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African World and Ideology

Religion and religious beliefs and their effects on the African community are the key to understanding the African world and ideology. This, as Mbiti has rightly pointed out, is because, "It is religion, more than anything else, which colours their (the African) empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. That is the philosophical understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships. Up to a point in history this traditional religious attitude maintained an almost absolute monopoly over African concepts and experiences of life"¹.

Ideologically speaking, the African world is a world of inanimate, animate and spiritual beings. The African is conscious of the influence of each category of these beings in the universe. Their existence, for the African, is reality; so also is the fact that they interact as co-existent beings in the universe. This idea of the world is accepted by the African and is passed on from one generation to another. It forms the basis of the African's ideology in relation to his existence in the world. This idea helps the African to define and explain intelligibly, the rationale behind all that he does, wants to do, what he can or, is expected to do in life. Africans, in general, have their own ideas and beliefs about life in the world, about the world and the life outside it. This is why it is not illogical for Africans to tell stories connecting animals, human beings and the spirits all acting together in a community.

In this regard, Professor E. Obiechina has rightly said: "The traditional (African) imagination can also exhibit unique versatility and an acuteness of perception beyond that of people who subsist only on modern realities. It is sensitive to the deeper layers of experience in a way that is no longer common in modern industrial societies. It perceives without difficulty the reality of the world of spirits, gods and ancestors and the mystical bonds that unite all beings. Whether in their folklore and mythology, in their symbolism and figures of language, in their religious and magical beliefs, they have a total view of the universe as a continuum and a perpetual flow of being and experience comprehending the visible and invisible universe, the world of nature and the supernatural, and of the living and the dead"².

Again, the African ideas of life, man, and the universe are also dependent on practical experiences through the ages as communities. The African world view is therefore affected by events and contacts in social life which make the African relate to other ideas (foreign) from his own background. On this level the African ideology must be understood in terms of the African experience; because the realities of life must be defined in terms of existential postulates and explained in specific normative African concepts³. For instance, before the coming of the European, the Africans had specific ideas and beliefs about deities and spirits and their activities. When the European appeared, the Africans saw him as a strange and mysterious creature. From his activities the African began to think of him as a spirit. The Igbo⁴ clearly said: *Bekee wu agbara*, which literally means, the white man is a spirit. In the same way, the Efik said: *Mbakara edi ekpo*, which also means, the white man is a spirit. Therefore, the Igbo and the Efik whose life, in various ways was a continuous attempt to imitate and be a "spirit" automatically switched over to imitating and becoming the White man. This explains, in part, the fluency with which the Igbo and Efik in Nigeria embrace the European culture.

¹ Mbiti J.S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, 1975, P.262

² Obiechina E., *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African novel*, London – Cambridge Uni. Press, 1975, P.131

³ Onwubiko Oliver, *African Thought , Religion and Culture*, Enugu, 1991, P.4

⁴ ,Igbo' und ,Efik' sind Volks Gruppen im Ostern von Nigeria.

The Igbo and Efik experiences are examples that can be verified among other African peoples. What must be emphasized is that no matter the effect of the events and contacts on them, the Africans have directly or indirectly tried to protect, both ideologically and practically, what is of value in the African way of life. The fact that the study of African Tradition and Culture is today becoming very important in Africa, is self evident of the attempt to protect African values and thought patterns.

Furthermore, in the 'authentic African world', how the African feels about the things around him must be related to his ideological formation within various contexts. The African value systems and this determines what he does and how he will do it. This also depends, to a large extent, on the African idea of what is possible and what is not possible within the cultural context. Thus Onwubiko wrote: "ideas fashioned by the culture become the indispensable element that helps African peoples in their communities to deal with the questions of survival and existence"⁵. These ideas helps also in the preservation of African cultural values.

African cultural values

African Cultural Values have been discussed by J.A. Sofola⁶ and many other African writers. One can summarize their views into eight African Cultural Values which includes: (i) Sense of community life; (ii) Sense of good human relations; (iii) Sense of the sacredness of life; (iv) Sense of hospitality; (v) Sense of the sacred and of religion; (vi) Sense of time; (vii) Sense of respect for authority and the elders; (viii) Sense of language and proverbs. We shall now examine each of these African Values Briefly.

Sense of Community

A popular African proverb comes to mind here to express the African sense of community. It says: "Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament"⁷. The African idea of security and its value depends on personal identification with and within the community. Communalism in Africa is a system that is both suprasensible and material in its terms of reference. Both are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally "godmade" because it transcends the people who live in it now, and it is "Man-made" because it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it now⁸. Therefore, the authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his community.

The community is the custodian of the individual, hence he must go where the community goes . In the material term of reference, the individual must go to the "community centre" or village square which is a social, political, judicial and religious centre. It is the communal meeting place for political discussions, communal tribunals, sports and games. It is therefore a traditional place of congregation for the entire community. In this sense the community is "man-made". Again, the important events in and around the community are well known to its members. And because at the community centre, their tutelary deity often has a shrine, the centres therefore become also the centre of communal religious worship, sacrifices and festivities. In this sense the community there gathered becomes "god-made".

This community also, within this transcendental term of reference (god-made), becomes the custodian of the individual's ideas. This is why, beyond the community - the clan - for the African, "there stood the void in strong and ever present contrast. Outside this ancestrally chartered system there lay no possible life, since 'a man without lineage is a man without citizenship': without identity, and therefore without

⁵ Onwubiko Oliver, Op.cit., P.5

⁶ Sofola J.A., African Culture and the African Personality, Ibadan, 1982

⁷ Davidson B., The African Genius, Boston, 1969, P.31

⁸ Onwubiko Oliver, Op.cit., P.14

allies...; or as the Kongo put it, a man outside his clan is like a grasshopper which has lost its wings"⁹. The clan here is 'clan vital' that is 'a living clan'¹⁰.

In another sense, the community offers the African the psychological and ultimate security as it gives its members both physical and ideological identity. It must be noted that in the African mentality, the community as an entity remains, while individuals, as persons, come and go. Therefore the Africans emphasize community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity. Its aim is to produce and present an individual as a community-culture-bearer. Culture is a community property and must therefore be community-protected.

Also, the individual in an African community is in the 'Clan vital' protected. His individual identity is not emphasized at the expense of his community identity. This is why individualism, as an ideology and principle of life, is not encouraged in Africa, even though it is not destroyed. In the words of Steve Biko: "We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism."¹¹.

Furthermore, "Living together" and the sense of "community of brothers and sisters" are the basis of, and the expression of, the extended family system in Africa. The rationale behind it according to Davidson is that "balance of kingship relations, seen as essential to the ideal balance with nature that was itself the material guarantee of survival, called for specific patterns of conduct. Individuals might have rights, but they had them only by virtue of the obligations, they fulfilled to the community. This explains (the African) logic of regarding legality in terms of individual obligations, not of individual rights. At least in (our) jural and moral assumptions, (our) communities lived at an opposite extreme from the 'free enterprise individualism' which supposes that the community has rights only by virtue of the obligations it fulfils to the individual"¹².

The philosophy behind the African communalism, therefore guaranteed individual responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship. The prosperity of a single person, says an African adage, does not make a town rich. But the prosperity of the town makes persons rich. Put in another way, a person can only be truly safe in a safe community. Seen on the economic level Biko observed that in an African community: "Poverty was a foreign concept. This could only be really brought about to the entire community by an adverse climate during a particular season. It never was considered repugnant to ask one's neighbours for help if one was struggling. In almost all instances there was help between individuals, tribe, chief and chief, etc. even in spite of war"¹³. This explains why a community may have poor people but it may not have beggars¹⁴.

Also, the traditional African community attitude to work was another factor which made it impossible for us to have beggars within the 'clan vital'. It is true that "When a job had to be done, the whole community turned out with supplies and music and proceeded to sing and dance its way through to the successful conclusion of each particular chore. In this way work was converted into a pleasurable productive pastime"¹⁵. Generally speaking, the goodwill and brotherly atmosphere, normally inspired and sustained during the work period, by music, justifies its usage. But what is more important is the solidarity it

⁹ Davidson B., Op.cit, P.55

¹⁰ 'Clan vital' – 'a living clan': is a community where real life is assured, where one can suffer neither social nor cultural alienation. It is a clan that is alive because life in it is human and humane.

¹¹ Biko Steve, I write what I like, New York, 1978, P.42

¹² Davidson B., Op.cit, P.57

¹³ Biko Steve, Op.cit., P.43

¹⁴ A beggar in this context is someone who is not accommodated in the elastic means of the community's life and resources. He is outside the "clan vital". He has no hope of survival.

¹⁵ Okafor F.C., Africa at Crossroads, New York, 1974, P.22

fosters. Thus Obiechina wrote, "Whether the musical situation is meant to provide entertainment or is created for ritual and religious purpose, the ultimate effect seems to be the same: to bring the community together"¹⁶.

Sense of Good human relations

Life in the African community is based on the philosophy of live-and-let-live. This principle is based on the concept of the 'Clan vital' and applies to a concrete community. According to Onwubiko, "Inter-community relationship realised in the interaction between individuals of different communities is different from the intra-community relationship based on inter-personal relationship realised in a definite community, among its members, to express the practical traditional African concept of humane living"¹⁷. Chieka Ifemesia sees Humane Living among an African people as a concept which is defined as "...a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests and values; a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings"¹⁸.

Relationship between individuals recognises their worth as human beings and not only what they possess or what they can do for each other. However, these can come as secondary considerations, in terms of reciprocity and in terms of inter-personal relationship. People help one another without demanding immediate or an exact equivalent remuneration. Everyone is mindful that each person has something to contribute to his welfare, some time and some how. A Hausa¹⁹ proverb illustrates this point clearly. It says: "Friendship with the ferryman right from the dry season means that when the rains come, you will be the first to cross". This proverb emphasizes constancy in friendship. In it, the worth of the ferryman, as a human being is not determined solely by what he can offer during the rains, hence he must be befriended right from the dry season when his occupation is not in strict demand.

The art of dialogue and conversation is a cherished value in African human relations. People freely discuss their problems and look for suggestions and solutions together. The unwillingness to talk to people about either private or public affairs can be interpreted as bad manners or sign of enmity. Above all the African believes that he who discusses his affairs with others hardly runs into difficulties or makes mistakes in the execution of his plans. According to Gokana people of the Rivers State of Nigeria: "Kola nen ea gbi bula gbo nen, na olo ba m tagan", which means: Anyone who seeks public opinion does not enter into trouble. In the same way, the Igbo of Nigeria also say: "Ome akara oha oghom anaghi agho ya", which means, he who tells people what he does never suffers mishap.

A good human relationship based on inter-personal communication has always been emphasized in the African Community. Biko observed: "Ours has always been a man-centred society. Westerners have in many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but applying to a whole group of people who find themselves together whether through work or residential requirements"²⁰. But the discussions must respect individuals' sentiments, hence conversations that may cause misgivings are avoided. That is why the Yoruba²¹ people say: 'The fingers of a man who has only nine are not counted in his presence'.

Hence, in an African community, every one is accommodated. This African sense of accommodation accounts for why, "In traditional African culture, the weak and the aged; the incurable, the helpless, the sick were affectionately taken care of in the comforting family atmosphere"²². The "comforting family

¹⁶ Obiechina E., Op.cit., P.58

¹⁷ Onwubiko Oliver, Op.cit., P.19

¹⁸ Ifemesia Chieka, Traditional Humane Living among the Igbo, Enugu , 1979, P.2

¹⁹ ‚Hausa‘ sind Volks Gruppen im Northern von Nigeria. Die sind hauptsächlich Moslems

²⁰ Biko Steve, Op.cit., P.41

²¹ ‚Yoruba‘ sind Volks Gruppen im Western von Nigeria.

²² Okafor F.C., Op.cit., P.23

atmosphere" is provided by the extended family system. It is a system that ultimately rested and still rests on the philosophy of "live-and-let-live", otherwise known as "the eagle-and-kit" principle. This principle is according to Onwubiko "a principle which defined rights and duties, responsibilities and obligations towards the less fortunate, those incapacitated in one way or another"²³. For instance, a man had the obligation to cater for the widow and orphans of his dead relative. Failure to do this earns him strong public criticism and as a result, it is difficult to find someone in the community without help. Therefore no beggars existed!

Again, in many African communities, the killing of a kinsman, the contrast of caring for him, is not only a crime but also an abomination. Capital punishment or expulsion from the community which tantamounts to death is approved. But if an outsider is killed, the offence takes a different dimension and is viewed with a lesser degree of gravity. Hence offences such as adultery, theft, murder, etc. are judged, not in themselves, but as they affect or disrupt the peace of a particular community. This is where and how the African sense of community and Human relations, when misplaced, promote "nepotism". The African therefore should carry the ideals of his community into the wider world - another community. The values cherished in his community should enable him know that the other man is his brother as a human being. Therefore, the Igbo proverb which says: "Don't laugh at a distant boat being tossed by the waves, your brother may be in it"; should now be: "Don't laugh at a distant boat being tossed by the waves, a human being is in it".

Sense of the sacredness of Life

The African does not like violence per se. This is because shedding of blood is abhorred. People who were killed were those whose continued existence was a threat to the life of others and to the peace of the community. In such cases, the principle that it is better for one man to die than for all the community to perish, applied. War was only taken to as a last resort, that is when all formal and normal courses of action to search for peace had failed. Murder was not encouraged, especially within the clan. If a man conscientiously killed another man within the community, he was killed himself. But if he killed a kinsman inadvertently, he was exiled for some long period.

However, murder is officially committed during war or in self defence. In this case, the murderer is not expected to eat until he has ritually washed the blood of the slain man off his hands. This ritual helps to free the murderer from the anger of the God's. This is why "In many (African) tribes the killing of a kinsman, the antithesis of caring for him, was not only a crime but also an abomination. After the murderer had been executed, his family would have to perform sacrifices and rites to remove the stain of evil and ward off the anger of the gods"²⁴. In this light, unborn children are protected and, abortion is tabooed. Sources of life are sacred. Trees and animals believed to facilitate reincarnation are also sacred.

Furthermore, the sacredness associated with life goes to explain the rigidity with which the Africans treat and regard sexual intercourse and the sex organs. In fact sex taboos and the demand for virginity before marriage stems from the fact that Africans believe that: "The blood of virginity is the symbol that life has been preserved, that the spring of life has not already been flowing wastefully, and that both the girl and her relatives have preserved the sanctity of human reproduction"²⁵.

Also, "The sanctity of human reproduction" derives from the sanctity of life in the African concept. This idea of sanctity of life makes it an abomination for anyone, under any circumstances to take his own life. Suicide was never permitted. Punishment for it was such that the person was not buried since his corpse was also believed to be abominable to mother earth. The Africans prize life above every other thing. The Igbo saying: Nduka - life is supreme - is expressive of the African regard for life. Any form of

²³ Onwubiko Oliver, Op.cit., P.21

²⁴ Amadi E., Ethics in Nigerian Culture, Ibadan, 1982, P.58

²⁵ Mbiti J.S., Op.cit., P.141

materialism which ultimately leads to the destruction of life is alien and destructive of the African culture and concept of human life and should therefore be avoided.

Sense of hospitality

The African sense of hospitality is one of the African values that is still quite alive. The Africans easily incorporate strangers and give them lands to settle hoping that they would go one day, and the land would revert to the owner. For the Africans, one cannot opt out of his original community completely. So they did not imagine that others could.

Africans have symbolic ways of expressing welcome. These are in forms of presentation of kola nuts, traditional gin, coconuts, etc; in various communities. These are given to a visitor to show that he is welcome and safe. Among the Igbo, the basis of hospitality is the generally accepted principle that a guest should not harm his host and that when he departs, he should not develop a hunch back on the way home. Dr. Festus Okafor has summarised the African attitude to strangers thus: "In traditional African culture, whenever there is food to be taken, everyone present is invited to participate even if the food was prepared for far less number of people without anticipating the arrival of visitors. It would be a height of incredible bad manners for one to eat anything however small, without sharing it with anyone else present, or at least expressing the intention to do so"²⁶.

Sense of the sacred and of religion

In traditional African societies there were no atheists. This is because religion, in the indigenous African culture, was not an independent institution. It is an integral and inseparable part of the entire culture. Religion in the African sense was practical. One's entire action is reflective of one's religious concepts and practices as is seen in the ordering of society. This is because social morality is dependent on religion, and what Bolaji Idowu says of the Yoruba can pass for many African people. He says: "With the Yoruba, morality is certainly the fruit of religion. They do not make any attempt to separate the two; and it is impossible, for them to do so without disastrous consequences"²⁷.

The traditional African culture fashions moral, religious and philosophical attitudes to life. All were interrelated in reality. The result of inseparability of religion from morality was that: "The ancient Africa was far from being an abode of laissez-faire morality. There were strict moral principles and determined code of conduct. Custom laid down the code of law which established the nature of right-doings and custom established penalties and taboos against malefactors. Moral sanctions were mainly religious sanctions, and these metaphysical sanctions were truly effective"²⁸.

The sense of respect, and the idea of the sacred filled the African as he approached religious elements and matters. It has been admitted by African and European authors that Africans do not know how to live without religion. Whereas not every philosophy is a religion, every religion is a philosophy of a type²⁹. In this case philosophy is an offspring of religion and a child that constantly returns to its mother. Religion protects philosophy within the community culture. Mbiti, therefore was right to assert that in traditional African there were no atheists.

²⁶ Okafor F.C., Op.cit., P.21

²⁷ Idowu Bolaji, God in Yoruba Belief, London, 1962, P.146

²⁸ Okafor F.C., Op.cit., P.25

²⁹ Onwubiko Oliver, Op.cit., P.24

Sense of time

The question of the African sense of time has arisen because of some dangerous conclusions some writers on Africa have drawn. Strange enough some of them are Africans. Here we would like to pay attention to the views of Mbiti on this question. He began to discuss the "African concept of time as a key to our understanding of the basic religious and philosophical concepts". But his findings and conclusions are very strange. According to him: "The question of time is of little or no academic concern to African people in their traditional life. For them, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred: which are immediately to occur... The most significant consequence of this is that, according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking"³⁰.

The linear concept of time is not 'Western' but Judeo-Christian. Cyclic notion of time, was part of the pre-Christian western culture. And when Mbiti talks of time as being of no academic importance among the African people, he is thinking of time in terms of "education" which he, in this context, must be considering as a purely western cultural academics. He forgot that time, within our African culture was socialised. "Thus time apart from being reckoned by such events as the first and second cock-crow, sunrise, sunset, overhead sun, or length of shadow, is also reckoned by meal-times, wine-tapping times, time of return from the farm and so on. These factors are not arbitrary. For instance, the use of meal periods does not imply that all eat their meals at exactly the same time, but that every one has a reasonably accurate idea of what is meant"³¹. Obiechina, here, has made a striking distinction between the "clocktime" and "socialised time"³². He brought out clearly the concept of time and the different elements with which it is reckoned in traditional African culture.

In the African culture, time is polychronous in the sense that a person can do three or more things within a given period but simultaneously. Clock time thinks of them being done successively. For instance, a woman in a typical Igbo village could be doing her cooking, at the same time cracking her palm kernel, she may still within this period attend to her baby and would be prepared to attend to anything that may come up. In a natural image, some authors have depicted this polychronous concept and use of time in Africa with the image of an African woman who could be pregnant, while at the same time carrying a baby on her back and at the same time carrying a load on her head. Combining responsibilities is an aspect of our culture that is directly influenced by our communalism and our sense of time. Therefore time was for man to control and not to control man. This does not mean, nor imply that Africans had no sense of punctuality in their concept of time.

Despite the events Obiechina mentioned in the quotation above to denote time, the Africans also make use of market days to indicate definite time and use of weeks to denote cyclic time. Historic time according to Onwubiko "is determined by reference to landmarks in the life of the community, to contemporaneous events or by recourse to a genealogical 'chat'"³³. The African can refer to any period in their history, no matter how distant. When events that took place in the "infinite past" are referred to, the Africans use symbolic expressions such as "when lizards were few and far apart". The saying is based on another one. The Africans (Igbos) say, he who has no house has no lizards. Therefore, the saying - 'when lizards were few and far apart' refers to when there were few people on earth. Achebe tells us in the words of Ezeulu, as he - Ezeulu - recounts the antiquity of his priesthood that: "At that time... when lizards were still in ones and twos, the whole people assembled and chose me to carry their new deity"³⁴. It must be pointed out that this is part of the priestly recitation of the history of the origin of that deity.

³⁰ Mbiti J.S., Op.cit., P.16-17

³¹ Obiechina E., Op.cit., P.123

³² "Socialised time": is the use of time which does not sacrifice social duties and human relations on the altar of the clock-time punctuality.

³³ Onwubiko Oliver, Op.cit., P.26

³⁴ Achebe C., Arrow of God, London, 1975, P.70

Also, Mbiti's belief that the Africans do not conceive of infinite future time is not correct because the Africans do believe in the future and can also conceive of the future. Thus Kato wrote: "...We absolutely believe in the future . We even believe in a future resurrection. This is demonstrated by burial ceremonies and the contact we maintain with the spirits of the dead"³⁵.

It is not uncommon to hear people talking of "African time" to mean that Africans have no sense of punctuality. This statement always refers to the half-Europeanised and half de-Africanised Africans who are finding it difficult to adjust to the "clock-time" category. The traditional African is a master of time and not otherwise. This is why time is socialised, that is, time is programmed into socio-cultural norms of human behaviour and inter-personal relationship. If, according to Nkem Nwankwo, "Punctuality is not one of the virtues of the Aniocha man", it is because, "He takes time over his snuff and his palm wine and if you attempted to hurry him from either he would excuse himself by reminding you of the proverb; where the runner reaches there the walker will reach eventually"³⁶. The most important thing was to arrive.

Finally, it must be pointed out that on the one hand, Africans do have and conceive of time in the punctual sense. That is, at a particular time things must happen, have effect, or must be done. This can easily be discovered in African religious concepts. There are specific times sacrifices must be offered and no more. On the other hand, the African use of time does not sacrifice social duties and human relations on the alter of the clock time punctuality.

Sense of Respect for Authority and elders

In the words of William Conton: "Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness"³⁷. Though it is natural for the African to respect, an elder, this respect in some cases, can be relative to what "we can find" and admire in an elder. It is true that respect for elders starts within one's immediate family. This is why the Yoruba say "Obileye", which means, parents have dignity and respect.

The elders in Africa are respected for many reasons. For e.g. they are believed to be the teachers and directors of the young. Among the Efik, it is said: "The words of one's elders are greater than amulets", it means that they give more protection than the amulet does. In the same way, the Igbo say: He who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle. The oracles are believed to give the infallible truths, thus the elders are also believed to say the truth and their words and instructions are heeded to for the promotion of good behaviour among the young. A typical example of the practical moral effect of the elders' words are contained in this poem of Matei Markwei: "In our little village when elders are around, boys must not look at girls and girls must not look at boys because the elders say, that is not good"³⁸.

Furthermore, the elders are taken to be the repository of communal wisdom and therefore they are conceded leadership in the affairs of the people. One of the reasons for this is the nearness of the elders to the ancestors. And in the African concept, "Legitimate power lay in the office sanctioned by ancestral norms, not in the person; and the person lost his right to exact obedience once he abused that office"³⁹. But the elders themselves respect authority and hardly abuse it, and often are committed to the demands of their office.

³⁵ Kato B.H., *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, Kenya, Kisumu, 1976, P.61

³⁶ Nwankwo Nkem, Danda, London, 1975, P.42

³⁷ Conton William, *The African*, London, 1966, P.21

³⁸ Matei Markwei, *Life in our Village*, in *African writing* (ed), P. Zebala & C. Rossell, London, 1979, P.15

³⁹ Davidson B., *Op.cit*, P.200

The respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the maintenance of custom and tradition. The young are always looking forward to being elders and they are often told that if a child respects an elder, he would be respected by the young when he becomes an elder. The care of the aged, as an African institution, is situated within the family. It is so cherished and so organised that there is no need, in the African setting, for nursing homes for the aged as exist today in Europe and America. The idea of old people's home and its introduction into Africa would lead to the abuse of the African sense of and respect for old age.

According to Onwubiko, "... respect for elders also has a corresponding responsibility, on the part of the elders attached to it, and the reception of this respect is dependent on the execution of that responsibility; it is based on the reciprocal exercise of duties/rights, based on the old/young relationship"⁴⁰. The adult who does his duty demands this right. In Igbo symbolism, the socio-political life, within the cultural context, is represented by a drum from which the elders must beat out the music and the pace at which the young must dance. If the elders beat, "okoro eto", that means, may the young never mature - the young naturally would begin to dance "anyi asoghi anya okemmadu", that means, we do no longer respect the elders. But if the elders beat the normal music and, instead, the young dance: "we do no longer respect the elders", the elders automatically begin to beat: "may the young never mature".

In another symbolism, the elder/young relationship is expressed in the gun/detonator complementarity. The Igbo say: "okemmadu wu egbe Okorobia wu igu. Ma igu adighi na egbe o naghiekwu okwu. Ma egbe adighi igu enweghi ebe o ga ano". That is, the elder is the gun, the young man is igu⁴¹. If there is no igu in the gun it cannot fire and sound. If there is no gun, igu would have nowhere to rest, it thus becomes useless. This symbolism is concerned with the complementary roles of the old and the young in the life and affairs of the community.

Sense of Language and proverbs

Language expressed in speech is an important vehicle of thought and culture. People express their thought in speech and both are determined, to a great extent, by their culture. The culture element in language has been noted by Swartz and Alland when they noted that different language organise the world differently, and that no individual is free to describe with absolute impartiality what he observes in other cultures because he must be constrained by certain modes of interpretation. The principle of "relativity" in this regard holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar⁴².

There is an African proverb which says that "the stranger who returns from a journey may tell all he has seen, but he cannot explain all". This is because, for him to explain all, he must share the people's language categories. This is why translations are often defective. The famous Italian proverb says: "Traddutore traditore", which means, a translator is a traitor. Put in another way, the French say: "Les traductions sont comme les femmes: lorsqu'elles sont helles, elles ne sont pas fideles, et losqu'elles sont fideles, elles ne sont pas belles". This, in English, runs thus: translations are like women: when they are beautiful, they are not faithful, and when they are faithful, they are not beautiful.

That a translation is not "beautiful" when it is faithful to the original language only expresses the inability of the stranger to appreciate the beauty native to the language. For the African, if an individual is not able to communicate with the native language, the individual, ideologically, puts himself outside the community. Speaking a language, does not, in the African sense, depend on the peripheral knowledge of the language. It depends on the ability to express oneself adequately in the proverbs and idioms of the

⁴⁰ Onwubiko Oliver, Op.cit., P.29

⁴¹ „Igu“: gun powder needed to operate the African local gun (egbe)

⁴² Swartz M.J., Culture, New York, 1980, P.366; Alland A., To be Human – An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, New York, 1981, P.33

language community. These proverbs, idioms, riddles are based and determined by the culture of the community. According to an African saying: “The child who carries an elder's bag has a very good chance of being a wise man in his life. He follows his father to meetings and places, and listens to the wise words the elders speak. The result is that he knows at an early age those idioms and proverbs with which we fool the foolish and baffle the stranger, and also the custom of the land”⁴³.

Also, familiarity with proverbs, riddles and idioms of a community, means a thorough knowledge of that community. This is because these are drawn from, and refer to, the environment, social order and behaviour common in that community. They determine the norms of action in that community and above all, they are didactic in nature. According to Okafor, “...what James Johnson admitted of the Yoruba Moral system can be said of many other African communities. According to Johnson, the Yoruba moral system taught religiousness, reverence for ancestors and authority, filial piety, chastity, truthfulness, honesty and kindness. These were taught through different avenues of acculturation, including parables and proverbs”⁴⁴.

Furthermore, proverbs can be looked at from another point of view as a symbolic language in which the discovery of the meaning of the words and phrases demands a penetration of the mind of the speaker. This could be why the Yoruba say that proverbs are horses we ride to search for truth. In another way, the Igbo say that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. In short, the use and understanding of proverbs mark the adult usage and maturity in an African language.

In the “Arrow of God”, Ogasulobodo summarises the crisis in Umuaro with a cluster of proverbs thus: “... when a handshake passes the elbow it becomes another thing. The sleep that lasts from one market day to another has become death. The, man who likes meat of the funeral ram, why does he recover when sickness visits him? The mighty tree falls and the birds scatter in the bush ... The little bird which hops off the ground and lands on an anthill may not know it but it is still on the ground... A common snake which a man sees all alone may become a python in his eyes;... The very thing which kills Mother Rat is always there to make sure that its young ones never open their eyes... The boy who persists in asking what happened to his father before he has enough strength to avenge him is asking for his father's fate... The man who belittles the sickness which Monkey has suffered should ask to see the eyes which his nurse got from blowing the sick fire... When death wants to take a little dog it prevents it from smelling even excrement”⁴⁵. These proverbs were spoken within the traditional usage of familiar and local images to bring home to the addressee the content of the speech. One is truly a member of the community if he can live within this climate and level of communication in it.

⁴³ Munoye John, *The Only Son*, London, 1977, P.31.

⁴⁴ Okafor F.C., *Op.cit.*, P.33

⁴⁵ Achebe C., *Arrow of God*, London, 1975, P.65