

**African Proverb of the Month**  
**January 2009**

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*Agwụ nwere nchekwube/ọ leanya a dgh egbu egbu. (Igbo)*

*The hunger that has hope for its satisfaction does not kill. (English)*

Igbo (Nigeria) Proverb

## **Background, Explanation, Meaning and Everyday Use**

The Igbo people inhabit southeastern Nigeria. "Igbo" refers to both the people and their language. Occupying a rainforest region, the Igbo were traditionally mainly farmers and their lifestyle was patterned on the farming cycle. Usually between the end of the farming

season (when most of the crops from the previous harvest had been consumed and the seedlings planted) and the next harvest, there is a food scarcity spell called *ga*.

This Igbo proverb was mostly used at this time, a period of about five to seven months, to counsel hope and endurance until the next harvest, a future of abundance. The elders used this proverb to teach the young ones that no matter how trying and challenging a situation might be, one usually survives it if one looks beyond the particular moment with hope for a brighter future and, therefore, endures with dignity.

However, one neither hopes nor endures in inertia. Both hope and endurance imply hard work. So this proverb ties to another Igbo proverb, *aka aja aja na eweta n mman mman* ("soily" hands bring about an oily mouth). With these two proverbs, people are encouraged to be active and diligent while they hope for a better future. The majority of the Igbo are Christians today and they acknowledge that not even the Lord would feed the sheep that shies away from the pasture (cf. *Psalm 23*).

## Biblical Parallels



At the basis of the survival of the Israelites from their slavery, Exodus,

wilderness, foreign occupation and exile experiences was their hope, the hope for the Promised Land, the hope for the Messiah, and the hope for the return. The hope in the Second Coming and in the resurrection sustained the early Christians through their persecution. This hope is not idle; it is tied to faith, as "the assurance of things hoped for (*Hebrews* 11:1). It brings joy to the just (*Proverbs* 10:28). When the Israelites were wearied with the length of their journey, it was hope that helped them find new life for their strength (

*Isaiah*

57:10). And when due to their exile they thought their bones were dried up and wanted to give up hope, the Lord sent Ezekiel to remind them thus: "Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves... and I will bring you home into the land of Israel... And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live..." (

*Ezekiel*

37:11-14).

St. Paul argues that he shares in the prophets' hope in God for the resurrection (*Acts*

24:15). This hope is not without a price, however. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes: "More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (

*Romans*

5:3-5). It is in this hope that "we are saved," the hope that enables us to wait with patience for what we do not yet see (

*Romans*

8:24).

Paul also reminds the Corinthians that it is in hope for the share of the crop that both the person using the plough and the thresher work (*Corinthians* 9:10). Hence he berates the Thessalonians who, under the guise of waiting for the Lord's Second Coming, shunned work: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness... we were not idle when we were with you... but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you... If anyone will not work, let him not eat" (

*Corinthians*  
3:6-10).

## **Contemporary Use and Religious Application**



Today, the Igbo are engaged in sundry industries and disciplines. Yet this age-old truth is still as relevant for them now as it had been in the past. It also remains relevant for the larger society. Presently in Africa and in the world at large, many people undergo various hardships: domestic difficulties, unemployment, conflicts and wars that result in internally displaced people and refugees, terminal illnesses like AIDS and cancer, and the list goes on. People can almost always survive these difficulties if they do not give up hope of doing so, if they believe they can survive. For example, Nelson Mandela and many European Jews survived 27 years of imprisonment and the Holocaust respectively largely because they did not let go of their hope.

Hope does not flourish in laziness. It engages and challenges us to action. So in a world like ours characterized by get-rich-quick, success-without-hard-work, quick-fix and impatient mentalities, this proverb challenges us all, especially the youth, to actively and diligently engage the present while we hope for a future where our hunger would be satisfied. As Pope Paul VI said, "If you want (read " hope for") peace"... work for justice" (emphasis added). This implies that we realize our hopes, our dreams, our future, by actually working for them.

This proverb also speaks to the Catholic Church that her faithful, especially during the season of Advent, prepare themselves through prayer, fasting and works of charity to commemorate the birth of the Messiah and to wait in joyful hope for his Second Coming in glory.

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