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Igbo Folk Idioms in Caribbean Phrase¹

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Introduction

In the course of investigating the possible survival of Igbo cultural elements in the Caribbean, I have been presented with three important linguistic leads. The first comprises folk idioms and other types of Africanisms in Caribbean English which seem to be related directly or indirectly to Igbo speech patterns or idiom (Azuonye, 2002a and 2002b). The second includes some actual lexical survivals or cognate words which are unmistakably Igbo and some of which do indeed cast some light on the etymology of certain words in current Igbo usage. These lexical survivals include, for example, the words *édè* or *édò* for cocoyam and *bèkéè* or *buckra* for the white man; and among the cognate words so far recognized as possibly Igbo-related, *obeah* for magical healing (throughout the Caribbean) and *agwe* for the deity of possession and spirit mediumship (especially in Haiti), seem to be of particular significance for the light they seem to cast on such Igbo terms as *dìbìà* (medicine man) and *Ágwù* (the Igbo deity of creative madness, who is commonly associated with possession).² As I have argued (in Azuonye, 2002a), the etymology of the word *dibia* remains obscure until we relate it to the concept of *òbìà* (visitor; in this case, evil forces which visit and take possession of the individual and afflict him and which must be exorcized to restore the individual back to health). In this sense, as I have argued, *dìbìà* is in all probability *dí-òbìà* (master or controller of visiting evil forces), an obscured sense which the Caribbean cognate, *obeah* (i.e. *òbìà*) seems to supply. The third and final set of leads on hand comprises a stock of personal names which, despite their transformations in their new English and French phonological environments, reveal themselves as inalienable traces of the Igbo presence in the region. I have elsewhere examined two different corpora of Igbo names in the New World, one from the nominal roll of 212 names from the slave ship *Amelié* which was captured off the shores of Martinique by the French navy in 1822 (Azuonye, 1989; 2003a), the other from North American slave records (Azuonye, 2002c). Apart from what these names tell us about the image of the Igbo, both in their homeland and in the New World environment in the heyday of slavery, they also reveal that a number of non-Christian and non-European names in common usage in the Caribbean and the Americas may well be of Igbo origins.

Taken together with other evidence and extrapolating from other hypotheses arising from the study of other cultural linkages between West Africa and the New World as well as existing pidginization and creolization theories (Hymes, 1981, and Asante, 1996), these linguistic leads invite further field explorations towards their further verification. In the present paper, I will confine myself

¹ This paper was originally circulated *in absentia* at Paper presented at a Conference Celebrating Simon Ottenberg's Contributions to Igbo Studies, at the Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, New York, Monday, March 31-Wednesday, April 2, 2003).

² Professor Adiele Afigbo (personal communication, July 5, 2004) has opined that "The dominant feature of this entity is not 'creative madness, but divination. Madness comes in only in respect of *onye Agwù kere* (one who has been selected by *Agwù*, but who tries to dodge the profession he and *Agwù* agreed upon before he came into his present incarnation). *Agwù* cannot just strike anybody it sees with madness. And *Agwù*'s madness is not really madness. Often it is a shade between foolishness (*iberibe ojoo*) and what is generally known as brain fag."

to a corpus of phrases from the Caribbean which the collectors believe to have an Igbo provenance. The following, received (in 1982) from Professor Richard Allsopp of the University of West Indies at Cave Hill, Barbados, through Ayo Banjo of the University of Ibadan, are highly illustrative.⁵ In compiling the list from which these samples are taken, Allsopp had set out to ascertain “how the West Indian phrase may be related to Igbo thought and expression” (Allsopp, 1982). My analysis of Allsopp’s repertoire of Caribbean phrase reveals four major patterns: firstly, word-for-word transliteration from Igbo into English; secondly, creative processes in the transformation of Igbo folk idiom into Caribbean phrase, thirdly, rhythms of Igbo syntax in Caribbean speech; and, finally, reflections of the Igbo thought, world-view and customs in the Caribbean folk idiom.

I make no claims whatsoever to finality in these reconstructions and interpretations of Allsopp’s repertoire. It must indeed be admitted that, because of the close genetic and structural relationship between Igbo and several other West African Niger-Congo languages of the *kwa*-group (especially Yoruba, Edo etc), some of these reconstructions and interpretations may equally apply to these languages in the same way as they apply to Igbo. The main ground, in this paper, for focusing on the possible Igbo provenance of these phrases is the fact that Allsopp, like other native speakers of Jamaican Creole, perceive their language as originating from Igbo. All citations, including the embedded numerical codes, refer to the raw data provided by Allsopp.

Word-for-World Transliteration from Igbo in the Caribbean Verbal Repertoire

There is indeed clear evidence of direct morpheme-for-morpheme or word-for-word transliteration of Igbo folk idioms and speech patterns in the repertoire of Caribbean expressions on hand. Here are some striking examples:

<i>Caribbean Phrase</i>	<i>Sense (According to Allsopp)</i>	<i>Possible Igbo Equivalent</i>
eye-water	“tears” (1)	anya-mmiri
mouth-water	“saliva”	onụ-mmiri
eye-pass	“disrespect; impertinent usu. towards another person” (7)	anya nlefe; <i>or</i> nlefe anya
big eye	“gluttony; selfishness” (8, 9)	anya ukwu ^{3 6}
strong eye	“wanting the best for oneself while ignoring the rights of others” (12)	anya ike
bad eye	“bad wish” (13) (malevolence, associated with the evil eye)	anya ojoo
good head	“good brain; special aptitude” (19)	ezigbo isi
his head isn’t... good	“mental imbalance” (0.20)	isi adighi ya mma

3 Afigbo (personal communication, July 5, 2004) observes that the Igbo idiomatic equivalent to “big eye” (*anya ukwu*) is better transliterated as “greed” rather than Allsopp’s “gluttony”. For Afigbo, “gluttony”, in Igbo idiom is *ori-ori* (with the first *i* being high and the second low) or *afo eju ala* (lit. earth’s belly is never filled)

confuse head	“upset concentration and cause mistakes” (0.26)	igbaka isi
hold head and bawl	“place both hands against the temples and shriek with grief (0.28)	gbanye aka n’isi na-eti mkpukpo ⁷
hard ears	“stubbornly disobedient” (0.35)	nti ike ⁴
face set like	“assume a threatening look; appear set for quarrel” (0.60)	idowe ihu ka (dika)
bathe your skin	“bath, bathe, take shower” (0.61)	ighu ahụ gi; or isa ahụ gi
pick your mouth	“get information indirectly from someone by engaging in conversation” (0.49)	ighu gi onu ⁵
turn round fast	“hustle; move promptly and and diligently about your work (0.87)	igbaghari
carry yourself	“[mild form of vexed reproach] be off with you; be gone with you; get away” (0.85)	buru onwe gi [puo]
her eyes catch fire	“crave for something seen for the first time”	anya na-eke ya oku ⁶
you self too!	“[expressing restrained rebuke] “how unreasonable you are” (0.85.6)	gi nwa kwa!
you do well	“[sarcastic rebuke] be inconsiderate in your expectation (0.85.10)	I meela! or I gbaliala!
push mouth in everybody’s business	“meddle; interfere in other people’s affairs (usu.) Involving some tension (0.42.1)	manye/tinye onu n’okwu onye obula
eye-turn	“dizziness; faint feeling (usu. due to hunger) (0.95)	anya igba gburugburu
bad bowels	diarrhoea (esp. in infants) (0.100)	afoo ojoo

Even from a cursory glance, it is easy to see that several of the above phrases from present day Caribbean Creole are basically the same as certain phrases in active use in contemporary pidgin

4 Afigbo (personal communication, July 5, 2004) notes that “Other renderings of this phrase in Igbo include *nti ikputu* (thick ear lobes which the Igbo believe make it difficult for what is being said to go in) and *nti belebele* (thin ear lobes which the Igbo believe make it difficult to retain what is heard long enough for it to be understood and acted upon).”

5 Alternatively *ighu olu*, as suggested by Afigbo (personal communication, July 5, 2004).

6 “The proper rendering of this,” Afigbo (personal communication, July 5, 2004) comments, “is *anya nwuru ya oku*, which is usually in reaction to some happening, whereas *anya na-eke ya oku* is an in-born habit not dependent on any particular happening and thus a trait of bad character. A woman who has been stretched in a sexual encounter with a man would say *o mere m anya nwuru m oku* not *anya na-eke m oku*.”

spoken in the Igbo states of Nigeria as in several towns and cities elsewhere in Nigeria. There is thus sufficient evidence to surmise that these phrases may have originated at the transitional stage in the language shift process between simple *code-mixing* or *code-switching* (when the early Igbo-speaking slaves in the Caribbean mixed their native Igbo with English words or switched freely from Igbo to broken English and *vice versa*) and *pidginization*, when, with the acquisition of more English words, their speech became predominantly English in vocabulary while retaining the meaning-patterns (semantics), word-form (morphology) and word-order (syntax) of their native Igbo. This process has been aptly described and illustrated by Asante (1996) with reference to African-American English or Ebonics.

Creative Processes in the Transformation of Igbo Phrase in Caribbean Idiom

Some of the phrases in Allsopp’s repertoire are as delightfully poetic as Achebe’s literal rendering of Igbo expressions in English in his novels. We are reminded, for example, of the poignancy of Ezeulu’s pragmatic admonition to his son, Oduche, in *Arrow of God*, to go and join the Christian missionaries, as his spy: “Go and be my eye there....” (Achebe, 1964). The transformation of Igbo phrases into Caribbean English phrases may have come about through similar kinds of creative communicative processes.

But, at times, we can glean, from these phrases, some of the difficulties which the early Igbo expatriates in the Caribbean had communicating Igbo thoughts through the medium of English. For example, the phrase “belly working” (“cause, have diarrhoea, 0.101.3”, according to Allsopp), is one of many cases in the verbal repertoire before us of mechanical, at best zeugmatic, transformation of Igbo words into incongruous albeit quaintly effective English expression. The Igbo phrase here seems to be *afó òrúrú* (meaning “stomach upset”). But, in the absence of a clear English equivalent for the verbal element, *òrúrú* (which has a restricted reference to the gripping turning of the stomach associated with diarrhoea), the early Igbo expatriates in the New World seem to have opted for the English gloss of the homonymous form, *òrúrú* (from *órú*, “work”, meaning “working”). Occasionally, however, such mechanical transformations turn out to be quite effective in reflecting the bucolic charm and innocence inherent in the original Igbo expressions, as in the following examples:

<i>Caribbean Phrase</i>	<i>Sense (According to Allsopp)</i>	<i>Possible Igbo Equivalent</i>
somebody do him so	“bring some apparently unexplained sickness upon you by means of witchcraft” (0.120)	o (w)ụ mmadu mere ya ya
she was <i>able with</i> him	cope with somebody; be equal to, a match for somebody (0.127)	o kwere ya na ya
he was <i>sweet with</i> her	be on intimate terms with somebody; have an amorous friendship with somebody (0.144)	ya na ya na-atọ

In these and similar phrases, the early Igbo expatriates have clearly gone beyond mere transliteration

to the finding of dynamic English equivalents to their native Igbo syntactical and thought patterns. Retained in these phrases are aspects of Igbo “communicative style” (to borrow a phrase from Asante, 1996) rather than direct transliteration of Igbo morphological or syntactic patterns. On the other hand, the phrases below illustrate patterns of direct transliteration of Igbo morphological or syntactic patterns in Caribbean speech. Both processes (dynamic creative equivalences and direct morphological and syntactical transliterations) belong squarely to the pidginization and creolization stages in the evolution of modern Caribbean speech.

The Rhythm of Igbo Syntax in Caribbean Speech

The resilience of Igbo phrases over centuries of usage in what was originally an alien and even hostile linguistic and cultural milieu is truly fascinating. Clearly there is a heritable cultural dimension to linguistic competence. What has survived in the phrases presented below is not only the sense but the syntactic pattern and quite often the world view as well. But before examining aspects of the Igbo world view which these phrases Caribbean contain, let us observe the ways in which the rhythm of Igbo syntactic patterns seems reflected in a number of phrases in the repertoire:

<i>Caribbean Phrase</i>	<i>Sense (According to Allsopp)</i>	<i>Possible Igbo Equivalent</i>
he went and did it	“actually, purposefully do (Something) (0.133)	ọ gara mee ya
<i>I(t’)</i> s not sick (<i>h</i>)e sick, <i>I(t’)</i> s lazy he lazy	[emphasizing the sense of the sense of the adjective]; actually/ really + adj, (0.255)	ọ bughị ọrịa ka ọ na-aria, ọ (w)ụ umengwụ na-agwụ ya
<i>I(t’)</i> s dry those things dry already	[as above]	ọ (w)ụ ọkụkọ ka ihe ndị a kọrọla
wid de open Eric open the door, she hit (<i>h</i>)er one lash wid a stick	[adding dramatic emphasis to the verb]; as soon as + verb (0.257)	mmepe Erik na-emepe ụzọ, o were osisi kụọ ya
the come you come you start trouble	[as above]	otu ọkpụ ọbịbịa I na-abịa, I bido esemokwu
<i>I(t’)</i> s vex she vex	[emphasizing the sense of the verb]; actually/really + verb (0.256)	ọ (w)ụ iwe ka o were
<i>I(t’)</i> s sleep you sleeping	[as above]	ọ (w)ụ ụra ka I na-arahụ.
<i>I(t’)</i> s gone Fitz gone today today	[as above] “without fail/definitely today” (0.259)	ọ (w)ụ ụla ka Fitz lara. taa taa!
tomorrow tomorrow	“without fail/definitely tomorrow” (0.259)	echi echi!
<i>me</i> and <i>you</i> <i>you</i> and <i>he</i> the <i>two</i> of them	[as a warning or threat] there will be serious row between me and you, etc) (0.168).	<i>mụ</i> na <i>gị</i> (naabọ) <i>gị</i> na <i>ya</i> ha <i>naabọ</i> / unu <i>naabọ</i> .

Clearly illustrated in these phrases is the retention of serial verb syntactical patterns as well as the absence of tense markers in Igbo as in many other West African languages of the *kwa*-group of the Niger-Congo family, features which have repeatedly been remarked as distinguishing *Ebonics* (Black English) in the Caribbean as in North America from mainstream English (See Asante, 1996).

Reflections of the Igbo Customs and Worldview in the Caribbean Folk Idiom

In many other phrases the interest lies not so much in the semantic and syntactic parallels between the Caribbean phrase and its potential Igbo equivalents but in the world view and cultural norms which they reflect. These sociolinguistic dimensions are of special interest in helping to locate the provenance of the Caribbean expressions unmistakably in Igbo culture.

For instance, the phrase “eye-cut” in the Caribbean sentence, “The child *cut her eye* at the teacher,” has been interpreted by Allsopp as referring to a situation in which a person “looks rudely at another; then closes his eyes and/or turns the face away as if ‘cutting’ the person out of his sight” (3). This is a common type of folk gesture among the Igbo; described as *igbabi anya* or *ira anya*, a gesture considered to be an extreme form of insolent behavior usually from the young towards their elders. We can see in this and other phrases of the same kind important landscapes of identity in customary behavior, revealing that certain standards of etiquette in Igbo folkways have indeed been carried over wholesale into the new Caribbean environment. Thus, the Caribbean phrase “talk back” (Igbo *isa okwu*), seems also to refer to one of the forms of behavior customarily deplored by the Igbo in the relationship between the young and their elders. As in the Igbo *isa okwu*, the Caribbean “talk back”, as explained by Allsopp (0.169) evokes the idea of a child or junior replying “aggressively or argumentatively when scolded.”

Among the Igbo, we are reminded in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, “age was respected but personal achievement was revered” (Achebe, 1958). The Igbo republican ethos, which goes with this high premium on personal achievement, also emphasizes the dignity and worth of the individual and capability of each person to reach the highest vaults of achievement without kowtowing to a god-father. Although I have found no direct Igbo idiomatic equivalent to the Caribbean phrase, “hang their mouth where the soup drips (in Igbo, *ikowe onu ebe ofe na-atusi*),⁴ the sense seems to be a New World survival of an Igbo cultural norm which abhors “seeking favor from persons in (especially political) power at the expense of pride and principles” (Allsopp, 0.79). The norms reflected in this phrase are the subject of many an Igbo proverb.

It is not surprising to find so many phrases in the Caribbean repertoire which refer to the value of restraint, especially verbal restraint. Good examples include: “run his mouth” (*onu na-agba ya tum tum*)⁵ which means “to be talkative and consequently untrustworthy” (0.40-1); “mouth has no cover” (*onu ya enweghi nkwuchi*) which refers to “babbling and tongue-wagging” (0.38); “mouth could open and story would jump out” (*onu meghee akuko amaputa*) which refers to the revelation of embarrassing confidences and information” (0.44); and many others. The last of these phrases may not be a direct morpheme-by-morpheme transliteration of an Igbo folk idiom but a dynamic equivalent of such more colorful idioms as *ire guta oku agba awhuwuoro ya ya* (“tongue fetches fire and the jaw fans it up for him”). In this case, the early Igbo expatriates (finding it rather complicated to transliterate such a phrase directly, appear to have settled for a simpler but dynamic creative alternative. Another phrase, “don’t talk too much”, transliterates the Igbo cautionary idiom,

ekwusikwala ike” which is intoned, as in the Caribbean, “when someone is unduly confident about something or some situation” (Allsopp, 0.148).

The family in the Igbo setting is the extended type including not only the immediate nuclear unit of parents and their children (*ezi-na-ulo*) but also the kindred (*ikwu-na-ibe*) and the larger patrilineal (*umunna*) and sometimes matrilineal (*ikwunne*). To the Igbo, all these segments form one large closely-knit unit—the extended family and in the modern urban contexts in which he finds himself, as is the case with the people of Umuofia in Achebe’s *No Longer At Ease*, the Igbo regard anyone from any of these units as a family member, thus organizations like the Umuofia Progressive Union in Lagos, as depicted in the novel just cited (Achebe, 1960), are commonly described as “family meetings” in a generalized English rendering of such kinship terms as *umunna*, *ikwu-na-ibe*, and *ezi-na-ulo*. The Caribbean phrase, “she is family to X” (0.239) seems to have arisen from more or less the same process of generalized transliteration.

As the primary unit of social organization, and one on which the individual depends most for support in times of difficulty, members of the Igbo extended family are customarily held together by unusually strong bonds of reciprocity and parents would sacrifice everything to bring up their children in the hope that the children would live up to their reciprocal obligations towards them in their old age. The Caribbean phrases “she punished to bring up those children” (Igbo: *o tara ahuhu i zuputa umuaka ahu*) and “she sacrificed herself...” (Igbo: *o ji onwe ya chuo aja...*), both of which Allsopp glosses as to “deprive oneself of normal needs so that others, usually children, may enjoy same” (0.82), not only reflect the structure of the Igbo folk idioms given in parenthesis but this dogged parental determination in matters of family (including extended family) welfare. This doggedness is also reflected in the willingness of the Igbo, like his Caribbean affines, to “pull in his belt; subject himself to rigid economies” (Allsopp, 0.88) when the occasion demands, hence the phrase “tie your belly” with the Igbo equivalent, *imachi aji ike*.”

The Igbo worldview is a cyclical one, one in which life is seen as an eternal journey from the human world (*uwa*) to the spirit world (*ala mmuo*) and from the spirit world back again, through reincarnation, to the human world. It is essentially an existential journey through a path (*uzo*) which at every point is rigged with battle (*ogu*) against numerous antagonistic forces generally represented as the enemy (*iro*) who in turn is believed to be ubiquitous. To survive the battle of life and attain the ultimate fulfilment of ripe old age with material success and respectability (*nka-na-nzere*) which alone can guarantee a dignified passage into the spirit world, ancestorhood and reincarnation, the individual requires the support of the deities, one’s personal deity (*chi*), the ancestral and other good spirits (*ndi mmuo*), the individual’s physical, psychological, spiritual, and mental resources (*obi, akona-uche, ike, anya, aka, ukwu*, etc), and, above all, a steadfast community of parents, siblings, children and other human relatives, friends, neighbors etc (*nne, nna, umu, ikwu, ibe, enyi*, etc). Needless to say, in such a perilous world, the communalistic instinct is naturally very strong and one of the highest values in social relations is the idea of being able to surround oneself with people with whom, to use the relevant Caribbean phrase, one can “cook in the same pot” (Igbo: *ndi gi na ha na-esiko nri n’otu ite*, “people with whom you can cook in the same pot), otherwise *ndi gi na ha na-eriko nri n’otu oku*, “people with whom you can eat from the same dish.” As observed by Allsopp, the phrase, in both the Igbo original and its Caribbean transformation, “refers to people being of a kind, subject to the same controls and being partners in the same venture” (0.177). But, in a slightly different semantic environment, the same Igbo or Caribbean phrase can invoke a diametrically

opposed set of sentiments, the widespread fear of being poisoned by the ubiquitous enemy (*iro*). The consciousness of the ubiquitous enemy in the battle of life, deigns us to exercise caution in matters of choosing people with who we can “cook in the same pot” or “eat from the same dish”. We are reminded here of phrases like “somebody do him” (Igbo: *o (w)u mmadu mere ya*) which suggests the instrumentality of magic in cases of sudden serious or inexplicable illness. There is, today, a jocose parlance which says that “there is no germ in Africa”, since every illness is usually traced—not to bacteria—but to the doings of evil magicians, Igbo equivalents of Caribbean obeah-men and North American conjure-doctors often described as “Two-Heads” (*isimgba* or *Isinaabọ* in Igbo). This pristine ontological bias seems to re-echo in the Caribbean personification of disease in such phrases as “sickness came and held him,” which in turn re-echoes the Igbo phrase, *Ọrịa b́iara jide ya*, a phrase which suggests a severe, often sudden attack of an illness fostered by magical powers.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have briefly examined the possible Igbo roots of a rather small but significant sampling of Caribbean folk idioms. A more extensive investigation along the same lines as those initiated by Allsopp and others need to be carried through, not only in the Caribbean but also on the American mainland. Unfortunately, the work done so in this field has been less productive than it would otherwise have been largely owing to the limited involvement of researchers of West African origins or with native competence in one or more relevant West African languages. It seems absolutely necessary at this time for individual partnerships as well as institutional linkages between West African universities and universities in the Caribbean and the Americas to be established in order to move the research beyond the confines of speculative guesswork to empirical results founded on intensive fieldwork. I worked through Allsopp’s list of Caribbean phrases with several classes of Igbo students at the University of Ibadan and the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, and every new encounter with a new set of students produced interesting new insights into the possible Igbo roots of the Caribbean phrases. Beyond the basic goal of establishing linguistic and other cultural connections between West Africa and the Caribbean, research in this field bids fair to contribute immensely to the growing worldwide interest in the study of the universal phenomenon of language shift, especially with regard to its implications for a better understanding of the processes of language endangerment and death as 50% of the languages of the world faces extinction within the next fifty years or so. For a preliminary application of these understandings (including evidence from the present Caribbean data) to Igbo, see Azuonye (2003b).

It is however important to note, as I have earlier stated, that in carrying out this investigation, the matching of Igbo and Caribbean or Black American idioms, no matter how persuasive the results may be, cannot produce conclusive evidence of Igbo presence in any particular area or among any particular population sample. Studies of mother-tongue interference in various African Englishes and comparative studies of the West African resources of Ebonics have revealed identical syntactic patterns which can easily be re-translated into many different African languages of the same family. It will, therefore, not at all be surprising if the Caribbean phrases for which we have found Igbo equivalents in the present paper turn out to be translatable, with equal fidelity into one or other languages spoken by West Africans who share identical world views and mythologies.

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