

**Visual Anthology of the Igbo Proverbs in Sonny Oti's *Ilu*  
*Ndi Igbo* song in *Nkosi Nwa m* Album**

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**Abstract**

In contemporary Igbo society, the craze for western culture and adoption of western culture as a symbol of high status or class has destroyed Igbo tradition and culture. Non-literate Igbo parents even go all-out to make their children speak English language instead of their native Igbo language, no matter how they “cut and nail it together” or what can be called a passable English just to belong to the trend. As a result of this, Igbo language and culture have continued to wane and now threatening to go into extinction according to the predictions of the United Nations. It has become imperative to document every aspect of Igbo culture in whatever form, to prevent the prediction of the United Nations and for the upcoming generation. This paper is a visual anthology of the Igbo proverbs in professor Sonny Oti's *o biara egbu m* song. It highlighted the importance of proverbs in Igbo traditional society. Data were sourced from primary and secondary sources. Findings show that the song is a collection of Igbo proverbs which pinpointed equity, fairness and justice as part of Igbo mythology. Recommendations were made which

include that visual narrative of Igbo tradition can prevent the extinction of Igbo language and culture.

**Key words:** Visual, Proverb, Igbo, Sonny Oti.

## Introduction

Visuals have remained the greatest medium for communication. Just as light travels faster than sound in physics, visuals communicate better than words. The use of visuals as means of communication started even before man could document his own history. The early man used drawings of animals to represent the activities of his period and before the invention of writing, pictograph was the medium for communication. Many also believe that an image is worth more than a thousand words. This is true as Kumar (2016) observes,

When hear information, they are likely to remember only 10% of that information three days later. However, if a relevant image is paired with the same information, people retain 65% of the information three days later...Words are not enough anymore to inform and engage audience. Visuals have become like a staple in the online customer's diet. For instance, try to answer; "what is a circle?" What comes to your mind first? It's image or definition of a circle? We are sure that it was the image that must have come to your mind. That is the power of visuals.

Therefore, a visual anthology of the proverbs in Sonny Oti's *ilu ndi Igbo* is necessary for proper documentation, retention and preservation of our Igbo culture for posterity.

Proverbs which are called *ilu* in Igbo language are generally accepted as in-depth means of communication without saying

much word. Proverbs and idioms are often misconstrued for the other in usage and purpose. An idiom is a figurative expression used while writing or speaking and it is formed by the combination of a verb and a preposition. On the other hand, a proverb is a saying that has a bearing on the ways of the world. This is the basic difference between idioms and proverbs (Koshal 2011).

Proverbs are believed to be words of wisdom mostly spoken by the elders among themselves and sometimes to the younger people when they are going astray. Achebe (1958) in his book *Things Fall Apart* defines proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten. As such it is near impossible for kinsmen to gather for deliberations without the use of proverbs in Igbo land.

Proverbs are not only used at social gatherings but even in the home. They are used by men and women in the training of the children. It is used to correct one who has flawed, it is also used to re-direct one who is going astray, and it is also used to jest an idiot. But these are dependent on one's ability to understand the meanings associated with the proverb. This means that proverbs have been part of the Igbo traditional society from the beginning.

### **Igbo People in Historical Perspective**

The Igbo speaking people occupy the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. The origin of the Igbo people varies according to history. No one can categorically say where they came from to occupy their present place as Ilogu in Iweamadi (2013) believes that where the Igbo come from and when, will remain for a long time a matter of conjecture because of the absence of helpful records of archeological findings by which we can determine the date of settlement or place of origin. However, there are varied versions of Igbo history. There is

the *Nri* version which claimed that the Igbo people migrated from Egypt through the river Nile, crossing the Niger River to settle at their present location (see Onyinye 2021).

There is also the autochthony school of thought that believes the Igbo had been in their present place since creation. This is according to Onwuejeogwu (1979) as cited in Amadi & Akena (2015) that autochthony, which is the claim of origin from the spot of present habitation by maximal lineage generally *Umudiani* (“Children of the earth”) is found in many ancient Igbo towns such as the *Umudiani* in *Nri* town who claim they were there when *Nri* migrated to the present town called *Nri*. The autochthony school of thought is again supported by the claims of an elderly man, whom Isichei (1976) quoted as saying in an interview: “We do not come from anywhere and anyone who says we come from anywhere is a liar, write it down” (Iweamadi 2013).

As the origin of the Igbo people remains subject to many speculations, her traditional and contemporary art, and cultural practices are highly recognized and widely celebrated. With an indomitable spirit and will, the Igbo are still a very resourceful, intelligent, industrious, sociable, and hospitable group. They are bold, courageous, proud, and self-sufficient. The Igbo people, who are mostly farmers, cultivate yams, cocoyam, maize, and cassava. They also exploit the various palm produces, which are found all around the West African equatorial forest. Their sense of indigenous technology is expressed in bronze casting, ironwork, pottery, and woodcarvings (Okpara 2012).

The Igbo people have excelled in the art of music. From the traditional Igbo music to modern Igbo music, many Igbo musicians have exhibited mastery of this profession and are acknowledged internationally. In the traditional Igbo music,

there is the Abigbo Mbaise group, the Nkwerre aborigine women group, Ogenwanne and his cultural group from Umuahia, to mention a few. On the modern Igbo music there is Joe Nez (1939 - 1982), the Oriental brothers led by Dan Sach Opara, Bright Chimezie and his Zigima sound band, and of course Sonny Oti (1941 - 1997).

### **Professor Sonny Oti (1941 – 1997)**

Modern Igbo music known in some quarters as highlife played a great role among the Igbo people from 1970 after the Nigeria – Biafra civil war. It afforded the people a soothing relief from the effects of the war. It equally revived the zeal among the people to rehabilitate in a Nigerian society where they were marginalized, deprived and subjected to second class citizens. Modern Igbo music is what Emielu (2013) in Amadi (2020) called “new synthesis”, that is, the combination of foreign instruments and Igbo folklore or language. This is the style of professor Sonny Oti’s music.

Professor Sonny Oti born in Arochuku in present day Abia state in 1941 was a versatile and multi-talented individual. He was a singer, playwright, actor, theatre professor and evangelist. He studied English at the University College Ibadan and later did a master’s degree at the University of Leeds on a British Council scholarship. He founded the theatre arts programme at the University of Jos and taught there from 1976 until his death in November 1977. He acted in Nigeria’s entry for the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar 1966, playing the lead role, *Danda* in a play by the same title. He subsequently acted in the 1970s Benin City television series, *Hotel de Jordan*. He created, produced and acted the *Jerome* series for the Nigerian television Jos and was a winner of Nigerian Television Authority’s ‘Star of the Tube’ award. Oti acted in *Bullfrog in the Sun*, the film adaptation of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

Oti's musical albums include *Nkosi Nwa m, Nigeria Go Survive, Late Night Huaband*, etc. He sang in fluent Igbo, Efik, English and Pidgin, lacing his songs with satire, sarcasm and plain humor. His most outstanding influence has been with discovering new talent such as Veno Marioghae who voiced his *Nigeria go survive* song while studying at the University of Jos or his collaboration with younger artistes such as Nelly Uchendu who sang his parody on unfaithful husbands, *Late Night Husband*. His enduring legacy in many respects includes the popularizing of his songs by other artistes such as Onyeka Owenu's *Halleluyah Chi m le*.

During the civil war Oti was head of the Biafran Theatre Troupe. His volunteer players were charged with performing sketches to lift the morale of soldiers in the battle fronts. His finished manuscript on the subject is yet to be published. Oti's written plays include *The Old Masters* (1977), *The Carvers, The Drummers, Return Home and Roost Awhile, Dreams and Realities* (1979), *The Return of Jerome* (1981) and *Evangelist Jeremiah* (1982). He wrote what is perhaps the most comprehensive documentation of the highlife music phenomenon in his book *Highlife Music in West Africa*, published posthumously by Malthouse Press. After his conversion experience in 1984, Oti became a gospel singer and evangelist. He devoted his life to teaching in the university and extensive evangelistic ministry. (Source: <http://afrobios.com> : Sonny Oti).

### **Sonny Oti's *Ilu Ndị Igbo* song**

The song is made up of six stanzas as follows:

1. Chorus: Q b́jara egbu m ooo  
Q b́jara egbu m ooo  
Q b́jara egbu m ooo  
N'ilu Igbo, o bu ya ga-egbu nu onwe ya

2. Ilu ka ndi Igbo ji ekwu okwu o  
Ilu ka ndi Igbo ji ama ihe  
Ilu ka ndi Igbo ji aaa...  
Ha si, O biara egbu m ga-egbu onwe ya

(Repeat Chorus)

3. Egbe bere, Ugo e bere ee  
Egbe bere, Ugo e bere ee  
Egbe bere, Ugo e bere ee  
Nke s'ibe ya ebela, ndi Igbo si, nku ga-akwa ya n'ike

(Repeat Chorus)

4. O biara nga onye abiagbukwala ya  
O biara nga onye abiagbukwala ya  
Mgbe o ga-ala nu ala,  
Ndi Igbo si na mkpumkpu apukwala ya

(Repeat Chorus)

5. Aturo o mara o mara e  
A turo omara o mara e  
A turo omara o mara,  
Mana A turo ofeke, o fere banye n'ohia

(Repeat Chorus)

6. Ochụ nwa okuko nwe ada  
Ochụ nwa okuko nwe ada  
Ochụ nwa okuko nwe ada  
Ma nwa okuko nwe nwe-nwe oso

(Repeat Chorus)

Sonny Oti's *Ilu ndi Igbo* song is a compilation of Igbo proverbs that highlights equity and justice and its importance in our everyday dealings. The music was released in the early 70's after the Nigeria – Biafra civil war. The injustices against the Igbo people after the war such as taking of their properties by other tribes in Nigeria in the name of abandoned property and the issuance of 20 pounds irrespective of the amount, they had in the bank probably motivated the music.

In the first stanza *O biara egbu m ga-egbu nu onwe ya*, Oti started with a proverb that means “when you try to hurt someone who did you no wrong, you will end up hurting yourself” and this served as the chorus for the music. This proverb is a warning to mischief makers and evil people who take delight in seeing the fall of innocent people to be weary of the consequences of their actions. Even the bible emphasized this in Deuteronomy 28: 7, “The Lord will defeat your enemies when they attack you. They will attack from one direction, but they will run from you in all directions.” (Good News Bible: 1979).

In the second stanza, Oti emphasized on the importance of proverbs to the Igbo people as he sings: *Ilu ka ndi Igbo ji ekwu okwu o*. He notes that proverbs are important medium for communication amongst the Igbo people. Not only that, he also observes that proverbs are also a channel for wisdom (*ilu ka ndi Igbo ji ama ihe*) and this highlights the Igbo people as very wise, intelligent and resourceful people.

The third stanza *Egbe bere Ugo bere* talks about live and let live. The Igbo people believe so much in justice and fairness irrespective of social status that is why everybody is given a chance to speak in the gathering of kinsmen. Analysis of the proverb shows that the Eagle (*Ugo*) which is regarded as the king of the birds is greater than the Kite (*Egbe*) in all



ramifications and therefore should not oppress it and vice versa. They must co-habit on the same tree which symbolizes their society. Any among them that insist the other will not perch on the tree, may its wings be broken. It is important here to highlight that the life of a bird is its wings. Whenever the wings of a bird are broken, its survival is very slim. The proverb chose the important aspect of the bird for its vengeance. In the same vein, the proverb warns that anybody who chooses to discriminate against his brother will have his life broken as retributive justice.

However, this philosophy may not be the same today as injustice and nepotism have taken over the Nigerian society in its entirety. But be that as it may, the prayer still remains that whoever is against justice and fairness will have doom



Fig 1. *Egbe bere Ugo bere. Nke si ibe ya ebela, nku ga'kwa ya n'ike.*

Chizo Egornu (2023). Pen, Ink & wash. 29.5cm x 21cm

The fourth stanza *O biara nga onye abiagbukwala ya, mgbe o ga-ala nū ala ndi Igbo si na mkpumkpū apukwala ya* speaks of returning evil for good deed. The Igbo people are very hospitable and therefore accommodate strangers. But they also know that one's good deed can put one in trouble as obtained and a very common phenomenon in our society today. Many people are in trouble because of their good deeds. Many people in the society today, are betrayers, back stabbers and without conscience. The proverb cautions on doing evil to one who means well. In the pen and ink drawing, Chizo Egoronu uses *Uri/ Uli* designs and a combination of positive and negative spaces to represent the proverb, with very high emphasis on the hunch back (*mkpu-mkpū*) which is the punishment for returning evil for good as believed in Igbo



*mgbe o ga-ala nū mkpumkpū apukwala ya.*

Chizo Egornu (2023). Pen, Ink & poster colour. 29.5cm x 10.5cm

The fifth stanza, *A tũrọ ọmara ọ mara, mana A tũrọ ofeke, o fere banye n'ọhịa* is the same as “A word is enough for the wise” in the English proverb. This proverb is often used by



Fig 3: *A tũrọ ọmara ọ mara, mana A tũrọ ofeke, o fere banye n'ọhịa*  
Chizo Egornu (2023). Pen & Ink. 29.5cm x 21cm

The sixth stanza *Ọchụ nwa ọkụkọ nwe ada ma nwa ọkụkọ nwe mwe mwe ọsọ* connotes success or victory over the enemy or competitor. This proverb is derived from the normal incident of chasing a chicken around and falling down in the bid to catch it. It is believed that the chicken escaped because of its innocence; therefore, any enemy trying to attack you will fall while you escape like the chicken. The Igbo people believe in equity and fairness and whoever is against this philosophy or ideology is fighting against the forces of nature.



Fig. 4. *Ọchụ nwa ọkụkọ nwe ada, ma nwa ọkụkọ nwe nwe-nwe oso.*  
Chizo Egoronu (2023). Pen & Ink. 29.5cm x 17cm

## Conclusion

*Ilu ndị Igbo* music was a creative means of documentation of Igbo proverbs through folklore. Oti carefully selected Igbo proverbs that hinge on fairness, equity and justice. He understands that the traditional Igbo man is a hardworking and proud man who abhors any form of laziness and cheating and would carefully avoid doings that would bring calamity to him, his family and his community.

*Ilu ndị Igbo* music reveals the philosophy and worldview of the Igbo people. They believe in the repercussion for every evil deed against an innocent man. Although the

contemporary Igbo society may have digressed to an extent from this ideology and worldview due to influence from interaction with foreign cultures, it is time to re-address the problem for a better society.

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