

**ENCAPSULATION OF BOTH PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL REALITIES:
WELLERISMS AMONG THE IGBO**

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Abstract

*When Charles Dickens created a character named Sam Weller in his novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, he never knew that his using this character to make mockery of established clichés, aphorisms and proverbs would have so much impact that any proverb which has the name of the speaker in it would henceforth be known as wellerism. Because of this origin, Westerners take such proverbs as being vulgar, humorous, facetious or even, that they are anti-proverbs. These do not hold in Igbo wellerisms which are so seriously conceived and constructed that in them can be found both physical and spiritual considerations about the characters that speak them. In order to arrive at this conclusion, the researcher took three collections of Igbo proverbs from which he extracted all the wellerisms. But because of the number, he had to use simple random sampling to select only four speakers and five of what they speak. After analyzing these, it was discovered that contrary to Western conception of that genre, Igbo wellerisms are so couched that they reveal a lot about the people's spiritual and physical views on life.*

Keywords: Wellerism, Dog, Mad person, Tortoise, Frog

Introduction

Proverbs are short expressions into which the people's culture and wisdom have been infused, so as to help in conversations without the speaker going into elaborate explanations. This is how the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria see it and make use of it. It is so revered that when elders gather to discuss vital issues, they have to resort to these coinages. Because of situations like this, those sayings are taken as belonging to them. That can explain why they are re-structured by young people when talking to the elders. Under such a condition, the young one out of respect for verging into an exclusive territory, has to say something like: "Are you not the elders who say, '...?'" After that introductory part, the young person chips in the proverb.

As defined by Ruth Finnegan, the proverb is "a saying in more or less fixed form marked by 'shortness, sense, and salt' and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it" (393). Because of the compact size, it is easily recalled during conversations. Because it has been taken as containing the wisdom of the people, it helps in settling cases and arguments. Because of situations like this, proverbs can be said to be linguistic structures which when used in conversations help in driving home needed points. As F. B. O. Akporobaro puts it:

Its beauty and source of delight is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth. The truth presented in the proverb is not a logical, *a priori* or intuitive truth; it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from people's experience of life, human relationship and interaction with the world of nature (71).

But in spite of the truth therein, proverbs can be craftily used, and so can contravene other proverbs. Since they are taken to contain wisdom and truth, the final decision of what prevails will have to depend on other considerations.

Among the Igbo people, there is a social type of proverbs that is called "*Asinilu* or *Asinunu*, depending on the dialect. *Asi* means "It is said". *Ilu* or *Inu* stands for proverb. *Asinilu* or *Asinunu* means "It is said in proverb". Among the people, there are two types of this proverbial construction. One is the dialogue proverb in which two characters say something in a sentence. As an illustration:

Ijiji siri nkakwu nkea o di ndu na-esi isi, kedu ka ndi nwuru anwu na be ha si esi; nkakwu si ya nke a o bu okenye ha otua, kedu ka umuaka no be ha na-aha?

The housefly taunted the shrew for being alive and is smelling heavily, what would be his fate when he is dead and the shrew replied that it would be

interesting to see a baby housefly if the adult could be as small as this (Onwudufor vol.2. p. 102).

In this illustration, the two personified characters, Housefly and Shrew are criticizing each other. In the taunt and in its reply, one cannot find any fault with the observations because they are the truth as associated with the two characters.

Another type of *Asinilu* or *Asininu* is wellerism. Here, there is only one character that makes a statement either of himself or of another character. Such statements in general are referential and truthful. Of these two types, wellerism has gained more international acceptance and critical studies and this is the theme of this study.

In studying wellerisms, one can see some differences between the western conception of this type of proverb and that of the Igbo nation. As can be seen from Leigh Lundin in an online posting, "Wellerisms center around a quotation, a cliché or sometimes a proverb misapplied with humorous effect" (n.p.). Wellerism among the Igbo is simply a proverb with the supposed name of the speaker attached to it. Therefore, there is nothing like misapplication so as to have a humorous effect for such is far from the Igbo conception of the whole thing. The only relationship it has with western wellerism is in the name as can be seen in Lundin's observation:

[Wellerism came] from the character of Sam Weller in Charles Dickens book, *The Pickwick Papers*. Wellerisms are a type of wordplay in which the second half of a phrase undermines the first half in a humorous way. These sayings are usually constructed from clichés or well-known phrases (n.p.).

Also contributing is Valentine Todorova-Marinova. According to this scholar in another online article, the word wellerism which we have seen as coming from the fictitious character Sam Weller was introduced by A. Taylor in 1931. To be discountenanced or be taken with a pinch of salt is the idea from the online article of the Island English Tutor which is to the effect that wellerism is:

An example of humor so dry as to be brittle; a wellerism is a sentence with a speaker and a narrator; after the speaker speaks, the narrator adds commentary that undermines the sentiment of the speaker sometimes by employing some

equivocation -- changing the meaning of the speaker's idea. Other times, the narrator offers description to show that what the speaker said may not be so true, after all (n.p.).

Having two speakers belongs to the genre of dialogue proverbs which will not be treated here. Having a narrator does not exist in Igbo wellerism. Also to be rejected is the idea of equivocation or utter rejection of what was said. To the Igbo, wellerisms which are projected through such personified characters like different types of animals, humans, trees and so on, harbor the undiluted truth that one can use so as to get along in life. Such truths are devoid of doubts because there is nothing in them that can be misunderstood.

Statement of Problem

Probably, because of cultural differences and because of the influence of Dickens' presentation of Weller's handling of old proverbs, there is a wide chasm that demarcates western wellerisms from Igbo ones. Such differences are many. Some of them are: while some westerners see them as anti-proverbs which may often be humorous and mocking, some say that they make fun of people and situations and are based on clichés. Many are the differences.

But to the Igbo people, wellerisms are full-fledged proverbs which can be used to study the physical and spiritual realities of the people. Because of these differences, there is need to analyze some Igbo wellerisms for people to know that in Igbo wellerisms, there are physical and spiritual realities of the people but these are masked using different personified characters.

Research Methodology

All the proverbs used in this study are from three collections of Igbo proverbs. One of them is F. C. Ogbalu's *The Book of Igbo Proverbs*. This collection has 161 wellerisms. Other collections are F. O. F. Onwudufor's *Igbo Proverbs* volumes 1 and 2. While Volume 1 furnishes us with 76 wellerisms, volume 2 furnishes us with 83 wellerisms. However, there are many repetitions which can be seen even in the same collections, depending on the topic under discussion. With such repetitions, the number of wellerisms has been seriously reduced.

Studying all these wellerisms is not possible in a journal paper. Therefore, the researcher grouped them under their speakers. Using random sampling, he chose four speakers. Under each speaker, he chose only five wellerisms. This makes a total of twenty wellerisms.

Content of Igbo Wellerisms

Whatever a character says in this type of proverb is meant to apply to that character, and in extension, to humans for these personified entities are humans in disguise. In this way, what should apply is the Igbo proverb which says: "*Ka o di be oke, ka o di be ngwure* -- As it is in the home of the rat, so it is in the home of the lizard". These Igbo wellerisms have similar content with Hindi wellerisms as is observed by Marionova in an online paper:

As regards their content, Hindi wellerisms as well as the other types of proverbs include a large range of ethical, social and aesthetical views about people and the world they live in. They register or explain phenomena and at the same time,

express a positive and negative attitude towards them and a valuation; they orientate (directly or indirectly) towards customary standards of thought and behaviour, showing in a specific manner which human features are good, and which are bad ... (n.p.).

The truth here is that the discussion is so serious that there is no room for Meri Giorgadze’s assertion in that online article that asserts that wellerisms “convey a funny or vulgar meaning [which] is often humorously explained” (n.p.). The business of wellerism in Igbo land is a serious business that allows no room for diversion as can be seen in the following illustrations that start with the sayings of a mad person.

S/n	Igbo Wellerisms	English Translations
1.	<i>Onyearcha siri na ya agaghi ahapu iso okporo uzo n’ihi na o dighi onye huchara uzo bawa ohia.</i>	The mad man says that he cannot change his habit of going along the highway since a sensible person does not prefer the forest to a good road (Onwudufor vol.1. p.31).
2.	<i>Onyearcha siri na o bu ubochi ya kpebiri ka ya kwuchaa ihe dum anya ya huru ka a na-asi na oria ya na aka njo.</i>	The mad man says that on the day he makes up his mind to say all that he saw that people say that his lunacy has worsened (Onwudufor vol.1 p. 160).
3.	<i>Onyearcha siri na isi di ya mma kama n’obu nani na ya choo ikwu ozo, ozo abata ya n’ onu.</i>	The mad man says that there is nothing wrong with his common sense except that he says many things at the same time (Onwudufor vol.1. p. 161).
4.	<i>Onyearcha siri n’ebe ya ga-agma oso bara uba, tinyere ebe ya ga atu okwute.</i>	A mad man says that he has a lot of distance to cover apart from the numerous targets for throwing stones (Onwudufor, Vol.1. p.217).
5.	<i>Onyearcha siri na o dighi ewute ya na ya na-agho ara, kama n’obu ejebe erughi ulo.</i>	A mad man says that he is not bothered by his madness except that it keeps him away from his house (Onwudufor, vol. 2 p. 88).

The above enumerations, just as in any other Igbo wellerism, were formulated after long and serious examinations -- in this case of the behaviour of a mad person whether male or female. Highlighted here are: the way some of them keep on moving along the roads, some throwing stones, some talking uncontrollably and as it is in the last one, some go to the extent that they walk out of their towns of birth and residence to distant places where they are not to be seen again.

The fourth one reminds the researcher of one mad woman in his village when he was still a child. This mad woman was known as Milimili Madam. Whenever the village children were looking for reasons to make them run, they would go near her thatched hut to shout at her, much to the annoyance of their parents, for surely Milimili Madam would pelt these children with stones. To run and hide from her was a very enjoyable sport.

In all, there is nothing like any of the above being anti-proverbs. Any person looking for illustrative proverbs can make use of them -- first to refer to the speaker and

second, to be used to evaluate the person himself. Because these are proverbs, they can be seen from the observations of Nkem Okoh, where he avers that:

Apart from their role in enlivening conversations, proverbs display a literary capacity for accomplishing a range of other functions: to conceal meaning or veil references, save offence, admonish, persuade, even rebuke. Proverbs particularly display enormous potential for commentary on a situation, ridiculing a speaker, criticizing another's action or comportment but more importantly all this is accomplished in oblique fashion (127).

These can be accomplished using any of the above citations. If they are anti-proverbs, then they cannot be used in this way. What is more, all of them and the ones which are yet to come in this enquiry were gotten from collections of Igbo proverbs. If they are not what they are said to be, then they cannot be found in those volumes and be heard during conversations.

Therefore, when somebody cites the first entry where the mad man asserts that he must continue his habit of going along the highway since a sensible person does not prefer the forest to a good road, the intention of somebody who uses such a proverb is to show that even in our defense of our set goals, we may be wrong because we see things from our narrow perspective. In explaining that proverb, Onwudufor has it that, "A conceited person defends his actions even when it is senseless to do so" (31).

When Igbo people see mad people shouting, talking uncontrollably or being more violent, some of them that feel that they understand more than the surface of what the lunatic is doing, may attach a spiritual dimension to it -- either that the moon phase is affecting him or that a wicked person using diabolic means has struck him with madness. To the Igbo people, everything has a spiritual undertone. However, their seeing the influence of the moon is just universal; hence mad people are referred to as lunatics. In addition, if the mad person has passed through a market place or is still there, the conclusion is that all hope is lost because the madness cannot be cured again. Therefore, in some Igbo wellerisms, the spiritual and the physical realities of their existence are merged most especially in some risky situations.

By using the term in which a mad person in referring to a sane person who goofed, the implication is that everybody has element of insanity in him. Where somebody's insanity has surpassed a certain level is when the person is known generally as being mad. Therefore, when somebody is too loquacious as seen in the second entry, one is reminded of the mad person who has decided to say all that he saw. Any sane person who lets out all he saw is letting himself down. As the collector puts it in the explanatory section, "It takes a double effort for one to recover his good name once he has lost it" (Onwudufor vol.1 p. 160). If somebody is known as hiding no secret because he divulges all that his eyes behold, people will start avoiding him. Who knows the person whose secrets he will divulge next?

There is a saying among the Igbo which is "*The bia n'ito, oto* -- When something occurs the third time, it stops". The importance here is that explaining the whole twenty proverbs sampled out for this study will amount to an unwieldy volume. Therefore, for any character, the study will only consider three proverbs. The others are there for the readers to see and evaluate.

And so, when the mad man says that he is not bothered by his madness except that it keeps him away from his house, one may ask him what can bother him if he is not bothered by something that alienates him from his kith and kin, and from his home. Such

should give him sleepless nights. But not so to the mad man who comfortably sleeps in the market place or at roadsides. Come rain, come sunshine, come the cold and dry harmattan season, he is not bothered because, “The perception one has for one’s problem determines how it worries the person and how one handles it” (Onwudufor vol.2 p. 89).

Finally, before considering other characters, let it be stated that the reason behind the efficacy of wellerisms as it is in other proverbs “is that it is an aphorism, a wise saying, based upon people’s experiences and is a reflection of the social values and sensibility of the people (Akporbaro 69).

Awo (Frog/Toad)

The Igbo people know the frog as that small aquatic and lumpy animal that disturbs when it croaks. These frogs are not consumed as meat. It is even feared that when a dog sniffs at it and touches it with its mouth or nose, these parts will swell like the frog. These observations are not quite different from those of T. H. White. This researcher adds more of what resembles the views of the Igbo people by his stating that:

Frogs [have] croaking voices, for they rattle round the mating ponds and make a row with their exasperating cries. Some frogs are aquatic; some pertain to the marshes; some are called Toads because they live in bramble bushes -- and these are larger than the others (27).

Therefore, when conversations are made in Igbo land and a wellerism is brought in to depict the activities of this animal, there is nothing humorous involved for what is reported is a situation as it is in real life. This is one of the ways one can use to differentiate Igbo wellerisms from Western ones. Therefore, Jan Brunvand’s observation as quoted in an online article by Jean Jorgensen, does not apply among the Igbo. According to the quotation, “Wellerism is a saying in the form of a quotation followed by a phrase ascribing the quotation to someone who has done something humorous and appropriate ...” (n.p.).

In the Igbo type, the quotation comes from the original speaker, and it is never ascribed to another person whether that person has done something humorous, appropriate or inappropriate as can be seen in the following illustrations.

S/n	Igbo Wellerisms	English Translations
1.	<i>Awo siri onye di, ka ibe ya di, ka o ga-abu ubochi uzu ka a hu ndi ga-atu ya.</i>	The frog says [that] it is good for everybody to stay alive so that on the [day of noisy argument and discord], there would be enough people to undertake such (Onwudufor vol.2 p.42).
2.	<i>Awo siri na o bu nani onye rijuru afo na-ekwe woo! Woo!</i>	The toad says that it is only when one is well fed that one can sing woo! Woo!
3.	<i>Awo siri na onye ukwu adighi, na-eji n’oge aga nkiri.</i>	The toad says that a person with bad legs should go to the entertainment square in good time (Onwudufor vol.2. p. 121).
4.	<i>Awo siri na ya amaghi otu ya ga-esi kwa akwa ka mmiri ghara iju ya onu.</i>	The frog says that he does not know how to croak so that water will not fill his mouth (Ogbalu 154).
5.	<i>Awo si na ya amughi nwa, ikpu ya anaza.</i>	The frog says that she did not deliver a baby, yet her genital keeps on swelling (Ogbalu 151).

A thorough study of all these quotations credited to frog has to do either with his/her behaviour or his/her physique. As was earlier pointed out, it keeps on croaking Woo! Woo! as it is in the second entry. During such exercise, one can hear many frogs croaking noisily. Also as part of its physical features is the way it trudges along. These and more are what one can use to project one's ideas for the hearer to apply to either one's situation or to that of another's. But because Igbo wellerisms mainly focus on what a character says of himself, that can explain the absence of jokes or mockery as it is in other languages. People do not generally make mockery of themselves. If it is about another person that aspect of mockery can come in.

Taking the citations one after the other, the first one quotes the frog as saying that it is good for everybody to be alive so that on the day of noisy arguments and discord, there could be enough people to participate. We should do well to note that this day of noisy argument is referring to any time when a shoal of frogs gather together so as to croak. This is a normal activity as can be noted by the online posting of Sandiego Zoo which has it that: "A ribbeting chorus: have you ever walked past a pond or creek at night and heard lots of frogs and ribbeting like a giant froggy chorus? It's likely you're hearing male frogs making calls to attract females" (n.p.).

The interpretation of this rowdy situation as given by the person that collected the saying is that "There are times in life when it is necessary to rely on communal effort and only people blessed with many brethren can secure it" (Onwudufor vol.1.p.42).

The truth of this observation can be seen in another proverb which says "A *nyukoo amili onu, o gboo ufufu* -- When urine is released by many people at a particular spot, it foams". On the whole, what is projected here is harmonious and communal living, for such is the only redeeming feature in this life with its different threatening and devouring situations.

Therefore, as it is among the Nzema people of Ghana, so it is among the Igbo of Nigeria. As observed by Mohammed Yakubu about his people, so it is among the Igbo. In both societies: "Analysis and findings have shown clearly that wellerisms ... have significant contextual usage and that they abound in metaphorical implications. They teach morals and also advice members to refrain from social vices that societies do not find pleasant" (117).

Then, concerning the second entry where Frog states that it is only when one is well fed that he can holler Woo! Woo! one can see the truth involved. As explained by the collector, "A hungry person is usually without strength and produces little or nothing" (Onwudufor vol.1. p.45). If this statement is not true, where can the person garner enough strength with which to holler? This advice has been existing among the Igbo people. This, in other words, is a way of showing the emptiness of the assertion in the online article of Merriam-Webster which has it that wellerism is "an expression of comparison comprising an usually well known quotation followed by a facetious sequel" (n.p.). Igbo wellerisms are coined with fresh statements ascribed to characters so as to accord well with the characters' behaviour.

Finally, on one of the listed entries is the witticism as shown in the third one. It is a show of proper understanding if somebody who cannot be fast in walking to start early to trek to the venue. After all, what is the proverb there for? Is it not to teach people for them to learn and live comfortably so as to make worthwhile achievements? Make use of

what you have and do whatever you can do so as to help yourself. As explained by Onwudufor, this third entry can make one learn how to “always endeavor to keep oneself out of trouble as much as possible especially when he may not have any helper” (121).

Just as we stopped at the third entry in the previous one, so are we to stop here so as to have enough space to look at other characters, starting with Nkita the Dog.

Nkita (Dog)

From the folklore of the people, this is the first animal that man domesticated, and today, it helps man in various capacities -- as a hunter, for security purposes, as a being capable of discerning that which the normal human eyes cannot see and so on. According to Gregory Ejiofor Adibe in *Igbo Mysticism: Power of Igbo Traditional Religion and Society*, the dog: “is an aggressive animal. It equally serves for aggressive purposes in Igbo religious rituals. The blood is used ritually for activating *ofo* [ritual staff], as special meal for Agwu deity [the god of healing]” (215).

In another of his books titled *Igbo Issues: Values, Chi, Akalaka, Ikenga, Magic, Agwu and Manipulation of Divinity*, this scholar states that:

Nkita is an animal with apprehension and agility to protect and in some occasions to be mischievous. It perceives things in the dark. It could see the spirits and human in clouded shadows. It can never be a coward in any circumstance. It would not tolerate any nonsense from the owner. It can bite its owner when aggrieved. It goes to any extent to feed itself when hungry (259).

This is an animal about which a proverb says, “*Oju nkita anya, o taa onye nwe ya* -- When it fills the dog’s eyes, it bites the owner”. This is what Adibe records above. Because of all these attributes of the animal, whenever it is mentioned, people bring up all they know about it so as to give interpretations, for indeed, the animal holds a centre stage among the Igbo. Whenever any wellerism comes up, some of these spiritual attributes of the animal will come to bear on the people’s understanding.

However, some of these attributes of the animal are substantiated by scientific discoveries. For illustrative purpose, while the folklore of the people say that it is the first animal that man domesticated, the scientists as can be seen in the online posting of Constance B. Venacone has it that: “For more than 12,000 years, it has lived with humans as a hunting companion, protector, object of scorn or adoration, a friend” (n.p.).

As it is noted above, the people say that it can perceive spirits. In addition, western scientists as can be seen from the online article from Gabrielle Feldman have it on record that “If conditioned to, they can predict future events such as regular walk times. Your dog can smell your feelings” (n.p.). Though these can be accounted for physically, the natives give them spiritual interpretation. But then, let us look at some of the wellerisms surrounding the animal.

S/n	Igbo Wellerisms	English Translations
1.	<i>Nkita siri na ya na-ebi n'ulo onye na-akputara ya agba enyi.</i>	The dog says that he lives only in the house of a person that provides him with

		the jaw of an elephant (Onwudufor vol.1.p.81)
2.	<i>Oke nkita siri na o bu anya ka ya ji eri aja a churu n' elu.</i>	The male dog says that the only way for him to consume the content of a sacrificial dish offered on a high platform is by gazing at it (Onwudufor vol.1.p.49).
3.	<i>Nkita siri n'anu ya ga-achu gbanahu ya n'oso, ya emee onu ka adighi eri ya eri.</i>	The dog says that if he could not catch a particular game, it is better to pretend as if it was never to be eaten (Onwudufor vol. 1. p.49).
4.	<i>Nkita siri n' ihe ya jiri agbo onye biara be ya uja bu ka o hapu ibu uzo gboo ya onwe ya.</i>	The dog says that the reason why he normally barks at a visitor is to stop him from barking at him first (Onwudufor vol.1. p.155).
5.	<i>Nkita si ka a tupuru ya okpokpo utara n' ezi ma hapuru ya ogu ya na ndi mmuo.</i>	Dog said that the pounded food should be thrown for him outside but let the person who does so forget about his fight with spirits (Ogbalu 34).

In all, what Dog says of himself must be factual for he is not known as a liar. All the things he says have to do with his physical life and his spiritual insight into the affairs of life. Therefore, saying that “in a number of languages, especially in Africa ... the choice of the animal may not carry much significance” which is from the online source, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* is wrong. As it is, Igbo language is not included because what wellerisms portray have to do with both spiritual and physical realities of the speaker of the wellerism as perceived by the people. Such is also extended to affect the people themselves.

As an illustration, in the fifth entry, Dog is confident and is not afraid when the food meant for him is thrown outside for him. He can fight favourably with spirits because he is one of the sacred animals that belong to the god of healing, Agwu (Adibe, *Igbo Issues* 259). What is more, he is so endowed that he can see spirits (Adibe, *Igbo Issues* 260). Therefore, he can fight his way through and eat the food meant for him.

But then, somebody who uses the wellerism just like Dog is confident that he can have his way for him to achieve his desire. What the speaker wants to convey is that when somebody is well fortified, physically and spiritually, nothing will hinder his progress. All he desires from you is for you to help him in any way you want, and he can take control of any other thing that may come up. In the case of Dog, he can run as fast as he wants to reach the venue; he can be aggressive enough to fight for his right even if his antagonists are spirits. The most heartening of all is the mega power behind him and protecting him. To Dog, the Agwu deity is there at the background.

Looking at the fourth entry, we can see the reason why Dog is sometimes aggressive to visitors. To him, if he fails to bark at such a visitor first, the visitor may do so at him. Is it not you humans who say that attack is the best defense? Is it not you humans who have it that you make hay while the sun shines? Barking is one of the physical characteristics of dogs and they use it both for attacking their enemies and in safeguarding the place assigned to them.

But when somebody uses the wellerism, what the person wants to show is that attack is the best defense. To Onwudufor who recorded it in the first collection, “A step taken as a precaution is always proper” (155). Why? Make hay while the sun shines because once it is dark, you cannot go far.

Concerning the third entry, it is on record that African dogs do well as hunting dogs. On their prowess as capable hunters, the online paper uploaded by Purim effusively states that: “The African hunting dog is the most successful land hunter in the world. They’re successful in 50-70% of their hunts which makes them consistently the best mammalian hunter; they even hold the current Guinness World Record for it” (n.p.).

But what happens when Dog tries to catch a game and he fails is that he wags his tail, bobs his head and stretches his ears. As soon as he does these, he diverts his attention and interest to other issues. After all, this is in the proverbial arsenal of the Igbo nation: “*M ga-egbu onwe m na nwa m bialu iku nwulu anwu?* Am I to kill myself that the baby I have come to nurse has died?”

In other words, the aim of this wellerism is that one should forget what his power cannot achieve. It is in the process of neglecting this wisdom that somebody can go on to steal, murder, tell lies and so on in order to achieve something which is beyond his reach. To Onwudufor, the wellerism has it that “One ought to take an option that is available to him where every other one has led to failure” (vol.1. p.50).

Mbe (Tortoise)

Tortoise is a reptile that has attracted much attention in Igbo land. For one, it is the trickster hero which has many tales surrounding it. For the other, native doctors and other mystics make use of it a lot. Some deities have it as their totem. Therefore, by surrounding it with a lot of wellerisms, the Igbo people hope to keep in the minds of the people both the physical and metaphysical aspects of the animal. From Adibe in *Igbo Issues*, it is one of Agwu’s sacred animals (259). Going further, he has it that: “Mbe is often spoken of as a wise and clever animal that can influence any being into submission. Igbo folklores and pithy sayings portray its insightful, tactful and artful [nature]” (261).

In expatiating this, this scholar in another book, *Igbo Mysticism* makes the following statements:

Tortoise ... is mythologically presented in Igbo world view as a very wise and cunning animal. Its common sense is so super that he maneuvers all traps and obstacles set before him in the Igbo myths. He can relate shrewdly with the mighty and low. Like in the natural world, its shell is used to display the power inherent in tortoise and it is activated for use in the mystical religious rituals (213).

Many are the ideas surrounding this sluggish reptile both in its physical and spiritual considerations apart from the ones enumerated by Adibe. The Igbo man’s view of the wisdom of this animal has been substantiated scientifically if we are to go by recent experiments conducted in the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology. From the Institute’s online posting, it is recorded that:

But new research carried out by scientists from Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST) suggests we have greatly underestimated the intelligence of these creatures, who cannot only be trained but also have amazing powers of long-term recall (n.p.).

All these considerations and facts go into the image of the folkloric tortoise that appears both in tales, proverbs and other sayings of the Igbo. Meanwhile, the following are some wellerisms surrounding this reptile.

S/n	Igbo Wellerisms	English Translations
1.	<i>Mbe siri na ya na-ekwu na ije ekweghi ya aga, a biakwa bo ya ulo n'azu.</i>	The tortoise is complaining about his slow steps [and then] someone added the weight of a whole house on his back (Onwudufor vol.2. p.316).
2.	<i>Mbe siri n'onye kariri ya tuoro ya ogu, ya emee ogu ahu ka o ghoru mgba.</i>	The tortoise says that if a stronger man wants to fight him, he will make the fight to look like wrestling (Onwudufor vol.2. p. 363).
3.	<i>Nnabe si ndi oso na-agba ma ndi aghugho a na-agho.</i>	Tortoise said that those who can run can go on and run, and the tricksters can go on to play tricks (Ogbalu 50)
4.	<i>Mbe siri a o na-eje sulukwam sulukwam, enyi na-eje malu bido malu bido.</i>	Tortoise using onomatopoeia says that he walks <i>sulukwam sulukwam</i> and elephant walks <i>malu bido malu bido</i> (Ogbalu 142).
5.	<i>Mbe siri umunna ya mere ya ihe oma were kwara ya kotu igwe.</i>	Tortoise said that his kinsmen did well by their sewing a coat of iron for him (Ogbalu 25).

Two of these entries are on the same issue -- the shell of the tortoise. In number one, it is called a house. In number five, it is called an iron coat which was sewed for him by his kinsmen. These are the physical realities of the reptile. But one thing about Tortoise is that whenever his name is mentioned, what comes to mind is his tricky disposition. When his sluggish movement is considered, to have such a shell is an added problem.

It is because of this that the collector of number one surmises that the meaning of that wellerism is that tortoise's "troubles have continued to multiply instead of being alleviated" (Onwudufor vol 2. p.316). It is a well known fact that "*Nwata si na nne ya agaghi arahu ura anyasi, o gaghi arahu nke ya -- A child that says that the mother will not sleep at night, he himself will not sleep*". Who knows what tortoise committed that attracted for him the ire of those who placed a house on his back?

But Tortoise's perception in number five has changed. Instead of lamenting that he is carrying a house, he now sees it that his kinsmen did well by making a coat of iron for him. This coat apart from covering his nakedness, protects him from harsh weather. And because it is made of iron, when he fights, he is well protected. In view of this, Ogbalu in interpreting that wellerism puts it that "We are happy and proud over advantage or good luck" (25). Or is it not the Igbo nation that puts it that *Umunna bu ike -- Kinsmen are strength*. They can ruin or build somebody. In the case of Tortoise, they did him well.

Both the second and the third entries which are on the same issue harp on Tortoise's wisdom. If there is an emergency, he cannot run away so as to escape. This is in the third entry. These his tricks are also helpful when somebody stronger than him wants to fight him. When such happens as it is in the second entry, he will craftily turn it into a

wrestling bout. The lesson here for whoever hears or reads the two wellerisms is that: “There are many ways of surviving the onslaught of an enemy” (Onwudufor vol.2. p. 363).

Conclusion

Wellerism which is a proverb in which the name of the speaker is mentioned inside it serves many functions in society. The way the Igbo people conceive it is different from the western conception of it. For illustrative purposes, these westerners see it as a type of anti-proverb that conveys funny or vulgar meanings. Also, they see it as a type of wordplay and so on.

Why they see it that way is that the word was gotten from a fictional character, Sam Weller which is in Dickens’ novel, *The Pickwick Papers*. Because this character takes established clichés and proverbs and shows how wrong they are, these westerners take it that all wellerisms must be like that.

But among the Igbo *Asinilu* or *Asininu* has been in existence and usage before the birth of Dickens. These literary constructions serve useful purposes because they are used during conversations. Apart from concretizing personal assertions, they educate and entertain. In this way, they help build the culture of the people in that what they portray are the physical and spiritual realities of the individual speakers. These can be transposed so as to be used in evaluating the lives of the listeners who are expected to put into practice what they get from these socially accepted sayings. In this way, the people learn wisdom and acceptable social ethics.

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