

Sustaining Afrolongevity Discourse in Imo State and the Igbo Diaspora: A Sociopragmatic Investigation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the sustainability of Afrolongevity discourse in the contemporary Igbo society and the global world. In the modern society characterized by rapid technological advancement and digital communication, global discourses on longevity and human enhancement are speedily advancing while the African perspectives- particularly those grounded in indigenous wisdom, ethical philosophy and afrolongevity remain underrepresented. Existing studies on afrolongevity have largely focused on nutrition, medicine, exercise, genetics, philosophy and lifestyle with limited attention to the sustainability of afrolongevity; how it can co-own discourse with the Western equivalent locally and beyond without losing its cultural heritage. The research adopts a qualitative descriptive research design and draws data from participant observation, oral interview with elders and native speakers. 10 selected Igbo traditional proverbs, 10 ritual expressions, 2 communal narratives; 1 short story and 1 folklore were analyzed. The analysis is anchored on Geoffrey Leech's (1983) Sociopragmatics theory which posits that language and culture are interwoven and Akinsola Akiwowo's (2022) African Sociological theory which is an epistemic intervention against the overreliance on Eurocentric and Western sociological models to explain African societies. It also emphasizes interconnectedness as central to African social life. Both theories are most suitable for the research since afrolongevity is cultural and negotiating longevity involves communal wellbeing. Findings reveal that Igbo communicative practices such as storytelling, oral poetry, proverbs, folklores, incantations, healing rituals, greetings, communal narratives are embedded with culture and are rich in health and wellness discourses. These communicative practices are the sociopragmatic tools and are used to transmit indigenous knowledge on health, wellness, care giving, moral conduct and communal responsibility. Furthermore, Sociopragmatics allows afrolongevity discourse to adapt to contemporary communication styles without losing its cultural essence or originality through digital storytelling, health podcasts, social media campaigns, and indigenous language blogs on modern digital channels such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Tiktok, Instagram, YouTube, etc. The following recommendations were made: digitalization of indigenous narratives, training in digital literacy and sociopragmatic competence, and establishment of digital archives of traditional health knowledge.

Keywords: Sociopragmatics, Afrolongevity, Digital Age Sustainable Development, Pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

Longevity has become a significant and global concern in contemporary societies due to increasing life expectancy, changing demographic patterns, and growing awareness of healthy aging. Within African societies, longevity extends beyond biological survival to encompass social wellbeing, communal harmony, spiritual balance and cultural continuity. The holistic understanding is increasingly conceptualized as afrolongevity discourse.

In Igbo cosmology, 'Ndu' (life) is the supreme good and sound health is not merely the absence of disease; it is the harmonious balance between the individual, the community, nature and the spiritual world. Health is holistic and wellness encompasses physical wellbeing, mental stability, spiritual purity, social harmony, moral uprightness, economic stability and communal peace. An individual's health is connected to the wellbeing of the family and the larger community. Illness may, therefore, be interpreted not only biologically but also socially or spiritually. In Imo state, for instance, health and wellness encompass physical vitality, spiritual balance, moral uprightness (Ofo na Ogu), and robust communal relationships. Sickness is frequently viewed as the disruption of this cosmic or social balance rather than just a biological event while ageing in good health is seen as a blessing.

However, indigenous communities have historically developed cultural philosophies, health practices, dietary traditions and social systems that support healthy living and extended life expectancy. These practices are embedded in language, proverbs, narratives, rituals and communal interactions. In Nigeria, among the Igbo, Yoruba and the Hausa communities, longevity is often discussed through culturally significant communicative forms.

On the contrary, globalization and digitalization have transformed patterns of communication, creating opportunities and threats to indigenous longevity discourse. Sociopragmatics, which studies language use in relation to social and cultural contexts offers valuable insights into how afrolongevity discourse is constructed, negotiated and sustained. The paper argues that sociopragmatics is indisputably important for the continuity and relevance of African longevity narratives in Imo State, the Igbo diaspora and within modern digital environments.

Statement of the Problem

In the contemporary society characterized by rapid technological advancement and digital communication, global discourses on longevity and human enhancement are speedily advancing while the African perspectives- particularly those grounded in indigenous wisdom, ethical philosophy and afrolongevity have remained underrepresented. This paper investigates the sustainability of Afrolongevity discourse in the contemporary Imo State and the global world. The paper is of the opinion that sociopragmatics is an indispensable and veritable tool through which afrolongevity can co-own discourse both in local and global platforms without losing the cultural heritage.

Aim of the Study

This paper aims to raise awareness of the field of Afolongevity, its sustainability and how it can co-own discourse locally and beyond without losing its cultural heritage. The paper also introduces Sociopragmatics and its significant applications, particularly in sustaining Afrolongevity. Afrolongevity discourse is linguistically-oriented and dependent on culture and the people. It can take the following forms such as proverbs, prayers, indigenous health narratives, sermons, songs, family conversations, political speeches, traditional rituals, health campaigns, media discussions and community interactions. These discourses need good training in sociopragmatic competence.

Research Questions

The paper, therefore, tries to answer the following questions

1. What is Afrolongevity?
2. What is the importance of Afrolongevity?
3. What is Sociopragmatics and Sociopragmatic competence?
4. What are the main applications of Sociopragmatics in Afrolongevity?
5. How can Afrolongevity achieve global recognizance and application without losing its originality?

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Afrolongevity/ Afrolongevity Discourse/Narrative

Afro longevity is the field of study which focuses on extending health spans and lifespan for people of African descent. It combines traditional African diets, plant biodiversity and culture with modern biotech, preventive medicine and precision healthcare to combat age-related diseases.

Afrolongevity Discourse or Narrative, on the other hand, simply refers to African-centered discussions and practices concerning healthy ageing, wellness, vitality and long life. It recognizes the interconnectedness of physical, social, spiritual, environmental and communal dimensions of wellbeing. Recent philosophical discussions on Afrolongevity emphasize African cultural values and indigenous knowledge systems as important resources for understanding ageing and promoting wellness. Afrolongevity discourse refers to the communicative practices, cultural narratives, linguistic expressions, beliefs and social interactions, through which African societies conceptualize, promote and sustain healthy ageing, longevity and holistic wellbeing.

Akilowo (2022) defines it as the way African people use language and social communication to talk about living long, living well and sustaining life. The narrative or discourse is deeply rooted in communal living, spirituality, morality and interpersonal relationships. The discourse can appear in the following patterns: proverbs, prayers, indigenous health narratives, sermons, songs, family conversations, political speeches, traditional rituals, health campaigns, media discussions and community interactions. These narratives communicate herbal remedies, dietary practices, preventive healthcare, spiritual dimensions of healing and community-support mechanisms. Sociopragmatics helps explain how these narratives gain legitimacy through culturally appropriate communicative contexts.

Afrolongevity /Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 'a universal blueprint' for achieving global peace, health and prosperity. They are the development goals which meet the needs of the present time without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs. They constitute the global push by the United Nations in 2023 toward 2030. They are seventeen in number and particularly, SDG 3 commits countries to ensure good health and wellbeing of the people. In Nigeria, the urgency for good health and wellbeing is quite glaring; hence the importance of this research studies on Afrolongevity.

Afrolongevity/ Sociopragmatic Competence

Sociopragmatics is a branch of pragmatics that studies language use within the social and cultural contexts. Ekwelibe, Regina (2021) defines it as:

the social use of a language which derives its meaning from the social norms, culture and beliefs of the speech community. It is the interface between Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics. It is the way conditions of language use derive

from the social norms and situations. In other words, it involves the study of both the forms and functions of language in a given social setting.

Leech (1983) and Mey (2001) state that sociopragmatics focuses on the social rules governing appropriate language behaviour in specific communities. In African contexts, language is not merely a communicative tool but a cultural resource deeply embedded in social relations and value systems.

Sociopragmatics, therefore, provides valuable tools for understanding how communication shapes attitudes towards health, ageing and longevity. Through sociopragmatic analysis, it becomes possible to examine how language functions as a vehicle for transmitting indigenous knowledge and promoting sustainable development.

Traditionally, Sociopragmatics has remained a veritable tool for the propagation of longevity and wellness of the Africans using the different discourses like conversations, storytelling, folktales, oral poetry, proverbs, incantations, healing rituals, greetings, health advice, research policies and communal narratives which centre on African populations living longer and healthier lives. They serve as instruments for transmitting indigenous knowledge on health, wellness, care-giving, moral conduct and communal responsibility.

However, Sociopragmatic Competence, as an aspect of sociolinguistic competence, borders on the ability to use the appropriate language, and to politely convey messages while observing the social and cultural conventions guiding such usage in a particular speech community. A complete foreign metric cannot be used to educate the Africans. The language should be either afrocentric in nature or a blend of Western and African to enhance assimilation and possible results.

Afrolongevity and the Modern Digital Platforms

The 21st century is characterized by the widespread use of information and communication technologies. To sustain afrolongevity in the digital age demands the use of digital technology and the digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tiktok, YouTube, Podcasts, Blogs and Online forums. Digital documentation and online dissemination enable the younger generation and even foreigners to access and interpret these cultural resources.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Sociopragmatics Theory by Geoffrey Leech (1983) and Akinsola Akiwowo's (2022) African Sociological Theory. The latter emphasizes collective existence and interconnectedness as central to African social life. It is an epistemic intervention against the overreliance on Eurocentric and Western sociological models to explain African societies. It posits that strong communal networks often provide emotional care, economic support, spiritual encouragement, and social protection for the elderly. On the other hand, Sociopragmatic theory is originally owed to Jerry Thomas and was later; given wide currency by Leech who maintains that a set of underlying social conventions exist which govern the use of language in any given speech community. These conventions or rules, according to Malinowski (1923), guide or influence the people's productive or interpretative use of the language, especially the speech acts since they are culture-specific. In view of this, Ekwelibe (2021) states that using language appropriately and politely to convey message while observing the social and cultural conventions guiding such usage in a particular speech community can promote long life, peaceful co-existence, communal care and support, progress and tranquility which enhance healthy aging and wellness. Servaes (2008) states that Igbo communicative practices such as proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and ritualized speech acts highlight the importance of indirectness, politeness, and respect for elders and also serve as tools for moral instruction, conflict mediation, and social control. Nwoye (1992) notes that Igbo discourse strategies prioritize

communal harmony and face-saving mechanisms, which are essential for the sustainability and promotion of Afrolongevity locally and globally.

Method of Data Collection

The research adopts a qualitative descriptive research design and draws data from participant observation, oral interview with elders and native speakers. 10 selected Igbo traditional proverbs, 10 ritual expressions, 2 communal narratives; 1 short story and 1 folklore were analyzed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Selected Igbo Proverbs on Health and Wellness

In traditional Igbo communities, proverbs are used to teach healthy living, encourage moderation, promote emotional balance, preserve indigenous medical wisdom and support communal wellness. Below are some selected proverbs with their meanings, interpretations and wellbeing lesson:

1. Ahu ike ka ego

Translation: Health is greater than wealth.

Meaning: this proverb teaches that good health is more valuable than money or material possessions. Without health, wealth loses its usefulness.

Wellness lesson i. Prioritize healthy living. **ii.** Avoid stress and harmful habits **iii.** Physical and mental wellbeing are priceless.

2. Ndu bu isi.

Translation: Life is supreme.

Meaning: Human life is the most important possession. Every other achievement depends on being alive and healthy.

Wellness lesson: i. Safety and self-care matter **ii.** Protect life through proper healthcare and healthy habits.

3. Mmiri bu ndu.

Translation: Water is life.

Meaning: Water sustains life.

Wellness lesson: Hydration and Sanitation are essential.

Ihe oriri oma na-eweta ahu ike.

Translation: Good food brings good health.

Meaning: Nutrition plays a major role in maintaining wellness.

Wellness lesson: i. Eat balanced meals **ii.** Traditional healthy foods support longevity.

4. Udo na-eweta ogologo ndu.

Translation: Peace brings long life.

Meaning: Peace of mind and harmonious relationships promote wellness and longevity.

Wellness lesson: i. Avoid unnecessary conflicts **ii.** Emotional wellness contributes to healthy living.

5. Nkuzi bu ogwu mbu.

Translation: Prevention/ Education is the first medicine.

Meaning: Awareness and proper instruction help prevent illness.

Wellness lesson: **i.** Preventive healthcare is better than cure. **ii.** Hygiene and health education are essential for healthy living.

6. Ahu mmadu adighi ama echi.

Translation: The human body does not know tomorrow.

Meaning: Life is uncertain, so one should take care of the body while healthy.

Wellness lesson: **i.** Regular medical checkups are important. **ii.** Do not neglect your health.

7. Ogwu anghi aru oru n'ahu onye na-adighi ezu ike.

Translation: Medicine does not work well in a body that lacks rest.

Meaning: Rest and sleep are important parts of healing.

Wellness lesson: **i.** Avoid overwork **ii.** Sleep and relaxation aid recovery.

8. A naghi ama ama agba afa.

Translation: One cannot divine what one does not know.

Meaning: Knowledge is necessary before action.

Wellness lesson: **i.** Seek medical advice and proper diagnosis before treatment.

9. Onye kwe, chi ya ekwe.

Translation: when a person agrees, his personal spirit agrees.

Meaning: Positive mindset and determination contribute to success and wellbeing.

Wellness lesson: **i.** Mental health affects physical health. **ii.** Hope, optimism, and self belief aid healing and resilience.

Some Selected Igbo Ritual Expressions

Igbo ritual expressions on health and wellness reveal the interconnectedness of language, spirituality, medicine and communal life in traditional Igbo society. They are channels through which longevity values are transmitted.

1. Ahu ike bu uba

Meaning: Health is wealth.

Contexts used: **i.** morning libation, **ii.** when elders are blessing family members, **iii.** traditional healing ceremonies.

2. Chukwu okike, biko chedo anyi na ahu ike.

Meaning: May God our creator protect us with good health.

Contexts used: **i.** morning libation, **ii.** when elders are blessing family members, **iii.** traditional healing ceremonies.

3. Ka ogwu a buru ndu, o bughì onwu.

Meaning: May this medicine bring life and not death.

Contexts used: i. traditional healers want to activate healing with their local herbs. ii. When they want to ward off evil spirit and restoring bodily balance.

4. Udo na ahu ike diri unu.

Meaning: Peace and health be unto you.

Contexts used: it is used during communal prayer for wellness.

5. Agwu gwoo ya.

Meaning: May healing come upon him or her.

Contexts used: i. it is used during herbal healing sessions. ii. During communal prayer for the sick. iii. It is also used by the traditional healers.

6. Ka Chukwu nye gi ogologo ndu na ezi ahu ike.

Meaning: May God rant you long life and good health.

Context used: it is used during child naming ceremony, wedding and visits to the sick.

7. Oria anaghi abata ebe ndi nna ochie no.

Meaning: Disease does not enter where the ancestors dwell.

Context used: Morning libation and reflects ancestral guardianship over family.

Communal or Indigenous Narratives on Health and Wellness

Traditional Igbo communities, for instance, promote health and wellness through the following: storytelling, folktales, music and dance, festivals, etc. Below is a folktale titled, **Adaoma and Mbe's Three Pots** and another short story titled, Food is Medicine.

Food is Medicine

My grandfather was known for his longevity in my village. One day, I asked him about the secret of his good health. He replied: "I eat what our land produces like yam, cocoyam, beans, vegetables, fruits and herbs." This simply means that food can either preserve or destroy life.

This narrative reflects indigenous knowledge about nutrition and healthy eating habits. Traditional foods are portrayed as sources of strength, vitality and disease prevention.

Adaoma and Mbe's Three Pots

In the time when animals still sat in council with humand, and the harmattan wind crried ewws from one village to the next, there lived in Ala Igbo a woman named Adaoma, whose hands were quick but whose body she never listened to.

Adaoma of Umunna ws famed for her work. She pounded yam before cockcrow, farmed three ridges before noon, traded at Nkwo till moonrise, and when others slept, she wove baskets by oil lamp.

"Ahu m siri ike," she would boast, "My body is strong." She ate standing up, drank palm wine instead of water, and laughed at the elders who napped under the udara tree.

Tortoise, Mbe, the old trickster who is also the keeper of small wisdoms, watched her. He went to her one

market day with three clay pots balanced on his shell.

“Adaoma, the Alusi of the Body has sent you a gift,” he said. “Three pots for three kinds of hunger.”

The first pot, ite ofe, steamed with bitter leaf soup, okro, cocoyam, and fresh fish. “This is for your blood. Eat it slowly, sitting down.”

The second pot, ite mmiri, was cool and clear, with slices of uda lemon grass floating in it. “This is for your river. Drink it all day, before thirst bites you.”

The third pot was empty, and warm from the sun. “This, Mbe said, ‘is ite ura - the pot of sleep.’ Lie down with it every night when crickets sing, and do not rise until the first cock crows.”

Adaoma laughed and said, “Three pots to do what one strong body already does?”

“Then prove it,” said Mbe. “Tend these pots for seven market weeks. If you fail, you will give me your finest basket. If you keep them well, I will give you my shell.”

Adaoma agreed. For the first two days, she tried. She sat to eat. She sipped water and slept early. By the third day, a big order came from Umudioka. She pounded through the night, skipped the soup for dry garri at her loom and forgot her water pot in the sun.

On the seventh night, as she wove, her hand shook and her head grew hot. Her feet swelled like overripe udara. She collapsed by her fire, and the villagers gathered.

Mbe shuffled forward. He did not scold rather he lifted the lid of the ite ura and placed gently over her head to block the lamplight. He spooned warm ofe into her mouth and pressed cool mmiri to her lips.

“Ahu ike k aku,” he said quietly. “Health is greater than wealth.”

Adaoma slept for a full day and night in that quiet dark room. When she woke up, the women of the Umunna were taking turns at her loom. Her children were singing as they fetch water and her husband was stirring the soup pot. She wept, not from sickness, but from realizing that the world was still going on even without her.

When she regained her health, Adaoma continued her work but now, kept three pots by her hearth always. She ate sitting with her family, carried water gourd everywhere and closed her shop when the crickets began, every evening, she walked slowly with the elders under the udara tree, laughing and cracking jokes, for laughter too is medicine.

Mbe came to collect his basket. Adaoma gave him the finest one she had ever made; with three blue beads woven into the rim, one for each pot.

“Keep your shell, Mbe,” she told him. “I have found my own.” This is why in Igbo land, we say:

- Nri bu ogwu. Food is medicine, eat it with care.
- Mmiri bu ndu. Water is life, do not wait for thirst.
- Ura bu udo. Sleep is peace; the body repairs itself in the dark.
- Ama echina. May the community never go dark because wellness is not an individual task.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Language is a very important means of communication. To sustain Afrolongevity discourse locally and internationally, the use of appropriate language is not only valuable but also indispensable. However, employing Sociopragmatics is important since it offers not only the language but becomes the toolkit for sustaining Afrolongevity here and beyond. The following findings were, however, made and conclusion drawn.

Traditional Igbo communities, for instance, promote health and wellness through the following: storytelling, folktales, music and dance, incantations, greetings, festivals, etc. These are the sociopragmatic tools and are embedded with rich afrolongevity discourses.

Afrolongevity is cultural and afrocentric. Therefore, using Western styles of advice during Health Campaigns on hypertension, diabetes, dementia, malaria, typhoid, etc, often fail. Sociopragmatics helps craft messages using proverbs, storytelling, poems and honorifics that align with Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa or other cultural frames. This makes interventions stick, creating sustainable behaviour change instead of one- off programme. Example, **Saying** “you must reduce salt.” And saying, “Our elders taught us that too much salt steals strength – let us cook the way Mama used to cook on special days.” The second respects age hierarchy and collective memory.

Global aging discourse is often dominated by Euro-American metrics of successful aging. Sociopragmatics exposes when African gerontologists, traditional healers or rural women are sidelined in WHO or AU policy forums. By identifying these speech patterns, we can redesign conferences, funding calls and research protocols so that African voices co-author the agenda. Discourse is co-owned not imported.

African Cultural Norms (AFN) should occupy a position in Health Communication. Sociopragmatics determines how meaning changes based on social roles, respect systems, taboos and indirectness in African culture. For example in Igbo culture, direct talk about illness, death or sexual health can be seen as disrespectful.

Sociopragmatics is not just about academia but the toolkit that ensures Afrolongevity discourse grows in ways Africans, and particularly, the contemporary Igbo communities will recognize, trust and lead. Without it, we risk building clinics, policies and media campaigns that look good on paper but sound wrong in practice.

With Sociopragmatics, Africans can become co-owners of global discourse on Afrolongevity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Indigenous communicative practices should be incorporated into public health campaigns.
2. Igbo language education should be promoted in schools.
3. Documentation of proverbs, narratives and oral traditions related to health and ageing.
4. Establishment of community-based elder mentorship programmes.
5. Encouraging interdisciplinary research on afrolongevity discourse.
6. Integration of sociopragmatic perspectives into health and development policies.
7. Support cultural festivals that celebrate healthy ageing and indigenous wellness practices.
8. Digital storytelling, health podcast, social media campaigns, and indigenous language blog should be promoted.
9. Using platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Tiktok, and YouTube as important channels for disseminating longevity-related information.
10. Training in digital literacy and sociopragmatic competence is important.
11. And establishment of digital archives of traditional health knowledge.
12. Establishing Afrolongevity club in schools and colleges

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