

# **Igbo Fowl's Wellerism and the Concensus of other Animals: the Issue of Literature Begetting Culture**

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## ***Abstract***

*Wellerism, the figurative expression that quotes the character in the course of communicating by the proverb is part of the Igbo people's linguistic ornaments. In their wellerisms, there are various characters like the old woman, Swallow, Lizard, Fowl, etc. Igbo Fowl's wellerism is the one which a goat used in giving a reason for the permission of his absence at an important meeting of animals. The wellerism was that Igbo Fowl pledged that whatever consensus other animals reached at the meeting he was absent, he would accept. So it was by the wellerism that he was selected the worst victim of ritual sacrifices in Igbo custom. It is this expression of literature that resulted to the culture of using Fowl for various ritual sacrifices. This work, which its data were sourced from the library and interviews, showed that literature is part of culture. The work is interested in the culture implications only and does not have interest in profound biology or animal husbandry. It is discovered that one of the culture implications is sacrificing of Fowl at ritual ceremonies.*

## **Introduction**

When people of common interest especially in Igbo communities, have issues to discuss and take decisions, they normally schedule meetings to enable every member air his or her views. All the points raised by each of the members are studied to find out how much reasonable they are. The plausible reasons backing them must always determine their acceptance in arriving at a consensus.

So it is very important that every member attends the meeting because people have different ideas given their nature and nurture. Senses of understanding differ from one person to another. So everybody has to help to achieve the set goals, especially in difficult situations. That is why Igbo people have the proverb that takes that "Knowledge is like the goat skin bag and everybody slings his own". The English man says: "All hands on deck" meaning that everybody has to contribute and the Igbo people of Nigeria also have the same belief for they say: "*Onye puta onye puta, obodo eju*" which means: 'When one attends and the other attends, the hall will be filled'

But that is very often not the case. On so many occasions, all the members of a group do not attend scheduled meetings. Some members make it a point of duty to attend all meetings because they are very much interested in the progress of their groups, whereas others absent from meetings. Sometimes the absentees would have genuine reasons like bereavements, ill health, travels, etc some people that have lukewarm attitude about the progress of their groups dodge meetings. In most cases they do not say the truth, when asking those that would attend to obtain permissions of absence on their behalf.

Whether the reason for one's absence is cogent or not, one should bear in mind that one's absence from a gathering one should attend jeopardizes one's interest when matters concerning him or her are being discussed. Igbo people very much code this in their following figurative expressions. They say: "*Onye anoghi a nodo ya*" meaning that "Whoever is not present at the time of decision taking does not have his interest cared for" Another saying of theirs which portrays the importance of one's presence to protect one's interest is: "*Anya okuku na-eche akwa ya*" This means: "The eyes of the fowl guards her eggs". So nobody else can represent one more than one would take care of oneself.

According to Igbo literature, it is this problem of one leaving one's affairs in the hands of others that Fowl suffers. When animals were to hold a meeting, he could not attend. He had a pressing matter for which he would not be able to attend the meeting so he sent a message that he would accept the consensus of others. Goat that was seeking the permission of his absence quoted him by saying: "Fowl said that he would accept whatever consensus reached". This is a figurative expression of the people of Abatete in Idemili Local Government Area, Anambra State. When the animal that

should be the worst victim of rituals of sacrifice was being discussed, he was not present to defend himself. All the animals present gave various excuses why they should be spared. Because they must vote one animal for that purpose, one of them suggested Fowl and the rest said that he was good for that purpose and that he would not be offended since he promised to accept their consensus. This consensus is today a public opinion. Enuka (2007) states that within the public perception of liberal democracy, it is logical that interest groups and public opinions should naturally be prominent in the policy process” (p.2260 Today, this opinion of using Fowl mostly in carrying out ritual sacrifices is uppermost in the minds of the people. It is an aspect of the Igbo people’s culture. The public consensus is irrevocable because the Igbo people believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God. God as well as deities to whom Fowl is sacrificed has been accepting him and will not reject him for other animals.

One may wonder the need for sacrifices as a result of which animals are worried over their extinctions. Sacrifice is a very important aspect of religions because it is a great way of praying to the Supreme Deity through different intermediaries by offering kolanuts, animals, foods wines, etc. Quarcopome (1987) in Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) captures the idea by stating that the items of sacrifice are removed from human possessions or use and transferred to the mystical powers, who become the new owners of the sacrificial victim offered them. In studying Gikuyu people of Africa, Mbiti (1983) notes that sacrificial animals which should have one colour, must be donated or brought by one person that is honest, trustworthy and clean-that is one that has not committed murder theft etc. And Basden (1983) states that Igbo people sacrifice to prevent evil.

## **Wellerism and Igbo Fowl**

Wellerism is similar to proverb but a little difference separates them as different literal terms. It is necessary to explain proverb to make the meaning of wellerism clear. Proverb is the catchy figurative expression in which all entities being talked about are represented with a view to elucidating what is being made known. An example of proverb is: “The swallow flies without perching, since the hunter shoots without aiming. The proverb is a simple statement but wellerism involves talking through a character in which case the character’s expression is reported by the user of the wellerism. The above proverb will turn to a wellerism if a character is quoted to have said it. So it will be: “The swallow says that he flies without perching because the hunter shoots without aiming”. Brunvand (1968) defines wellerism correctly by stating that it is “a saying in the form of a quotation to be followed by a phrase ascribing the quotation to someone who has done something humorous and appropriate” (p.40).

The Igbo people’s idea of wellerism is that it is a proverb to which gossip is added, that is, rather than say a proverb straight away; one goes to say that a certain entity said. That is why Ngoesi (1993) defines it as the type of proverb in which one quotes another entity when saying it rather than the type said right away. Emenanjo (2000) states that it is a figurative expression that resembles the proverb in being one sentence that is sweet to the ear, easy to remember and deep in meaning before comparing the proverb and the wellerism to print out that the latter is a story that states what a named entity said.

One must have wondered the origin of wellerism. The term is widely believed to have been derived from the German term *vellerism*. This is because the former is older than the latter although the English term started

to exist before the ninth century. Surprisingly, Brunvand claims that the term was named after a character, Sam Weller, in Charles Dicken's *Pickwick Papers*. The reason, according to him, is that Sam Weller uses a lot of wellerism in the publication. Even if his claim is true, it is known that the idea of the study of the term originated in Germany. The idea of wellerism have been existing in the Igbo culture since ages, that is since the Igbo people started to exist but the awareness of its existence as a different term from proverb is the contribution of English culture.

The Igbo people fashioned out the term '*Asinilu*' for it. This means the gossip one has made inside a proverb. Their name of proverb is 'Ilu' so their idea of gossip in proverb is self explanatory.

In the Igbo orature, there are various wellerisms. All the wellerisms have different beings that are quoted. More examples of wellerism are as follows:

- (i) Lizard says that when one carries water and sand respectively, one would know the heavier one.
- (ii) Chameleon says that he can never abandon the rich man's style of movement his father taught him just because the forest in which he walks about has been set on fire.
- (iii) Bedbug told her little ones to have patience for what is hot will later become cold.
- (iv) Partridge told its young ones to eat roots as they eat yams so that when the owner of the yams harvest them, they (the young ones) would survive on roots.
- (v) The titled man that does not know how to talk told his colleagues that he would leave for home; for they (his colleagues) have said what he would have said.

(vi) Vulture asked what he has to do with the hair dresser.

Fowl's wellerism is like any of these. The wellerism is: "Fowl said that whatever concensus reached by other animals would be acceptable to him". This wellerism was stated by another animal in Fowl's absence. This wellerism was noted by other animals at the meeting and it was on its note that permission of absence was granted him. The full story behind this wellerism goes this way:

Once upon a time animals had a meeting to discuss the animal that would be the worst victim of sacrifice to avoid human beings using all animals for sacrifice lest they extinct. All animals came but Fowl asked Goat to obtain the permission for his absence. Other animals were not happy with Fowl's absence. Goat quoted him by saying that he pledged to accept any consensus reached. This wellerism made the permission cogent and so he was permitted.

During the discussion of their agenda, all the animals gave various reasons why they would respectively be spared. It became a problem because they must vote one animal a victim.

Later on, Tortoise nominated Fowl. Some animals wondered whether he would agree with them. Tortoise pointed out that he had no option since he pledged to accept their consensus. All the animals agreed with him. With happiness they went home in groups as they praised Tortoise for his intelligence.

### **Culture Implications**

Ever since then, the public opinion started to be that Fowl is the worst victim of ritual sacrifice. This decision does not go down well with Fowl but there is nothing he can do because the public opinion is irrevocable. The opinion cannot be changed because it has permeated into the culture of the

Igbo people that no animal is suitable enough to change Fowl. Today various kinds of Fowl are used in carrying out ritual sacrifices. The determinants of the kinds of Fowl include age, sex, species and colour.

There are various reasons for utilising Igbo Fowl at different ceremonies. It is so commonly used that Amansea people say: '*Okuko adinu ma ihe ekwe omume*'. When Fowl is not available, no ritual sacrifice can be performed. Some sacrifices are not eaten. The materials could be used in cleansing somebody off some abominations and thrown away. A lot of sacrifices in what Fowl is used as the victim are performed by blessing, breaking and eating kolanuts, immolating Fowl and using his chicken in preparing a meal eaten by all the attendants; and drinking palm wine before the shrines of respective deities. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) stated that this kind of sacrifice is 'Meal and Drink Sacrifice'. The utilization of Fowl in carrying out sacrifices includes the following:

(a) **Egg:** The egg is the first stage of the life of the Igbo Fowl. The egg is known for purity and peace. That is why it is used in various sacrifices. It also has some cleansing power over devilish control. All these are why it is used in performing one Igbo traditional ceremony or the other. The uses include the following:

(i) The Igbo egg is used in cleansing the body of a sick person with a view to neutralizing the effect of the sickness spiritually. In this case, it is rolled all over the body of the sick person. In most cases, it is done with some incantations in which the person administering the cleansing prays for recovery of the sick person. He would also pray for his own health and must not fail to state that he would not take over the sickness. In some cases the egg is used in encircling four times on the head of the sick person. The four times signify the Igbo

four market days on which the sick person is hoped to be healthy as the sickness will fizzle away in faeces and urine. The egg so used could be placed on the road or thrown down on the road to break. The person that carried out this sacrifice may be charged with not looking backwards as well as not talking to anybody until he or she reaches home.

- (ii) Another thing the Igbo egg does is alleviating anger. When somebody is known to have missed a certain thing in life, his heart is expected to be full of anger. Such person's heart is cleansed of such anger so that in his reincarnation, he would not suffer the same ill fate. The ill fate might be childlessness (especially, male issues), peasantry, long-time ill health, premature death, positions etc. The egg might be thrown down on the grave of the unfortunate person to break away as it is done in Amansea, Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra Nigeria. Or the egg could be placed on the chest of the person before the coffin is covered as is the case in Uzo Uwani Local Government Area of Enugu State Nigeria Isaac Amalunweze told this researcher in a discussion, that if a certain great Nigerian politician that sought to rule Nigeria by all means and yet failed had hailed from his Uzo Uwani Local Government Area, they would place an egg on his chest before placing the lid his coffin and burying him (Personal Communication 4<sup>th</sup> April 1988).

The alleviation of anger can pertain to deities. The deities that are destroyed in religious riots are normally angry. Their anger is alleviated by rolling the Igbo egg over their shrines. This is done in the course of normalizing the relationship of such deities with the people that worship them.

(iii) It could be used in cleansing abomination from somebody who jumped into a grave, whether fully dug or being dug. The person is said to have chosen death. It looks funny but some people do jump into the grave being dug in their course of demonstrating the bitterness such death had evoked in them. In such cases, the traditional priest sets them free from death by encircling their legs with egg and other items. The egg and other items are thrown into the grave with the trunk of a plantain and buried before a new grave is dug.

Another way of cleansing abomination is to roll the egg over the eyes of somebody that saw an abominable episode. An example is the eyes of somebody that saw a person that hanged himself. The sight is an abomination. It is believed that the sight should be cleansed off otherwise it will live with that person and can instigate him or her to commit suicide by hanging. An example is the body of Okonkwo who hanged himself in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe (1958) did not state that the sight of his hanged body is sacrilegious, but he stated that his kinsmen could not touch his body let alone burying him:

It is against our custom, said none of the men. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers (p.186).

iv. It is used in issuing notices to deities. The Agbaja Abatete Community Association that has its national headquarters at Nkwo Agbaja Square, Abatete, demanded that the chief priest of Nkwo

should cut down some tree branches inside which hoodlums hide to waylay people. The chief priest that included two eggs and two chickens in the items required for some ritual sacrifices before the cutting down of the branches, explained to the researcher that he would use both the eggs and the chickens in cleansing the shrine before notifying the deity of the ritual sacrifices that would be carried out in future. According to him, it was during the ritual sacrifice of the deity that he would request the permission of the deity for cutting down of the branches. The eggs and chickens are used in cleansing although chickens are greater in quality (Ezenkwo, Personal Communication 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2010).

**(b) Chicken:** The next stage of Igbo utilization of Fowl in carrying out sacrifices is the use made of the chicken Fowl's life is the chicken. It is used in performing different ceremonies because of its purity. By its stage of life it has not copulated with another.

- (i) It is used in cleansing off sacrilege. It is believed that it has more potency than the egg in cleansing an abomination. So it is used in cleansing off heavy bondage.
- (ii) It is used in convening a meeting of deities. When deities are requested to assemble at a place, the chicken is used in offering a sacrifice so that gods and goddesses would come together.
- (iii) Chicken is used in ending up the marriage of a man and a woman. When a marriage would no longer continue, one party sues for divorce. There are different things that different communities use to complete the process of divorce. The Amansea Community in Awka North Local Government Area, Anambra State, uses a chicken to carry out a ritual that brings the process of divorce to an end otherwise

- whatever child the supposed divorcee gives birth to belong to that husband of hers. This ritual ceremony is called '*Iwa nwanyi uyom*'.
- (iv) When a married woman becomes unfaithful to her husband, she is cleansed with a chicken. The lady is expected to confess her sins. The people of Amansea that perform this sacrifice believe that the chicken would die if the woman confesses all her sins. If the chicken did not die, people would believe that she is hiding some lovers she feels too ashamed to mention their names.
- (c) ***Otinku***: This grade of Fowl is the cock that has not crowed. It is used in making an entity powerless. It is believed that it can be used in making a charm that is believed to make somebody a toothless bull dog. It can also be used in drawing an issue backwards and used in delaying the progress of a trial. Some court cases that were adjourned times without number, more so without cogent reasons are attributed to charms made with *otinku*.
- (i) It is used in sacrificing to the god of the river because it is expected not to have copulated with any hen. It is believed to be a symbol of holiness that is why it is used in sacrificing in the river.
- (ii) It is this age of the cock that is used in enforcing the spirit of a new deity. This is used because of its purity. It is at the age it has not copulated with any hen.
- (d) ***Adidi***: This kind of hen is the young one that is yet to lay eggs. Emmanuel Okoye said that like maidens are noted for beauty, *adidi* is known for attraction, politeness, gentleness, pleasance and grace. According to him, *adidi* is used in ritual sacrifices in order to make an entity develop her sterling qualities (Personal Communication 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2010).

- (i) It is used in empowering a new goddess. It is after it is used in offering a sacrifice to a new goddess that a fortune teller can locate it and find out its opinion in a divination. Before the empowering ritual, the idol is a mere piece of wood.
  - (ii) It is as well used in making sacrifice to the spirit of the river. The water goddess always wants purity. It demands *adidi* because it has not yet enjoyed copulation with the cock. So *adidi* is noted for purity.
- (e) **Cock:** The cock is a symbol of brightness. It is a full grown male Fowl that is at its prime. It is full of strength. It is the standard Fowl for sacrifice. That is used in performing many sacrifices. Igbo people believe that it signifies *ikenga*, the authority of the man.

One of its importance is beseeching for good things of life. When people have problems they ask God to help them by sacrificing to their deities. They do this by sacrificing cocks, when they receive favour.

It is used in asking a titled man or a group of titled men to eat on occasions. When they accompany people onto occasions, the cock is used in informing them that food was ready otherwise they would not eat. The host does all he can to make sure the *Ozo* titled men eat else it would be scandalous that he failed to wash their hands as a result of which they starved on his occasion.

The cock is also used for sacrifice in the bush when an *Ozo* titled man dies in some area of Igboland including Abatete, before people could cry. The permitting ceremony is called '*Iwa n'ofia*'. When an *ozo* titled man dies it is an abomination to cry immediately. It is this ceremony that should be carried out to announce his death in the land of spirit before people are allowed to cry or do any other thing.

The cock is always given to a dance troupe for playing with their drum (*Igba*). The membrane of the Igbo traditional drum is made with the skin of an animal called *mgbada*. The people have the tradition of including the cock for the payment of the cost of playing the music. The reason is that the animal killed and skinned in order to make the drum should be respected with the cock.

The cock is used in funeral ceremonies. When a man dies, his first son and first daughter have to strike a cock on the ground until it dies while they dance to *Egwu Akparata* in Awgu. The music which is played by one's mother's relatives is danced by the first son and daughter of the deceased until the cock dies. As soon as the cock dies the music stops.

The cock can be used in laying a curse. One can sacrifice a cock to a deity and ask it to attack some other person or persons for one reason or the other, and it would come true if the request is from a truly hurt person. Sometimes, someone can curse people that attacked one and stole one's belongings.

The cock is used in receiving in-laws at a funeral ceremony. When the father-in-law or the mother-in-law of a man dies, he attends the funeral ceremony with a dance troupe accompanying him. The man is received by his wife with a cock. This is a way of showing appreciation and the condolence train not only feels happy but gets a boost of its morale. This is done at the gate before the condolence visitors enter the compound.

The cock is used by a man for sacrifice to his personal god, *chi*. It is done annually. It is this guiding father of one that protects one. The Igbo people believe that no harm done on anyone succeeds if his *chi* does not permit. They say: '*Chi onye adighi n'izu, na onwu ara egbu ya*'. This means that when one's *chi* did not attend the meeting during which an evil

was decided against one, the evil cannot harm one. Achebe (1958) popularizes this belief thus:

At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly” so his *chi* agreed. (P.25)

The cock is used in celebrating the new yam festival. The cock is used in giving deities and ancestors new yam. People do this by praying over the cock before immolating it. They slaughter it and sprinkle the blood on the shrine, after which they pull out the feathers of the cock which they will stick to the shrine. Okodo (2009) states it all:

The next thing they do is to slaughter cocks or goats or any other animal, depending on the culture of the people in question. If it is cocks, they pull out the feathers and stick them onto the shrine with the blood of the animals. Some people offer both cocks and goats depending on the gains they made in the previous year. (p.84)

The people of Amansea have four ceremonies during which they sacrifice the cock as other items to *Ala*, the earth goddess on the bases of agriculture. One of them is *Onwa Ise* which is the ceremony at which they eat last old yams. They use the meat of the cock in cooking the yam. They sacrifice the food before eating. Another feast is *Onwa Isii* which is the ceremony of eating new yams for the first time. *Onwa asato* is the ceremony of communalism. This time the worshippers sacrifice cocks and go with a half each while donating the other half to the community. The community’s halves are eaten together. One other is *Egwu Alusi* which is the ceremony for marking the end of the year and the beginning of the next planting season.

The cock is used in preparing a protective device from dangerous charms. The protective device which is called *egbo* is hanged over the gate of a venue of a ceremony especially the burial of an elderly man at which masquerades and people could come to test their charms.

**(f) Hen:** The hen symbolises riches. It is a female that reproduces young ones. At a time, it may reproduce about twelve or more as the case may be. It is because of this that Igbo people call it *oku* (wealth). It is also noted for peace so these two qualities of it are anchored in using the hen for sacrifice. A charm for money making will involve sacrificing the hen.

It is used on different occasions. It is used by a woman in celebrating the feast of her *chi* personal goddess. Because some are females and their respective *chi* is female, they sacrifice the hen and use its chicken in cooking food. They sacrifice the food before everybody begins to eat.

The hen is sacrificed to deities. Various deities demand both the cock and the hen to signify the taking care of both men and women in the sacrifice.

### **Colour Significance**

One important aspect of Fowl for sacrificing is the colour. The two basic colours demanded specially are white and black. The white colour signifies progress, goodness or anything positive. This is why the white cock is always too costly. It is used in sacrificing to deities in the course of treating a sick person. It is mostly used in carrying out sacrifices in the river because the river goddess always likes the white colour.

The black colour is noted for retrogression. It is not noted for anything good. It signifies darkness. It is used in enveloping evil forces. An example is the disturbing of a living person by the dead one or ones. Such dead ones might be bewitched daughters of the land trying to take the

life of a living person because he or she has failed to work in consonance to the covenant they made in the land of the spirits. The covenant can be that they agreed not to exceed the age of twenty, for example. His or her mates might have died and he or she survives and probably was trying to beget children.

Sometime, the devilish powers of wicked deities might rise. Such deities might attack those that worship them. The deaths of some people in the past have been attributed to the attacks of their deities, which are aggrieved. The families that own such deities are known to have done several things to cliff the wings of such deities. Some obtain the services of prophets or prayerful Christians to destroy such deities. In alternative, some invite great medicine men to blindfold such deities. They do that with the black fowl and other items including black cloths.

### **Special Breed**

There are two special breeds of Fowl that are used in ritual sacrifices. One of them is *abuke* or *avuke* depending on one's dialect. This specie does not grow feathers on its neck and some other parts of its body. It is noted for its capability for neutralizing poisonous charms. Innocent Okafor (Personal Communication 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2010) said that Amansea people call it '*Avuke nzolu aja*' meaning "The avuke Fowl that takes away poisonous charms". So it takes away poisonous charms placed to harm someone as it walks about. People keep it in the house to offer such services to them.

Medicine men use it to offer sacrifices in the course of treating someone that has been affected by poisonous charms. When a medicine man is employed to exhume a charm buried in someone's compound, he would demand it, among other items.

Another special breed is *aghirigha*. It has its feathers scattered. The scattering of its feathers signifies disorderliness. The charm made with it causes quarrels among the victims. It can make a family fight always and get itself destabilized.

One can now see that a lot of Igbo sacrifices are performed with Fowl. Even when other animals are used, they are added to show the contentment of the worshipper with his wealth or the satisfaction he derived from the favour the respective deity he or she is worshipping gave him or her.

### **Conclusion**

That the Igbo Fowl records the highest frequency among all animals of the land in terms of utilizing them in carrying out ritual sacrifices is not in doubt. Fowl falls victim of the ritual sacrifices from this earliest stage of life, the egg; through his stage of chicken and to the adult stage of the cock or the hen. If this were eating food other animals would not allow the Fowl to take a lion share. Well, the Igbo Fowl has nothing to add because he signed his death warrant unknowingly when he so carelessly promised to abide by the consensus of other animals in a meeting he was unavoidably absent. His acceptance is in his wellerism. Fowl says that whatever all other animals agreed upon he would accept.

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