

Igbo Proverbs in Praise of Soil

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Abstract

Igbo people, one of the three major tribes of Nigeria, recognise the place of soil in life and have stylishly and uniquely deployed soil to speak in proverbs that depicts maturity, wisdom, identity, environmental management and good home-training. Such strategy for an enduring communication has gone global and should be preserved. The substance of soil resource for food security, human health, fertility and plant Nutrition, poverty alleviation, land use planning, sustainable development and degradation control, remediation and reclamation, land use change, history, philosophy, and sociology of soil science, justified the declaration of the International Year of Soils by the United Nations in their Sixty-eighth General Assembly of December 20th, 2013, where they also recognized December 5th as World Soil Day. The author pays tribute to the phenomenal role of the soil resource in the social, behavioural, agricultural, and environmental life sciences. Some of the Igbo proverbs show-casing relevance and diverse application of soil are discussed.

Keywords

Soil Resources and Use, Soil Proverbs, Igbo People, Culture and Science

1. Soils and the Environment

1.1. He Who Holds Me to the Ground/Soil Holds Himself as Well: Oji M Na-Ala, Ji Onwe Ya

Human activities on the soil will always impact the quality if unguarded. Over-tapping of resources like soil will destroy both the tapper (humans) and the tapped (soil). For example, irresponsible and persistent mining on a given site can destroy the miners with earthquake and impact soil structure, composition and function. This proverb means that evil is a distraction to the perpetrators (Raphael, 2018). Energy dissipated in fomenting evil as shown in **Figure 1**, going from plotting, planning, execution and sustenance of action and sometimes sealing to prevent exposure is not worth the trouble.



Figure 1. Photograph showing the wisdom that he who holds another holds himself.

1.2. No Matter How a Child Delays on Assigned Farm Portion to Cultivate, It Still Waits for Him/Her: Nwata Gbaa Lighilighi Gbaa Lighilighi, Ihu Oru Ya Nokwa Na-Eche Ya

Soil quality has been defined. The capacity of a soil function, within ecosystem boundaries, to sustain and maintain environmental quality and biological productivity, and also promote the health of plants and animals dependent on it defines soil quality. Ignoring the soil ecosystem puts a missing link in the interaction. Igbo people are historically handiwork-inclined people. Farmers were said to share the jobs to be done a day to their children who are expected to finish same with the day. Feigning ill-health or other flimsy excuses only increase the size of the job to be done the following day. According to Nwaichi (Nwaichi, 2018), the previous day's job that is undone is added to the current day's work. This practice raised dedicated children who shared in family's bigger picture of feeding family from proceeds realized from the farm. The proverb means you must pay for all inaction and negligence of your responsibilities as there is always a consequence (hidden or explicit, direct or indirect).

1.3. Land Dispute Is Not Settled with an Empty Hand: A Gbara Aka N'azo Ala, Onye Ji Ji a Na Akonye

This proverb derives from preparedness (Raphael, 2018). Soil is an integral part of the ecosystem so needs maintenance. If you want firm ownership of your land, you need to have the necessary instruments and documents in place otherwise, s/he who has them will repossess you of it. The proverb insists you do not fight a battle empty handed. It is often used when expressing or resolving disputes between the rich and poor or serious-minded and hard-working persons and loafers. Words need to be backed by corresponding action.

1.4. The Land Is Not Transferable: A Naghi Ebu Ala Ebu

This proverb is commonly used by the Igbos when referring to powerful people and the influences they exert, which most times cannot be taken away from them. The function of soil in the ecosystem cannot be taken away from it. Soil functions ranges from agricultural, environmental, nature protection, landscape architecture and urban planning, filter to protect quality of air and water, storage

and supply of nutrients, serving as medium for plant growth or bio-materials production, providing diverse habitat and deliver ecosystem services that enable life on earth. These and more make soil extremely powerful and so valuable. The proverb implies you cannot change the obvious (Nwogu, 2018).

2. Soil Fertility and Plant Nutrition

2.1. Bad Soil Breeds Bad Leaders: Ala Adighi Mma Bu Uru Ndi Nze

Poor soils amount to poor plant nutrition. A defective system in the same way gives room for all kinds of societal ills like corruption, nepotism, ethnocentrism, religious jingoism, etc. to thrive. A hydrocarbon impacted soil as shown in **Figure 2** has been tagged bad soil as it has suffered compaction and nutrient loss with resultant bad dominant species, nipa palms. This proverb says corrupt leadership thrives in a heated and/or bad polity (Raphael, 2018). Good soil nutrition amount to great soil quality and its absence can be likened to a porous leadership system with attendant increase in sharp practices among community leaders and actors.

2.2. When You See a Fertile Farmland, You Start Preparing the Stomach: A Hu Ala, Ehibe Afo

The sight of a fertile land with a luxuriant growth of crops as shown in **Figure 3**, gives so much joy to the farmer that he anticipates harvest and post-harvest activities, including eating in abundance. Similarly, identification of appropriate technologies for a particular soil condition and combinations of soil conditions to apply give hope to soil scientists and the world at large. The Igbos believe in soil resource and that the sight of a fertile soil especially one with growing healthy crops gives hope to a hungry farmer who in turn prepares his stomach in anticipation. The proverb emphasizes that if preconditions to anything are met, the next step(s) unfolds retorted Nwogu (Nwogu, 2018). Life has an order that a particular action begets the next.



Figure 2. Cross-section of Nipa palms showing disorder in unhealthy competition.



Figure 3. Photograph of a promising fertile land with healthy crops.

2.3. You Don't Go Empty-Handed to Cultivate the Land: A Naghi Agba Aka Akpa Ala Uru

When a soil is not taken care of by good management processes, it loses its essential function. Successful farming requires good soil, tools and machineries, human resources (**Figure 4**) and inputs. Harnessing these requirements will make a productive and profitable harvest. The proverb means that adequate preparation is necessary for results. It is generally believed that investment goes before harvest in all walks of life (**Raphael, 2018**). There is no food for an idle/lazy man or woman.

2.4. If You Praise the Yam That Yielded Good Seedling in a Farm, You Also Praise the Soil That Produced It: E Kelee Ji Ruru Nne, E Kelee Ala Ruru Ya

Soil management practices are according to land use to enhance best productivity. Yam is a popular tuber and staple food in Nigeria, its global largest producer, and has many species and varieties. It thrives on sandy clay loams and on most soil types provided the yam holes are properly dug and filled with organic material. For optimum tuberization, pH of 4.5 - 6.5, ample moisture in the first 12 to 20 weeks after planting and a temperature of 25°C - 32°C required of the soil (**Coursey, 2013**). Most farmers praise the yams with great tubers as shown in **Figure 5**, without reference to the soil that provided the enabling environment. The proverb says it is good to acknowledge a gesture in totality i.e. acknowledging the seen and unseen persons that created opportunity and action.

2.5. Even the Dog Gets a Share of the Farm Produce If the Soil Is Good Enough: Ala Di Mma, Nkita Erie Uwe Ji

Soil fertility is a panacea for feeding the teeming world population. In Igboland, most dogs are kept not as pets but for security purposes and have the kind of food given to them to be more violent. In a family, the farmer stacks his yams in barns after harvest and shares the seed yams called "uwe ji" in Igbo language, the crew that participated in the entire process. The farmer and family members are said to be so caring when the dog gets a share (**Figure 6**) of the "uwe ji". That means that the effort of the dog is also appreciated. The proverb stresses that



Figure 4. Photograph showing prepared team for cultivation on a farmland.



Figure 5. Photograph showing rich soil and rich harvest.

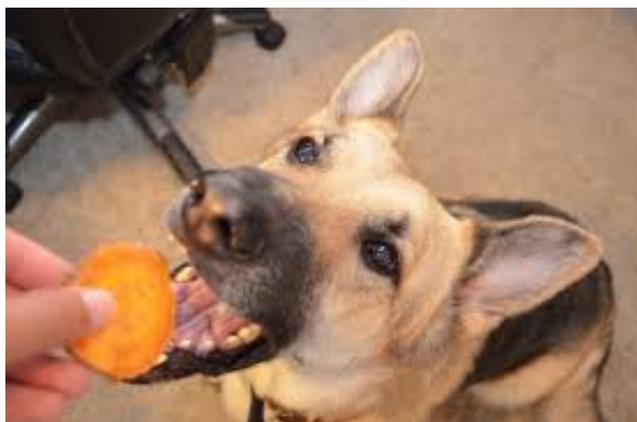


Figure 6. Photograph showing kind treatment to a pet.

when there is peace, everyone gets a fair share of the common good (Nwogu, 2018). Relating it to governance, a good governance engenders equitable distribution of the common good among its citizenry.

2.6. A Farmer Never Expects a Bumper Harvest from a Poor Soil: A Naghi Ele Anya Owuwe Ihe Ubi N'ala Nke Na-Adighi Uru

Plant nutrition is directly proportional to soil fertility (IUSS, 2018). Farmers believe that parched soils (Figure 7) are not useful as predictions can be reliably made of expected harvest. Farming on such soils are “to fulfil all righteousness” i.e. doing something so you don’t get blamed for inaction even when you don’t believe in the process. The proverb teaches that expectations are not made of a hopeless situation. When chances are very slim in a process, partakers are encouraged with this proverb so they can prepare for the worse without being consumed.

2.7. If the Harvest Is Bountiful, the Farmer Forgets the Sweat He Exuded during Planting: Ihe Owuwe-Ubi Maa Nma, Echefuo Ahuhu a Tara Wee Kuo Ya

Luxuriant growth brought about by fertility in a farmland has great and overwhelming promise in scenery, plant production, conservation of biodiversity, etc. The unspeakable joy a farmer radiates with bumper harvest (The Bible, 1971a) miniaturises the suffering and stress of the various stages of farming. This proverb is usually given when small and rigorous beginning is perceived to have given great ending. It means that the end justifies the means.

3. Soil Evaluation and Land Use Planning

Digging of the Ground Is Not Always for Burying a Corpse: E Gwughi Ala Si Ya Na Ozu Ga Alariri

Soil is a scarce and finite resource so use should be optimized. Given the myriads of functions and properties that make for these functions, one can maximize its use which is not limited to widely-reported one, i.e. agriculture. This proverb means that life is not a one-way directional event so people must make room to accommodate changes (Raphael, 2018; Answersafrica.com, 2018). The proverb is often used by the Igbo people when people make expectations because of an intended compliance to norms. For example, a dug hole (Figure 8) is not always for burying a corpse. It can serve some other great purposes.

4. Soil Degradation Control, Remediation and Reclamation

4.1. Fight Results When the Molded Sand Is Over-Pushed: A Kwaa Aja, a Hu Ogu

Over-exploitation of soil will affect soil properties and processes. Rigorous efforts put together in molding traditional or conventional bricks or children’s molded sand (which they make together when playing) make owner to react violently when broken by anybody. Playing with such molded sand therefore should be with kindness with utmost sense of responsibility. Otherwise, confrontation may ensue if not managed, could go violent. The proverb means that there is always a consequence for crossing boundaries (Raphael, 2018; Martin, 2019a).



Figure 7. Photograph showing a parched land incapable of growing crops.



Figure 8. Photograph showing a dug hole in the soil which can accommodate many possibilities.

The usage is always around analysis of dispute or combat. The ecological implication of disturbance of any sort to soil is highlighted and the outcome of monitoring and evaluation of such impacted soil could give rise to remedial measures and controls.

4.2. A Lazy Man's Farm Is a Breeding Ground for Snakes: Ala Onye Umengwu Bu Ogbo Agwo

Poorly managed soils can harm man and other soil “tenants”. A lazy farmer’s farm is characterised by underground rodent burrows or dens; under rocks, logs or bushes; in stumps or root systems as s(h)e farm stages specific activities like weeding and general house-keeping are seldom carried out. These inefficiencies make for a breeding ground for snakes (**Figure 9**) that thrive in undisturbed environment as well. Farm activities are less intense with lazy farmers and this makes the soils in addition to predisposing factors earlier listed, constitute a conducive environment for snakes. This proverb says that inadequacies, ineffectiveness and inefficiencies make for bad fortunes. Ecologically, the proverb warns



Figure 9. Photograph showing unkempt farmland.

about the consequences of soil degradation. Such degradation may puncture soil security which was defined by Global soil security (*Global Soil Security, 2018*) as the maintenance and improvement of the world's soil resource to produce food, fibre and fresh water, while also contributing to energy and climate stability, maintaining biodiversity and protecting natural systems and human wellbeing more generally. Safeguarding the health and wellbeing of current and future generations through good stewardship of Earth's natural systems, and by re-thinking the way we feed, move, house, power and care for the world constitutes world health.

5. Soils and Land Use Change

5.1. He Who Wants to Stay under a Tree-Shade at Old Age Must Plant a Tree on the Ground Now: Onye Choro I No N'okpuru Osisi Na-Aga Akunye Mkpuru N'ala Ugbua

Effects of urbanization on soil can deprive man of one or all of the basic needs of man namely shelter, food and clothing. It is characteristic of ancient Igboman to stay under a tree for relaxation as it provides oxygen and shade from harsh climatic conditions like rain and sun. Some elders were reported to have struggled for a portion of land because it had shady trees these disputes made the wisdom in the proverb that encouraged people to plant trees if they would love to sit or lay under tree shades at old age to prevent dispute. The proverb teaches that he who wants some comfort in the future must lay the foundation now (*Martin, 2019b; The Bible, 1971b*). Ecologically speaking, it acknowledges land use as habitat. Conscious planting (**Figure 10**) is believed to cushion the effect of hopelessness and hunger resulting in peace-of-mind otherwise called shade.

5.2. If a Road Is Good, Road-Users Pass through It Again: Uzo Maa Mma, a Gaa Ya Nga Abuo

Land use also extends to access road. A productive land being allocated to other uses like road creation can be compensated by tree-planting otherwise, gradual



Figure 10. Photograph showing preparedness for farming purposes.

destruction sets in. If an elderly woman (**Figure 11**) for example, gets around a road with ease, there is a likelihood that she will return to the road. People have preferences for routes to their destinations for own reasons. Most times out of earlier experiences or other sentiments, preferences are made. The proverb says that strong considerations for a second time in any event are dependent on earlier encounter or perception (Nwaichi, 2018).

6. Soils, Food Security, and Human Health

If One Sees a Thing Bigger than the Farm, He Sells the Barn: A Hu Ihe Ka Ubi, E Ree Oba

In agriculture, a barn could be defined as a large and uninviting building used for storing tubers, grain, hay, or straw or for housing livestock. Providing enough safe and nutritious food is a tremendous challenge hence a handsome premium has been placed on maintenance and conservation of agricultural land. Anything more valuable than an arable farmland could be procured at any cost. Sale of barn (**Figure 12**) here could be interpreted to mean sale of one's possession as wealthy man's possessions decades ago consisted in farm produce, so sale of barn means sale of valuables to acquire the discovered priceless asset. This proverb is used when big decisions are taken and means that big challenges beget unusual steps (Raphael, 2018).



Figure 11. Photograph showing comfortable pathway for walking.



Figure 12. Photograph showing a farmer's valuable—a yam barn.

7. History, Philosophy, and Sociology of Soil Science

All Lizards Lay with Their Bellies on the Ground—No One Knows the One with Stomach Ache: Ngwere Nile Makpu Amakpu N'ala—Onweghi Onye Ma Nke Afo Na Aru

Presence of regular terrestrial animals on the soil increases understanding of soil information and could be extrapolated to show relationship and diversity to development and soil history. Lizards are reptiles of about 6000 species. Whether they have with four legs, two legs and no legs at all; with frills, horns or wings; and in nearly imaginable every colour, lay on the floor (**Figure 13**) at some point or the other. It is impossible to decipher which has got stomach ache so care study and evaluation will be necessary to make pronouncements. This proverb enjoys wide patronage whenever events are clear or easily discernible and conclusions need to be made. It means therefore that one should not be quick to draw conclusions.



Figure 13. Photograph showing laying lizards with unpredictable health status.

8. Conclusion

Deep and thorough analysis of the usage of soil-centred proverbs by the Igbo people of Nigeria in various aspects of life and living, suggests and affirms the central role of the soil resource to basic survival in food and energy, food security, peaceful coexistence, unity of purpose, sustainable and liveable environment and cities as well as socioeconomic characteristics. Incorporating socioeconomic perspectives into soil security could include preserving and promoting our age-long soil proverbs as they are words of wisdom derived from the importance and diversely wide sets of the soil resource. Soil proverbs in this context could be deployed by science communicators in performing the remarkably daunting task of relating our science heterogeneous public.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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