Being grateful for help or assistance received is often taken for granted. This proverb is about remembering to be grateful to people who go out of their way to do us a favour.

18.0 Mmadu anaghi anwu ugbo abuo.

A man never dies twice.

Courage is often the deciding factor in several achievements of man. This rather universal one liner encourages us to be daring.

19.0 Ebom ohi nwa okuko m’ezuru nne ya.

If I am accused of stealing a young chicken, I will steal the mother.

It is often very difficult to face the music and to accept our roles when things go bad. This courageous proverb is about being bold enough to accept our faults and also inspires us to look beyond little achievements.

20.0 Onye cho iri awo, ya erie nke gbara abuba.

If a man wants to eat a toad, let him eat a large fatty one.

Dreaming big is a universal goal. Toads are not eaten by anybody which symbolizes doing the impossible or embarking on a journey of faith. If you must dare, dare for the biggest glory as far as your vision can take you.

21.0 Nwa aturu choro ipu mpi, ekwo si kwa ya ike.

The little sheep that wants to grow horns let his neck be strong enough.

If you must take chances or compete, be prepared. This proverb is used when such action is considered of a very risky nature.

22.0 Ahu cha agba nkiti mere di na nwunye ji ebi na udo.

Seeing and keeping silent makes it possible for husband and wife to live in peace.

The diplomacy of relationship whether at home or in the office is best illustrated here with marriage. The English say that the truth is always bitter. There is also an ABBA song that says that one of us is lying, one of us is cheating. In every relationship the wisdom to avoid making an issue out of everything that happens eventually makes the relationship to prosper. This is applicable to business partnership, friendship and diplomatic relationship between nations.

23.0 Ndi nwere imi anaghi ahu anwuru.

Those who have the nose for snuff, do not find snuff.

It is a sad acceptance that in life we do not always get rewarded according to our efforts and aspirations. It is also sad to see less talented people with little or no efforts at all achieving success unimaginable.

24.0 Onye nwanne ya no n'eligwe anaghi aga oku mmuo.

He whose brother is in heaven will never go to hell.

Nepotism is a very African thing. It is unimaginable to suffer when a relative or a friend is in a position of authority.

25.0 Agaghi m ano na mmiri ncha aba m na anya.

I cannot stay inside water and allow soap films
blind me.

Seize the day, take advantage of your circumstances and people you know who are in positions to enrich or empower yourself.

26.0 A na eji anya ama oka chara acha.

We know a ripe corn from the outside.

The ability to assess situations before getting involved is a very useful tool in the journey through life. Through careful assessment we know the viability of our interests.

27.0 Anaghi atupe ngwugwu aga emepe emepe.

We do not pinch the side of a parcel we are going to open eventually.

This proverb is about the virtue of patience. In Christian terms, it is about knowing how to wait upon God after we have packaged our prayers and devotion to him.

28.0 Anaghi aru ururu mgba ebe ala di nso.

We do not argue about our wrestling abilities while the ground is very near.

It unnecessary to argue or get embroiled in conflicts that can be easily resolved

29.0 Eji anya ama mkpuru nkwu chara acha.

We know ripe palm nuts with our eyes. (See proverb number 26).

The ability to assess situations before getting involved is a very useful tool in the journey through life. Through careful assessment we know the viability of our interests.

30.0 Aka mgbe ayi huru ike di ochi, mmanya okuru anakwaghi ato uto.

Since we saw the buttocks of the famous palm wine tapper, his palm wine has become tasteless.

When a person respected by the community lets himself down with a poor conduct, he loses respect. This proverb is also about disappointment after high expectations prove to be an exercise in futility.

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