

**ABLEISM IN THE AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOME SELECT IGBO PROVERBS**

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Abstract

Ableism is so copious in African traditional religion that it is found in their language, pithy sayings and proverbs. Ableism, to Campbell (2009:16), is "... a doctrine that falsely treats impairments as inherently and naturally horrible and blames the impairments for the problems experienced by the people who have them. It privileges a nondisabled perspective and promotes the inferior and unequal treatment of disabled people." Ableistic expressions are found in many Igbo proverbs that it has evoked an academic research. This paper was, therefore, set to critically analyze some selected Igbo proverbs with

a view to suggesting better use of language that will not paint persons with disabilities in bad light. Data for this paper was collected primarily from the contributions of a select number of blind members of the Old Students Association of Special Education center, Umuahia (OSASECU). It also made use of books, journal, magazine and newspaper articles and Internet resources. The paper was based on social theory of disability. The theory sees disability as a socially created problem and not an attribute of an individual but rather a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment. Hence, the management of the problem requires social action and is the collective responsibility of the society at large. It concluded that all the proverbs that contain discriminatory language should be done away with.

Keywords: Ableism, Persons with disabilities, Oppression, Igbo Proverbs and discrimination.

Introduction

The African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not spared of ableism. Ableism refers to the discrimination or prejudice against persons with disabilities (PWDs). Historically, the traditional African people with disabilities have been subjected to a multiplicity of oppressive social attitudes, which according to Barton (1993), included "... horror, fear, anxiety, hostility, distrust, pity, over-protection and patronizing behavior at the same time" (p.237).

Today, these oppressive social attitudes are still experienced by persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the Igbo society as well as other parts of Africa. Speaking of Igbo proverbs, Onyemelukwe and Akparanta (2021) have observed that:

Proverbs constitute one of the genres of Igbo Oral Literature. Cognizant of the fact that as a character in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart (TFA)" reiterates: The Igbo people love using proverbs to express themselves and to them, the proverb is like palm oil with which words are eaten (Achebe, 1958:5). The Igbo's attitude to people with disabilities is likely to be engrained in their proverbs used for interpersonal communication (p.70).

This paper is set to elucidate the ableism language found in ATR with particular reference to popular Igbo proverbs that portray persons with disabilities in bad light. It hopes to make meaningful suggestions that will help to discourage such practices.

Theoretical Framework

This article is based on the social theory of disability which sees the issue of disability as a socially created problem. The theory postulates that disability is not an attribute of an individual, but rather a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment. Hence, the management of the problem requires social action and is the collective responsibility of the society at large to make the environmental

modifications necessary for the full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of social life.

According to Shakespeare (2006), the theory argues that "... while physical, sensory, intellectual or psychological variations may cause individual functional limitation or impairments, these do not have to lead to disability unless society fails to take account of and include people regardless of their individual differences" (p.7).

The theory was propounded by the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS). The Union, founded in 1974 in the United Kingdom, played a pivotal role in the emergence and promotion of the social theory of disability. Owens (2015) has observed that:

The social theory of disability originated through a series of discussions in 1975 between the Disability Alliance and the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS). Their aim was to consider ways in which disabled people could become more active and involved in their affairs. UPIAS viewed disability as an artefact of society rather than something inherently within, or a product of the body. If society did not create dependency then disability would disappear (pp.385-386).

Barnes (2002) has noted that "UPIAS campaigned for equal rights and access for disabled people, advocating for changes in legislation, education and employment" (p.167). Furthermore, Oliver (1990) asserts that "the social theory of disability is a reaction to the dominant medical theory of disability which in itself is a functional

analysis of the body as machine to be fixed in order to conform to normative values” (p.143).

Strengths of the Social theory of Disability

1. Demonstration of the Success of Persons with Disabilities: The major strength of this theory is its demonstration of the success of persons with disabilities in society to challenge discrimination and marginalization, linking civil rights and political activism and enabling disabled people to claim their rightful place in society.

Finklestein (1990) believes that "... its creation has been akin to a New Social Movement whereby disabled people can gather together and challenge their experiences of oppression through political activism" (p.191).

2. Course for Social Change: Having noted that the theory sees disability as barriers created by the society, it helps to understand that the issue requires individual, community and large-scale social change. Again, the theory makes it apparent that equal access for someone with impairment should be a human rights issue of major concern.

3. Driver for Emancipatory Research: The social theory of disability has become the driver for emancipatory research. This, for instance, has made it possible for this writer to embark on a research that will help to transform the Igbo society from an ableistic one to one where the PWDs will be encouraged to lead normal and productive lives without any form of segregation.

Weaknesses of the Social theory of Disability

The social theory of disability, like other theories has some weaknesses which deserve a mention.

1. Denial of Difference: Scholars are worried that the theory has placed so much emphasis on the society and the barriers it creates that the experience of impairment, which is evident in the lives of PWDs, is often forgotten. As Shakespeare and Watson (2002) has argued:

Impairment is part of our daily personal experience, and cannot be ignored in our social theory or our political strategy. If our analysis does not include impairment, disabled people may be reluctant to identify with the disability movement, and commentators may reject our arguments as being idealistic and ungrounded. We are not just disabled people, we are also people with impairments, and to pretend otherwise is to ignore a major part of our biographies (p.17).

2. Failure to Make Curative Efforts: Another major criticism of the social theory of disability is that, due to the much emphasis on the society creating disability, it has made it nearly impossible for persons with disabilities to seek medical attention when necessary.

This has led Shakespeare and Watson to conclude that:

If the social theory argument was pushed to its logical extreme, we might not see impairment as something which we should make efforts to avoid. As a consequence, we might be

unconcerned about road safety, gun control, inoculation programmes, and mine-clearance (p.22).

Corker and French (1998) have argued that "... not only can sensory conditions include pain, but pain itself is generated through the interplay of physiological, psychological and socio-cultural factors. While impairment is often the cause or trigger of disability; disability may itself create or exacerbate impairment" (p.6).

Relevance of the Social theory of Disability

In the preceding pages, it has been established that the social theory of disability posits that disability is not inherent to an individual but rather a result of societal barriers and attitudes and that it holds significant relevance for understanding and addressing the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in every society. It is, therefore, relevant to this article in helping to transform the societal attitudes such as ableism language to one that is favorable to the PWDs. Secondly, it provides the framework for PWDs to challenge against all forms of discrimination, segregation and abuse hence its use in this paper.

Every society, according to World Health Organization (2011), grapples with a high prevalence of disability, often exacerbated by poverty, inadequate healthcare and social stigma (p.37). The framework creates the basis on which to fight against such stigma and negative stereotypes.

Lastly, the theory recognizes the agency and rights of persons with disabilities thereby promoting their participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Since the theory focuses on changes required in society, this article, therefore, considers it important for the Igbo society to take a more positive attitude toward ableism language in forms of proverbs, pithy sayings and in everyday communication and not underestimating the potential quality of life of the disabled persons in their midst.

Research Data

Drawing from a previous research on this subject matter, the researchers not only appreciate the work of Onyemelukwe and Akparanta but also are grateful to the members of OSASECU who contributed the proverbs used in this article.

In studying ableism language in Igbo proverbs, Onyemelukwe and Akparanta (2021) had used criterion sampling to select 45 Igbo proverbs on the basis of each containing one form of disability or the other. Thematic and sociological approaches were used to analyze ableism in the selected proverbs. The sociological approach enabled them to study the attitude of the Igbo to the identified forms of disability given that literature is a reflection of social realities. They found out that:

Ableism language use refers to the use of statements, utterances, renditions, sayings, expressions whether idiomatic or proverbial which are centered on one form of disability or the other tending to denigrate or reduce the status

of the disabled individual thereby portraying him or her as inferior to able-bodied members of the society. They saw ableism as "any statement or behavior directed at disabled person which goes to denigrate or assume a lesser status for the person as a result of his or her disability (p.71).

In the same vein, this article makes use of five (5) Igbo proverbs submitted by the members of Old Students Association of Special Education Center, Umuahia, Abia State (OSASECU) to gain insight into the enormity of ableism language in Igbo proverbs.

OSASECU members were asked to give as many Igbo proverbs that use persons with disabilities as they know. In all, twenty-one (21) proverbs were received but five of them were selected based on their relevance to this article.

The Five Igbo Proverbs that Depict Ableism

The following are the five Igbo proverbs that denigrate persons with disabilities and their possible English translation.

1. "*Onyé ishi tufuo udara ó zótara n'ukwu, onyé ga-enyé ya ọzọ*" (if a blind man loses the apple he picks up by accident, who will give him another?):

The society uses this proverb to mean that the PWDs are so incapacitated and limited in choice that the chance of getting another apple (or food for survival) might elude him/her.

2. "*Onyé ishi agaghị ama mmadụ okuté bélusó nké ọ zọtara n'ụkwụ*" (a blind man cannot throw stone at anyone except the stone his legs marched on):

This proverb suggests that the disabled person is so dependent that he cannot do anything for himself.

3. "*Ééju kpuru ishi awọpła onwé ya nrí*" (a snail that goes blind has denied itself food):

This means that once a person becomes disabled, the chances of survival are bleak. This proverb fails to cognize that disability is not by choice.

4. "*Anoghi agwa onyé ntí n'agha ésula*" (a deaf man needs not be told that war has started):

This proverb assumes that the deaf is so inferior or subhuman that he does not know when there is a trouble or danger.

5. "*Onyé ngwụrọ a kwọ n'azụ amaghị na íjé n'ara ahụ*" (the lame carried on the back of another does not know how painful it is to walk):

This labels persons with disabilities as not only dependent on others but also ingrates or unappreciative of help or services given them.

The above proverbs, unfortunately, denote the high level of ableism that has pervaded the Igbo society.

Onyemelukwe and Akparanta have, therefore, noted that:

The Igbo who are adept in the use of proverbs in their day-to-day communication are prone to

ableism language used in oral literature given that majority of Igbo disability proverbs used in the present study are found to be ableism (p.76).

Factors that Encourage Ableism Language in Igbo Proverbs

It has been noted that there exists ableism language in the proverbs used in everyday communication in Igbo land. Again, that some factors are responsible for this. The factors include but not limited to:

1. Negative Cultural Beliefs

In the African traditional society, there are some beliefs that put the PWDs in bad light. These beliefs, according to Eskay, Onu, Igbo, Obiyo and Ugwuanyi (2012), are caused by negative perceptions from:

(1) a curse from God (due to gross disobedience to God's commandments); (2) ancestral violation of societal norms (e.g., due to stealing); (3) offenses against gods of the land (e.g., fighting within the society); (4) breaking laws and family sins (e.g., stealing and denying); (5) ... adultery (a major abomination); (6) a warning from the gods of the land (due to pollution of water and the land) and many others (p.478).

Etieyibo and Omiegbe (2016) further note that:

People with mental illness are killed as part of rituals, practices that flow from various beliefs that people hold about disability. Many who hold negative beliefs about persons with mental illness

claim that their hands are unclean. In some communities, it is believed that such persons have committed an abomination, that is, violated the tradition of the communities. In other cases, a mentally ill person is simply labelled as a witch and subsequently burnt to death (p.188).

2. Indigenous African Theology

This refers to the theology of Africans that arose from the lived experiences, cultural traditions, spiritual practices and worldviews of the people which is independent of Western theological influence. It emphasizes the interconnection of physical and spiritual realities, community-centered living, and reverence for ancestors and respect for creation. The theology, unfortunately, justifies attitudes and behavior towards people with disabilities using these beliefs.

Eiesland (1994) laments that:

Theological themes tend to legitimize disability when they conflate this condition with punishment for wrongdoing; or when they justify it as virtuous suffering. When disability is identified with suffering that must be endured to "purify" the righteous, such justifications encourage passive acceptance of disability as a condition willed by God. For instance, scriptural views of disability are displayed in the Bible where common diseases such as leprosy, blindness, deafness, and paralysis are explained away as a curse or forms of punishment from God for disobedience and transgressions of sin.

These explanations tend to subvert justice by encouraging a continuation of treatment of people with disabilities as "other" instead of empowering them for a full social economic and political participation (pp.73-74).

Here, Eiesland is worried that all ableistic practices against persons with disabilities are perpetrated on the guise that the PWDs are punished for their sins and this tends to subvert justice.

3. Possession and Activities of Evil Spirits

Traditional Africans believe in the existence of evil spirits which may possess an individual and cause him/her to perform actions contrary to societal norms. Individuals so possessed are sometimes deformed by the evil spirits and constrained to behave anti-socially.

Abosi and Ozoji (1985) have observed that "... beliefs in the existence and potency of evil spirits were still widespread in Nigeria. Undoubtedly, such societal attitudes have had a devastating effect on the planning and implementation of services in Nigeria for learners with disabilities" (n.p.).

Abosi and Ozoji simply imply that persons with disabilities in African traditional societies do not receive the support they need to survive. They are neither planned for nor included in education or empowerment services made for others. This, unfortunately, has a damaging effect on the PWDs population.

4. Everyday Language and Proverbs

Lastly, in many African traditional societies, ableistic practices come in form of their everyday language and proverbs.

This led Schumer (2023) to conclude that:

Part of the reason ableism language is so pervasive in our culture and that is because disability has historically been seen as an inherently negative thing, something people find pitiable or even disgusting. We have the entertainment industry to thank for that--take Quasimodo, Tiny Tim and the Phantom of the Opera for example (p.9).

Schumer further states that:

A lot of ableism takes place in the form of micro aggressions or expressions or actions that indicate a negative view of someone's age, gender identity, race, sex, disability or other identity marker. In the case of ableism, examples of that could include phrases like:

- . "That's so lame."
- . "You're acting so bipolar today."
- . "It's like the blind leading the blind."
- . "My ideas fell on deaf ears."
- . "I don't even think of you as disabled."

Although many of these sayings aren't ill-intentioned, many people use them without even thinking about their ableism connotations (pp.6-7).

The Way Forward

Amidst the infinitude of the ableist language used in Igbo proverbs, it is believed that the following suggestions might help to curb such discriminatory language if not completely eliminated and encourage persons with disabilities to feel accepted.

Firstly, Positive Attitude to the Use of Language

The level of education in the African traditional society has improved considerably. Thus, scholars, ATR teachers, religious preachers and the educated ones in the traditional communities should enlighten the entire population on the better use of language to formulate social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Onyemelukwe and Ken-Akparanta recommend that:

There should be a change of attitude of the Igbo to persons with disability. ... Some ableism language used in the selected Igbo proverbs were outrightly violence committed against the disabled individual what was described as personal ableism; whereas others were indirect even unintentional, appearing as linguistic micro-aggressions. In the present 21st Century digital world where all hands are on deck to promote equality and inclusiveness in all spheres of life for all people. The Igbo people's negative attitude

to people with disabilities should be changed for a positive one (p.77).

Furthermore, Etieyibo and Omiegbe believe that:

Religion and culture promote certain beliefs and attitudes about disability and people with disabilities that lead to discriminatory practices. That is, they are sustaining factors in discrimination against people with disabilities. These practices should be wholeheartedly denounced because they result in the invasion of the dignity, personhood and life of persons with disabilities. They trespass the inalienability of human rights, in general, and the rights of persons with disabilities, in particular, as recognised by human rights conventions and laws (United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) (p.191).

Secondly, Government Intervention

Although there exists national and international legal instruments and conventions that uphold the dignity and human rights of PWDs, they are not strictly observed nor offenders duly punished.

It, therefore, behooves the government at every level to implement the provisions of such legal instruments with a view to deterring perpetrators of such ableistic practices as the killing of different PWDs for ritual purposes.

Etieyibo and Omiegbe agree that:

To ensure that persons with disabilities are treated fairly and to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to them, the Nigerian government would have to push through legislation that can target cultural and religious practices which are discriminatory against persons with disabilities. In addition, it has to undertake effective and appropriate measures aimed at raising awareness throughout the society about persons with disabilities (p.190).

Conclusion

Ableism, as already noted, is the discrimination against persons with disabilities and it is so per meant in the human society that it is even found in the day-to-day language of the African traditional society particularly in Igbo proverbs. Some of the factors that fuel ableism language include:

- A. Conflating disability with punishment for sins done in a previous life.
- B. Seeing disability as a source of imprecation to the society.
- C. Viewing persons with disabilities as people who are so dependent on support that they cannot lead productive or meaningful life or get gainfully employed.
- D. Lastly, Viewing the PWDs as societal misfits who have nothing to contribute to their immediate community.

These views, unfortunately, not only lead to ableism language but also make the PWDs to feel dejected, rejected and constrained to participate in socio-economic and political engagements that might benefit them and their community in general.

This article, therefore, recommends that:

1. The media, both conventional and social, should, as a matter of necessity, educate the populace on the use of language devoid of ableism. Ableism language, according to Onyemelukwe and Akparanta, encourage the culture of stigmatization, separation, marginalization and exclusion among the Igbo. ... This attitude exhibited by the Igbo is not quite correct and needs to be changed (p.76).
2. Leaders and the clerics of the religious groups, whether traditional, Christian or Islamic, should sermonize on the need to accept persons with disabilities as creature of God and use language that will help them feel belonged.
3. The leaders of Igbo traditional societies should also enlighten their communities on using proverbs that support and encourage the PWDs.
4. Lastly, Educational institutions, through their language and communications departments, should develop and teach courses that will transform the society into disability acceptance through the use of everyday language that enhances social cohesion.

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