

## **THE IGBO LEXICON: A VERITABLE IGBO THOUGHT AND PHILOSOPHY FOR TRAINING AND SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP**

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### **Abstract**

*The Igbo lexicon is an amalgam of the thought and philosophy of the Igbo life and experience used in training and governance, and have been informally acquired over time. A number of lexical items drawn from the domain of the Igbo philosophy are believed to be instrumental in training their children and framing their political tradition. The data for this study was drawn from the collections and literature of Igbo maxims and proverbs. The analysis showed that the Igbo lexicon, which is an integral part of Igbo culture contributed the essence in shaping the Igbo leadership, training and political ethos. The study therefore claims that the incorporation of the concepts expressed by these items in contemporary politics would galvanize the Igbo in particular, Nigeria and Africa in general and make for good leadership, governance, citizenship and political stability.*

**Keywords:** Igbo Lexicon, Philosophy, Leadership, Training, Thought

### **Introduction**

Every speaker of a language is endowed with a mental dictionary or lexicon of his language. Hence, Leech (1974) argues that although in a sense, a dictionary is a reference book on the living room or library shelf; in another sense, it is the 'inbuilt dictionary' which everyone carries around as part of his mental equipment as a speaker of a language" (pp 202 - 203). Leech's argument here centres on what he refers to as 'semantic competence', and as such he terms the dictionary in this second sense as LEXICON which is the concern of this paper. This lexicon comprehends what the speaker knows about individual items, as well as idiomatic expressions of his language. In like manner, Coupland (2007) describes a speaker's mental dictionary as his speech repertoire from which, he selects items "to match particular situations they find themselves in (situational conformity) (p. 82).

Through language we make friends or enemies, exacerbate or try to solve conflict, learn about our society and try to either conform to it or change it. Therefore, Duranti (1997:42) opines: “Language is an instrument of action (with representation or informing being kinds of action), a tool that is available and that, like all tools, is both enabling and constraining”.

Discussing language and worldview, Hickerson (1980) posits that Whorf earlier began with an assumption that there is a close connection between language and culture, and that the study of a language gives an indication of the categories and relationships – the worldview – as seen by the speakers of the language. Corroborating Hickerson’s (1980) opinion, Harley (1995) in discussing precursors to language posits the view of Social Interactionists that the development of language is through interaction with other people. These social interactionists believe that biologically determined critical period contributes little or nothing towards development of language, except for the acquisition of accent.

The social interactionists, however, emphasise that “language development must occur in the context of meaningful social interaction” (p. 337); hence, Bruner (1983) in Harley (1995:337) contrasted the idea of LAD (Language Acquisition Devise) with that of LASS (Language Acquisition Socialisation System). Harley (1995:336) had earlier supported Bruner’s position where he states: “To be effective early language learning must take place in a social setting. (Obviously this and talking about ‘here and now’ go closely together)”. These “here and now” according to Harley is the method adults use in talking to children when they use objects that are in sight and about events that have just happened as they talk.

The units of this lexicon are composed of words, idioms, collocations and proverbs which, according to Bolinger (1975:107) constitute “the prefabs of language”; and which in the opinion of Lobner (2002) are used to convey social meaning. To convey social meaning, to him implies “the use of terms and forms with social meaning ... governed by rules of social conduct” (p. 34). In like manner, Harley (1995: 347-348) had earlier in his investigation of language use and social processes sought to know whether “the way we use language affect the way people treat groups of people”, or how “groups of people function in society”. This consideration seems to support that the way we use language project how people function in society.

According to Lyons (1968:432):

the language of a particular society is an integral part of its culture, and that lexical distinctions drawn by each language will tend to reflect the culturally important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which the language is spoken.

Similarly, Ashipu (2006:127) posits that a linguistic study of the lexicon of a speech community such as their proverbs provides an insight into the “ethnography of the people which systematizes, gives a penetrating picture of the people’s way of life, their philosophy, their criticism of life, moral truth and social value”. This “picture of the people’s way of life which Onwudiwe (2017:223) refers to as local colour projects “sentimental or cosmic representation of the surface particularities of a region”. The “particularities” include the setting, dialect, customs, dress and ways of thinking and feeling which are distinctive of a particular region. Ashipu (2006) views the value of proverbs as an instrument of cultural transmission which is traced to the fact that proverbs are based on the people’s experiences which reflect their social value and sensibility.

Cruise (2004) studied dialect and register allegiance and observed that this brings about evoked meaning. According to him, dialectal variation is variation in language use according to speaker, while register variation is variation within the speech of a single speech community according to situation. He asserts: “usages characteristic of a particular dialect or register have the power of evoking their home contexts ...” (p. 59). Hockett (2006:471) also believes that “people who are daily in contact with each other, either because they live in a single village or because they belong to the same social or economic class, tend to share usages”. Also, Harley (1995:34) earlier consented to Whorf’s argument that “each language imposes its own world view on its speakers” in his study on the anthropological evidence on the precursors of language.

In essence, the lexical items that will be used in this study are the relevant words, idioms, collocations and proverbs which feature in the training, political and leadership lexicon. It is, however, worthy of mention that this paper is not a study of the various underlying structures of the Igbo traditional political system. Rather, the study relies on a corpus of items from the Igbo lexicon as a means of projecting the Igbo philosophy of life, as well as interpreting the Igbo political world view. It is believed that the lexicon can provide clues to the people’s principle of consensus, good governance, individual rights and responsibilities, code of conduct for public officers, conflict resolution, among others.

The paper therefore is based on two broad fundamental assumptions. The first is that the set of lexical items which feature in traditional Igbo politics constitute the basis for framing or shaping the people's political culture. The second assumption is that the incorporation of the essence of these items in contemporary Igbo politics, leadership and training will be a step in the right direction. Moreover, the study seems justified because the lexicon are deeply embedded in the language and therefore culture of the people.

In our presentation and data analysis, we shall arrange them under five major headings: politics, democracy, leadership, governance and training. We shall present Igbo lexicon comprising of single words, collocations and idiomatic expressions, and discuss their relevance to the framing of the Igbo political culture, on one hand, and how these lexicon which encapsulate the Igbo philosophy can be incorporated into the cotemporary leadership in Africa. Some of these lexicon will be drawn from various dialects of Igbo where they are found to be most suitable.

In order to clear any possible misconception in pronouncing these lexicon, we shall adopt Igwe and Green (1963) tone marking convention. In this approach, syllables with high tone will be unmarked, while those with low tone ( ` ) and step tone ( ^ ) will be marked.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Here, we shall present some of the lexicon on politics, training and those for accessing good leadership and governance. The lexicon which encapsulate various aspects of Igbo thought and philosophy will be illustrated with the views of notable scholars in linguistics, Igbo history, politics and philosophy.

#### **Lexicon on politics**

By politics it is meant a style of running a government or an organisation. In life, we are involved in one form of politics or the other, even in our homes, hence the popular saying that man is a political animal. In other words, politics is one activity one cannot run away from in life. As Anyanwu (1993:31) puts it, "...we can assert that political tradition is the corpus of opinions, beliefs, customs, values, orientations and attitudes which a people have come to accept from generation to generation as valid or positive in the political processes of their polity". Political tradition like this, he opines becomes synonymous to political

culture which a people is associated with, as we often hear statements such as Nigerian politics, African politics, American politics, etc.

Political culture presents a people's attitude or style that is, their polity. Hence, Anyanwu (1993:32) again says

...political culture defines what is good government, the goals a community ought to pursue, code of conduct for public officers, individual rights and responsibilities as well as roles in the political process and indicates the standards for assessing or evaluating the performance of political institutions.

It is in line with this idea of the Igbo political culture that Onwuejeogwu (1975) explained the Igbo concept of political power and authority as one structured and determined by their various concepts which include this one in Example (1):

(1) *Umụnnà* → kinsmen. This basic Igbo political organisation follows the segmentary structure of patrilineage. Political power is diffused and highly democratised. The *umụnnà* system encourages political dialogue, equality, communalism and egalitarianism at all levels of lineage segments. As aptly put, Nwala (1985:168) opines that, for the Igbo, politics and government provide the means "of regulating normal life among brothers". Even where membership of other associations, such as the kingship system like the 'Nze na Ozo' chiefs, 'Ndi Ichie', etc. occur together, the basic political organisation remains the same, centred around the *umụnnà* and title system.

The systems in the Igbo political structure may not be clearly visible, but they are obviously there hence, Igbo communities maintained law and order and ordered their affairs before the advent of British rule as opined by Nwachukwu (1993). The articulative, aggregative, communicative rule-making and rule applications spill over into one another without formal partitions between them. Structures can only be located if we ask the correct functional questions.

The legislative function of the kindred is carried out in an assembly of all adult males of the kindred at the compound of the kindred chief who usually is the first born amongst his kinsmen. The age grades carry out the executive function. The *umụnnà* occasionally wield into disputes such as land and boundary disputes, divorce cases, inheritance matters, etc. in the various nuclear families that find it difficult to resolve such cases. The forum where the legislative functions are harnessed and executed is regarded as lexicon (2) and (3):



(5) *onụọhà* (the will of the people). In the organic Igbo community, the opinion of the people is not sought as an end in itself but only to help determine the communal will (*onụọhà*).

The mechanism for the determination of the will of the people derives directly from ancestral practice and boils down essentially to the injunction of consensus. Anyanwu (1993) observes that the principle of consensus in handling affairs in the Igbo political activities was not only applied in the various units of the socio-political structure, but also in associations like age grades, secret societies, professional guilds, and even in religious matters. In fact, it is believed that to achieve *onụọhà*, there must be consensus of opinion, what Osuagwu (1989) describes as:

(6) *onụgāōtù* (*dial.*). This requires that no opinion should be overlooked on any issue, rather, every opinion must be considered as a pragmatic necessity and in observance of the Igbo thought that no opinion is insignificant. This is also in demonstrated in this Igbo proverb:

(7) *E lelia nwa ite, o gbonyuọ oku*, which literally means that if you ignore the small pot it will boil over and put out the fire. This is a useful advice needed in any political structure that is built to help the people.

When the will of the people is formulated in the form of obligation, it becomes communal law. This is what is captured in the Igbo philosophy with the lexicon in example: (8) *iwuọhà*. When the will of the people becomes sufficiently established, it metamorphoses to culture - (9) *òmenàlà*. An *òmenàlà* assumes a special status in the society and a violation of it becomes an atrocity - (10) *Aru*.

### **Lexicon on democracy**

Democracy, whether primary or representative was the bulwark of the whole Igbo political system. Unanimity and all the rigorous processes and compromises (period of consultations that lead to it are all efforts made to contain the wishes of the majority as well as those of the minority). In short, they are designed to arrive at what may be abstractly called the general will of the people or community, a consensus as captured by these lexicon:

(11i) *ọhà zùrù mee*

(ii) *ọhà na-eme ezè*

(iii) *onụ̀òhà`*

(iv) *obiòhà`*

Unanimity becomes desirable since the Igbo conceive of politics and government not as the means whereby the stronger or many impose their will on the rest but as “the process of regulating normal life among brothers” (Nwala, 1985:168). This philosophy is captured by the following lexicon: (12) *Onū̀rie mà onụ̀ erìghì nà-àwa n’afa*, which literally translates as ‘when a mouth eats and the other does not eat it reports at divination’. Other lexicon for this belief are:

(12i) *A kpaa akpaa wee mefue nwa mere arū̀ ò` naghì awa n’afa*, literally meaning ‘when there is a general agreement to sell a mischievous child it does not disturb the peace of the community’.

(ii) *Akpaa akpaa à` rahụ̀ n’ute*, meaning ‘with general agreement everybody lies on the mat’.

In other words, the Igbo ecosystem does not condone or hide nepotism, rather, it preaches equal treatment in the first instance, or at least fair treatment to all. This is what they preach with this proverb (13): *E mee nwa`kà e mèrè ibè ya obi` àdì ya` mma`* - ‘When a child is treated like the peers, he/she feels happy’.

Isichei (1976) observes that democracy, as it exists today in the Western world, and even in Africa, including most of the present Igbo society, is full of limitations. Governments take decisions that many citizens disapprove of, even among those that elected them. Hence she asserts:

Minorities, even large ones, have little hope of having their political ideals put into practice. The average citizen has effectively no power to alter the network of regulations that govern his life. One of the things that struck the first Western visitors to Igbo land, was the extent to which democracy was truly practised (p. 21).

She continued her narration with comments by other Western visitors to Igbo land. According to her, the visitor to a Niger Igbo town said that he felt he was in a free land and among a free people, while another visitor, a Frenchman declared that true democracy existed in Igbo land.

### **Lexicon on governance**

For any true democracy to be possible, there must be a level playground for good governance. Even in the homes, for a happy union and easy and successful rearing (governance) of children and other households, the leader (the husband and father) and then the couple must adopt good and workable strategy in their governance.

Governance in Igbo land is unique in so many respects. Apart from the nuclear family level and the kindred, Isichei (1976) observed that the details of Igbo traditional government varied from place to place, its characteristic nature is always the same. Thus, the basic unit of Igbo life, she went on to report was the village, which she described as a small face-to-face society. She countered the assertion of historians whom she said had sometimes written as if large political units are 'more advanced' than small political units; and as if the change from small to large units was a form of progress.

In the modern world, the above assertion may appear true particularly when a large state, for instance, commands more resources for development, and more say which therefore implies more independence in international affairs. Isichei still contended that in traditional Igbo land enlargement of scale offered no obvious advantages, as the small scale of her political institutions made true democracy possible. Such lexicon as:

(14i) *Umunna nwezuo akụ ekworo alaa*. This literally means: 'If every member of the kindred is wealthy, bickering will stop'.

(ii) *Umunna kwe*; - 'If every member of the kindred conforms' (expectedly things will go right).

(iii) *Ọha adị eme nka/à dighi iri eme nka* - 'Crowd/ten people don't arrive at useful decisions'.

The above Igbo lexicon and more like that point to the Igbo philosophy on governance. It is obvious from above report that the traditional Igbo society decentralises its governance.

Further to decentralised system of governance, the traditional Igbo society through this system encourages her citizens to contribute to the progress of the

system and the society at large. Hence, the lexicon in (15) are used to reflect this tradition.

(15) *Obere azu kpata obere nku, nnukwu azu kpata nnukwu nku*. This would mean 'Let every individual contribute according to his might'.

Similarly, the Igbo traditional society cautions individuals and communities to act within their limits or ability as against what obtains in some other societies, especially in modern time where ability or capability is considered secondary. This is the major reason for high rate of corruption among leaders and the led today. See lexicon (16) and (17) for examples:

(16) *Nwa egbe na-agbasà odu kà udele, o ga-emekwa ihe udele ga-eme* – A kiter which brags like the vulture, will it be able to do what a vulture can do.

(17) *Oke soro ngwèrè maa mmiri, o koo ngwèrè o ga-akokwa oke* – The rat plays in the rain alongside the lizard, is it sure its body will dry when that of the lizard dries.

### **Lexicon on Leadership**

Leadership and governance are very closely related. Leadership is governance in action because governance provides the process for leadership. Hence, Osuagwu (1989), in his article entitled 'Concept of the organic community in Obowo' observed that under the concept of Erima, sovereignty is vested in *oha*, (the people) as shown by the saying *Oha na-awu eze*, literally: the people is sovereign, which is shortened to *ohanæze* in standard Igbo. Another Igbo lexicon similar to this is (18) '*Oha na-ekwu/ oha na-aka/ora na-ekwu* – opinion of the people prevails.

As sovereignty in the Erima community is vested on *oha*, this rules out the emergence of an individual to impose his will on *oha*. The idea is that no individual should lord it over everybody else. Hence this lexicon in Example (19) below derived from the dialect:

(19) *Otu onye anaghĩ awu nna m oha*, meaning that one person does not assume the father of all (people). A culture of single leadership, he continued "is therefore, not well developed".

However, as the need arises *oha* might designate somebody as spokesperson. This person is called (20) *Onu na-ekwuru oha*, or *Onuoha*. *Oha* can also delegate a representative,

(21) *Anyà òhà* to a larger assembly as literally ‘the eye of the community’. All these lexicon are precursors to the Igbo traditional style of leadership, which if adopted by modern leaders in their governance will create a better government and a free and happier citizens.

However, there are a list of Igbo lexicon that can serve as warning or check for poor or bad leadership. For instance, the following proverbs in Okafo (1999) are guide or advice to leaders and aspirants:

(22) *E jì anyà àma onye ga-amara nnà ya ehi* – A good leader is known by his appearance and action.

(23) *Nwanne onye na-àgba ajò egwu òkò ikù à na-àkọ ya* – A bad leader brings shame to his relation.

(24) *Ọnụ uto anaghị egburwe nwanyi gbufo ya ndụ* – Gourmandism does not spare the offender.

(25) *Onye kpatara nkụ arụrụ sị nᅡwèrè hìàrà ya ọrụ* – Anyone who fetched ant-infested firewood invites lizards to assist him.

(26) *Agadì nwanyi na-ete ògìrì nà-àrìọ ijiji mgbà* – An old woman that is cooking locust soup is baiting flies for wrestling.

While Example (22) is a positive one as it promotes good leadership, Examples (23) is a call on leaders to desist from acts that will blackmail his people. The proverb in Example (24) is an Igbo lexicon which warns leaders against gullibility while in office as this attracts great punishment. The present fight against corruption by the Nigerian government, and the punishment meted to culprits is a case in point. Examples (25) and (26) both warn against bad and reckless as such act brings restlessness and disturbance to the offender. Therefore, the traditional Igbo society provides checks and balances with in all aspects of governance and leadership exploits.

### **Lexicon on Training**

Training is important in governance and leadership as poor or lack of training is a prelude to poor performance or failure. Besides being relevant to governance and leadership, it is one important aspect of the Igbo philosophy for *òhà* to join hands in training the Igbo child for him to grow into a reputable Igbo citizen. In fact, the traditional Igbo society believe in the popular axiom that says: ‘Train a

child on the right way to go that when he grows he will not depart from it'. Hence, Igbo lexicon and proverbs were created for training based on various aspects of Igbo tradition, belief and general human endeavour. These include:

(27i) *Nwatà bulie nnà ya elù, ògòdò̀ ayòchiè̀ yà anyà.* – This means. If a child throws his father up, his loins will cover his eyes.

(ii) *Mmadù/ Nwatà anaghì èkwere/èchere chi ya ògù̀* – Nobody/ A child does not challenge his god to a fight.

These Igbo proverbs mainly teach respect or reverence, which if cultivated early in life aid in good behaviour and ultimately enhance good governance and leadership.

(28) *Aka ajà ajà nà-ebute ònù mmanù mmanù* – This is an Igbo proverb used to teach the instill of hard work and industry in the citizenry.

(29i) *Ikwu amaghì ibè èzi ya* – He who is ignorant of anything, the relation would teach him.

(ii) *Ụzụ amaghì akpụ egbè ya lee egbe anyà n'odù* – Blacksmith who does not know how to mould a gun should look at the tail of a kite.

(29) *Egbe bèrè, ùgò bèrè, ǹke s̀i ibè ya ebelà ǹkù kwapù yà* - Let the kite perch, and let the eagle perch; anyone which says the other will not perch let the wings break.

This proverb teaches accommodation and tolerance. This is one of the very important *attributes needed for good leadership*.

(30) *Ike agwụ agadi* – The aged never tires.

(ii) *Azụ eru ala* – Back that never touches the ground.

These lexicon promote skill and expertise and therefore encourage people to work hard to come out the best in their life endeavours.

(31) *A ghara ndụ kpaà akụ, onye iro erie* – If life is overlooked because of quest for wealth, the enemy will take the wealth.

This proverb warns people to be order their priorities well. In the governance and leadership parlance, it cautions people to be properly guided in their planning.

(32) *Onye hūrūrē ebe ògòdò nnù ihē nà-àgba òkù ya tòrò ǹkè ya ẁnye* – This means:

Anybody who sees a costly cloth on fire, let him/her untie his/hers and throw into the fire.

This is a solidarity call or group participation in matters that concern members of the same community or group. It preaches show concern of concern in matters that concern other people.

(33) *Ìte ò gbasaghì m dàà ò buru mputu m̀putu (dial.)* – If the pot which does not belong to me breaks, it becomes fun.

This lexicon teaches that we should be equally precautionous over general matters otherwise if they get bad it will affect all. For leaders, it advises them not to pay special attention only to their own or immediate community needs in their governance.

(34) *Ụta gbatara elekē ǹtì òbā ya riè ògù mkpuru akū-* This means: Any arrow that hits the artful bird ‘eleke’ deserves to be compensated with twenty arrows.

This is a lexicon used to encourage children, and by extension leaders to strive for great feats.

(35) *Arūshì kpakaria ikē à gwa ya osisi e jì t̀ọ ya-* This means: If a deity proves to be too powerful it will told the wood with which it was carved.

This proverb is used to warn the boastful; and the leaders who claim more than they do.

(36) *Ò naghì abụ a kochighì mbubọ à zaba Ezeòdumegwu (dial.)* – This implies that anybody who has not been able cultivate his surrounding plot does not deserve to answer Ezeòdumegwu.

(37) *À fuhọ nde kwu ọtọ n'okwu Ezekwuabò mà ya fòzie nde tukwu ana (dial.)* – Those who are standing in Ezekwuabò square have not been seen let alone those squatting.

The proverbs in (36) and (37) are used mainly to train children to always operate within their level, and not to match words and might with their superiors. In the same vein, leaders at various levels of governance are by these sayings advised not to assume any position that is not within their schedule.

(38) *Onye jụ Ògwùgwù ò nịrụ Udō (dial.)* – This saying collected from a dialect of Igbo literally means: Anyone that refuses to swear to Ògwùgwù (deity) must swear to Udō (deity).

This saying is a sort of warning to people, including the children that anyone who attempts to circumvent any due process will be caught up by the other. Life is procedural.

(39) *Òme ihe jìde ofo* – Everyone should be upright in his actions.

This is a common Igbo axiom used to direct people's actions towards others. It tallies with the saying: 'One who goes to equity must come with clean hands'. It calls on people to be properly guided so as not to take any blameable action. It should therefore be a very important watch word for any leader that wishes succeed.

(40) *È jighị̀ mgbo mkpachako àgba aḍaka*. Literally put, it means that no one shoots a chimpanzee with by picking pebbles.

This Igbo proverb calls on everyone to be well prepared before engaging on any serious feat. In governance, any serious leader must be well prepared with good plans and other resources to achieve his vision.

Indeed, the Igbo lexicon and proverbs used for training are inexhaustible, perhaps because the Igbo traditional society is strongly built on training her citizens to grow into useful leaders in future. These lexicon are good tools for any progressive society, particularly the modern society which appear to be derailing from known tradition.

## **Conclusion**

The Igbo lexicon is a veritable thought and philosophy which are germane for sustainable governance and training. The present political proceedings in Nigeria and Africa as a whole need overhaul; and a study of the traditional Igbo political practice as enshrined in the myriad of relevant Igbo lexicon will be of great help.

Ejiofor (1974:1) talks about politics and the Igbo people thus:

Whatever politics is considered to be, the Igbo people as a general group want to be there, take part in the proceedings and register their voice and presence in both, as individuals and as groups. This is their concept of

political life; the various classifications which that concept can accommodate relate to egalitarian participation as their greatest common factor

All the words of this quote speak for the message of this paper. The lexicon on politics, democracy, governance and then training are encapsulated Igbo thought and philosophy that need not be left to be eroded by the torrent of modernisation, rather they should be documented and used as check to the modern practice.

Therefore, effort should be made by linguists, philosophers, historians and other scholars to collect and study more of such lexicon. This will enhance the growth of the Igbo language and also restore it from endangerment and re-strategise it for the language globalisation race.

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