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# The Social Implications of Some Nigerian Yoruba and Igbo Proverbs on Wisdom

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wisdom is the quality of having experience, knowledge and good judgment; it is also in line with the quality of being wise or the ability to think and act using knowledge, commonsense, understanding and insight. The Cambridge English dictionary defined wisdom as the ability to use knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgment. The Greek word for Wisdom is “*paideia*.” It means more than being cultured and well educated; it implies an ethical obligation to improve society and an attitude of caring (Aubrey and Cohen, 1999).

While Knowledge (*senso stricto*) is related to action, Wisdom is related to options and how to judge what we should do (McIntyre, 1985). Therefore, Wisdom is making (human) sense of Data, Information, and Knowledge and is composed of Values and Vision (Nonaka and Kyoto, 2008).

Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others (Tsoukas, 2005). According to Sir Geoffrey Vickers (cited by Tsoukas, 2005) the business of government is the regulation of institutions; such regulations are guided by purposes and values. Vickers’s “appreciative judgment” belongs to this Wisdom level. Western society has assumed that science and technology would solve all human problems, but they have not. Instead, the evolution of Knowledge has caused an involution of Wisdom; the sense-making of Wisdom has been pushed aside by the hubris of Knowledge. As a result, the 20th century ended up being the cruelest century ever.

The key issue at the Wisdom level can be summarized by a phrase from Jerome Kohlberg

(founder of the famous KKR investment firm): “Every value has a cost: no cost, no value.” Thus, it is not that we lack a long tradition of wisdom (Bloom, 2004; McIntyre, 1985). It is that as individuals, organizations, and nations, we are often unwilling to pay the price of values. To increase the validity of our Knowledge (*senso stricto*) claims, we need to reflect not only on what we do and how we do it, but even more relevant, to question why we do it and for whom (Tsoukas, 2005). Knowledge does not provide the questions or the values that allow us to decide which option to act upon; such questions and answers come from Wisdom (Tsoukas, 2005).

According to Nonaka and Kyoko (2008), the Values component of the level includes Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, three of the four that Aristotle (cited by McIntyre, 1985) saw as the transcendental properties of being. The fourth transcendental property is Unity, which in Adizes (2009) terms can be understood as Integration. Thus, Wisdom is more important than Technology (Nonaka and Kyoko, 2009; Tsoukas, 2005). Vision consists of a vivid and owned image of the organization we want to become. It is our contention that the energy required for organizational change resides in that “want.” What individuals and organizations are is reflected in what they do. Thus, for Adizes (1992), it is better to be than to know. In summary, Wisdom comes from making sense of Knowledge, just as Knowledge comes from making sense of Information, and Information comes from making sense of Data (Aubrey and Cohen, 2009). Society’s current emphasis on Information and the confusion between Information and Knowledge (*senso stricto*) underestimate the importance of Knowledge and Wisdom and obscure the relationship among the four levels. For this level, we understand Knowledge according to Peter Senge’s (1990, p.40) definition: “understanding the underlying structure and processes.” This definition helps us distinguish between the levels and allows us to analyze why current society deemphasizes the importance of Knowledge and Wisdom.

It is at the level of Knowledge that we talk about a creative act, a creative leap from Information to understanding the structures and processes (Senge, 1990). For Tsoukas (2005), Knowledge enables practitioners to select and undertake novel forms of

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actions to be reached through analogies and metaphors (Lakoff, 1987). The distinction between Knowledge and Information is that Knowledge understands causality; thus, it can predict the impact of our actions or inaction. Information alone cannot make such a prediction. Not only is our perception conditioned by our sensorial capabilities (Lakoff, 1987), but also our Knowledge. Our capacity for understanding and meaningful thought is also embedded in our bodily existence. The fact that our minds reside in a physical body impacts the way we perceive, understand, and learn. For example, the Data images from the Hubble, which as Information take the shape of a butterfly, can be compared with similar geometry discovered on Earth by Benoit B. Mandelbrot and, as new Knowledge, we can conclude that fractal geometry applies to the whole universe.

Quite incontrovertibly the Nigerian Yoruba and Igbo people believe that it is always good to use wisdom in doing things and that haphazard way of doing things is an ill wind that blows no one any good. These people are of the belief also that a man imbued with wisdom, is both intelligent and worth emulating.

Wisdom goes with the act of solving problems, taking the right decision. The Yoruba and Igbo people of Nigeria believe that when one does anything out of wisdom, problems will loom large in the final analysis. Wisdom guides, wisdom gives focus, wisdom directs and directs well.

It is our contention therefore that the Yoruba people and the Igbo people of Nigeria believe in the efficacy of proverbs in message delivery and of course in the avoidance of doing things in the wrong order. The more reason they hold that the adoption of wisdom in decision making is a right step in the right direction.

Some of the core Yoruba proverbs on wisdom, meanings and their interpretations:

*Ogbon dun-un gbon; imo dun-un mo*

- *Meaning* – wisdom is a good thing to have; knowledge is a good to have.
- *Interpretation*- This proverb presupposes the fact that it is a worthwhile thing to have wisdom, by the same token, it is also expedient to aspire towards gaining knowledge. Within the Yoruba and Igbo people's setting, a man with wisdom and knowledge is seen to be intelligent and such a man is respected.

*Ogbon ju agbara.*

*Meaning*- Wisdom is greater than power.

*Interpretation*- The above proverb suggests that when one aspires towards wisdom, it is by far better than mere acquisition of power. The Yorubas believe that wisdom supercedes power in all ramifications.

*Ogbon kii tan*

*Meaning*- Wisdom is never used up.

*Interpretation*- The above proverb in Yoruba people's culture suggests that wisdom does not get finished. It is one thing that can never finish, much as one keeps on seeking it.

*Ogbon la fi ngbe aye*

*Meaning*- One needs wisdom to live in this world.

*Interpretation*- The proverb above in Yoruba culture suggests that it is only with extreme wisdom that one can live successfully in this world. To the Yoruba people a man who hasn't wisdom will find it difficult to operate successfully in life.

*Ogbon Ologbon la fi nsogbon, Imoran enikan o to boro*

*Meaning*- One learns wisdom from other people's wisdom, one person's knowledge does not amount to anything.

*Interpretation*- This proverb above in the culture of the Yorubas suggest that one person cannot claim a monopoly of knowledge and wisdom. The proverb implies that we learn from other people and our own knowledge alone cannot take us to anywhere.

*Ogbon Ologbon o je ka pe agba ni were*

- *Meaning*- Other people's wisdom saves the elder from being called a lunatic.
- *Interpretation*- The proverb above shows how Yorubas believe in tapping from the knowledge and wisdom of others. To them this attempt will make one to be wiser and not to be seen as weak in knowledge

*Ogbon ti ahun gbon, ehin ni yo maa to ti igbin.*

- *Meaning*- The cunning that the tortoise has will always rank behind that of the snail.
- *Interpretation*- The proverb above shows the position of the Yoruba people about those who believe that they are the only wise ones. To the Yoruba people, anyone who believes he is the wisest is only deceiving himself.

*Ogbon ti opolo fi pa efon lo fi nje*

- *Meaning*- The same cunning with which the toad killed the buffalo will show it how to eat the prey
- *Interpretation*- This proverb in Yoruba setting and culture suggests that the wisdom which one uses in starting something is the same wisdom one will have to use in finishing it.

*Ogbon ogbon lagbalagba a fi nsa fun eranla*

*Meaning*- It is with cunning that a grown man runs away from a bull.

*Interpretation*- The above proverb shows clearly that the Yoruba people are of the belief that an elderly person will always avoid anything that will put him in trouble, but he will do this in style, so as not to be seen to be a weakling. The proverb further implies that elderly people are wise people and will always do things based on wisdom.

*Ogbo ni nsegun; imoran ni nse ete*

- *Meaning-* Cunning wins battles; knowledge defeats plots.
- *Interpretation-* The proverb above suggests that it is with wisdom that one can do whatever thing successfully. The proverb also presupposes the fact that it is with knowledge that one can surpass people in whatever evil plan of theirs. The Yorubas believe that wisdom is key to achieving success and knowledge is the impetus for crowning efforts with success.

Some of the Core Igbo Proverbs on wisdom, meanings and their interpretations

*Choo ewu ojii ka ehihie di*

- *Meaning-* Make hay while the sun shines
- *Interpretation-* The above proverb suggests that it is expedient for one to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. The Igbo people of Nigeria believe that it is only a man without a sense of wisdom that will see opportunities and will not tap it.

*A tuoro omara, o mara, a tuoro ofeke, ofenye ishi n'ohia*

*Meaning-* If you tell a wise one, he understands, tell a dunce, he runs into the bush.

*Interpretation-* The above proverb connotes that a man with wisdom does not need to be told anything twice for him to understand, but even if you tell someone without a scintilla of wisdom, something quite important, he definitely will not understand; The Igbo people of Nigeria believe that it is good for one to aspire towards knowledge and wisdom for they both enhance the refinement of an individual.

*Nwata erughi eru chowa ihe gburu nna ya, ihe gburu nna ya ga – ebu ya*

*Meaning-* An underage child seeking for what killed the father, will suffer similar fate.

*Interpretation-* The above proverb suggest that it takes wisdom for a young person not to go close to what he himself knows he cannot achieve while young but could be achievable at a time when he is matured enough to achieve a seemingly difficult task. The Igbo people of Nigeria believe that it takes wisdom for one to know what is achievable at a time and what is not indeed achievable at an inauspicious time.

*Onye buru chi ya uzo, a gbagbue onwe ya n'oso*

*Meaning-* He who walks before his godly guardian does the race of his life.

*Interpretation-* The above proverbs suggests that it is always a difficult affair for someone to raise his shoulder before those whom he knows are above him. The proverb also implies that it will be a misnomer for someone to behave negatively to those who have been of help to him. The Igbo people believe that not respecting elders or one's benefactor is bad, for it can be detrimental to one's interest in the final analysis.

*Ahu ihe ka ji, eree oba*

*Meaning-* When you see something bigger than yam, you have no choice than to buy the whole barn.

*Interpretation-* The proverb above presupposes that wisdom is at play when one comes in contact with something more precious than what one has or is looking for, it is better to grab the precious one and forget about the one, one initially focuses upon. The Igbo people of Nigeria believe that when you see opportunity greater than what you were aiming at, it is reasonable for one to grab it.

*Ihe yiri ihe ejiri koo ya onu bu achima achibi achibi*

- *Meaning-* Someone is open to mockery when he does not know when to stop laughing.
- *Interpretation-* The above proverb connotes that it is with wisdom that one knows when to draw the line. It also suggests that wisdom demands that one does things with moderation, for anything done excessively goes beyond moderation and can cause problem for one. The Igbo people believe that knowing where and how to draw the line is of essence and so one should be imbued with this ability.

*Isi kote ebu ogbaa ya*

- *Meaning-* The head that disturbs the honey comb will get itself stung.
- *Interpretation-* The proverb above suggests that it is dangerous for one to disturb a sleeping dog. That is, lack of wisdom in one will make an individual look for trouble even when it is unnecessary for him to do so. To the Igbo people, staying within one's limit portends wisdom and this is better for men or women of understanding.

*Ozu shiwe ishi, enyi ka nwanne alaa*

- *Meaning-* When the corpse starts smelling, the saying that friends are closer than brothers will no longer hold true.
- *Interpretation-* This proverb above indicates that when things are happening, which are diametrically bad, one will surely find them offensive and one will no longer care about fighting those who are closer to one, but are deliberately offending one without caring a hoot. The Igbo people of Nigeria believe that it is good for one to behave well to those close to one and those who are not in any way close to one, because good behavior begets good behavior, for one to gain the respect of people.

*Ijiji na – enweghi onye ndumodu na-eso ozu ala n'iyi*

*Meaning-* A fly that has no counselor follows the corpse to the grave.

*Interpretation-* This proverb above presupposes that it is good for one to take to the advice of people, so as not to fall in to an abyss of danger. The proverb also connotes that a man of wisdom will listen to other's advice in order to stay on the right track. The Igbo



people believe that a man who does things without listening to other people's advice will automatically finds himself in trouble.

*Ewu nwuru n'oba ji obughi aguu gburu ya*

*Meaning-* A goat that dies in a barn was never killed by hunger.

*Interpretation-* This proverb above means anybody that has opportunities at his door step is not affected negatively by such opportunities. The proverb also suggests that it takes wisdom for one to have opportunities and then not allows the opportunities to put him in a bad position. The Igbos believe that once somebody is blessed with opportunities he grabs it and uses it to advantage. This to the Igbo people is wisdom oriented.

## II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is indeed correct to say categorically that the Yoruba people and the Igbo people of Nigeria value the use of proverbs as weapon of making people do what is needful at all times; particularly in making them realize the fact that adoption of wisdom and the acquisition of knowledge play prevail in the well being of the people of any society. It is clear that someone who lacks wisdom, lacks intelligence and so cannot do things right and as such loses the respect of others. It is on the basis of this, that the Yoruba people and the Igbo people champion the adoption of wisdom in doings for it will always be a step in the right direction come. For the people of these two major ethnic groups of Nigeria, wisdom is one phenomenon that an individual has to pray to God for before undertaking whatever task, for wisdom guides, wisdom supports, wisdom leads to better decision making. It is an indispensable entity that human beings must always seek for guidance.

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