

IGWEBUIKE IDEOLOGY AND MARTIN BUBER'S I-THOU THEORY: TOWARDS A MODEL FOR AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE

Ejikemeuwa J. O. NDUBISI, PhD

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State, Nigeria
ejikon4u@yahoo.com

Executive Summary

Our contemporary society is such that emphasizes individualism. There is less emphasis on interpersonal relationship. Many people tend to live and behave as though they do not need the other. Today, there is high rate of frustration, hopelessness, suicide actions and rejections among the young and the old. In this regard, this paper burdens itself with a phenomenological inquiry into the existential problem of human interaction. It states that both Igwebuike ideology and the I – Thou theory are geared towards an authentic human existence. This study argues that the human person can only authenticate his/her existence as a social being when he/she collaborates with the other in a relationship that is hinged on openness, reciprocity, trust, sincerity, truth, mutuality, respect for the other, justice, among others. It, therefore, submits that the overemphasis on the 'I' cannot bring about an authentic human existence and, as such, our contemporary society needs to understand and appreciate this model for an authentic human existence as derived from the Igwebuike ideology and Buber's I – Thou theory.

Keywords: Igwebuike Ideology, Kanu, I-Thou, Buber, Human relation

Introduction

Experience has shown that the issue of interpersonal relationship has been the concern of many philosophers and thinkers. Philosophers, such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Heidegger, Levinas, Nietzsche, Ozumba, Nyerere, among others, have written volumes on human relationship. One thing that is clear in the submissions of most philosophers and thinkers mentioned above is that the human person is a being that cannot but interact with others; the human person is a relational being.

Emphasizing the importance of human relationship, Aristotle (1953) argued that it is not possible for a human person to live without friends (p. 258). This explains the existential fact that the human person is a social being. Existentialists affirm that the human person is a being-with-others. The nature of the human person is that of relationship with the other. One cannot actually see one's face without the aid of a mirror; and as such, it can be said that one cannot actually know oneself or discover oneself fully without the other. In the view of Kaitholil (2001), a human being is said to be more human when he interacts with others (p. 13). The implication here is that without interaction, a particular human person becomes less human.

In our contemporary society, experience has shown that there is much emphasis on individualism. Some people tend to believe that they are comfortable without relating with others. This, among others, has constituted a serious threat to the essential aspect of the human person as a being-with-others. Today, suicide is on the increase; family relation is being crushed; frustration and hopelessness have become the order of the day. The pertinent question now is: How can a human person live a meaningful life without interacting or relating with others? In an attempt to address this and other related questions, this study is set to phenomenologically analyze the *Igwebuiké* Ideology from Igbo-African perspective, especially as championed by Professor Kanu, and also Buber's theory of I-Thou relationship. The paper begins with a basic understanding of the *Igwebuiké* ideology and a

brief exposition of Buber's I-Thou theory. It further presents the *Igwebuiké* ideology and the I-Thou theory as a model for an authentic human existence in our contemporary society, and thereafter ends with a conclusion.

The Understanding of the *Igwebuiké* Ideology

The power of effectively pulling forces together to achieve a common goal cannot be undermined or overemphasized. There is always stronger and unquenchable strength in unity. The Igbo adage has it that a single broom can easily be broken, but when they are united as a bundle of broom, it then becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to break. This understanding is the brain behind the Igbo-African ideology of *Igwebuiké*. The notion of *Igwebuiké* hinges on the existential fact that 'united we stand, but divided we fall'. Ndujisi (2019) opines that *Igwebuiké* is an all-embracing ideology and as such, it "captures the philosophical, religious, political, economic and social life of the African people" (p.142). As a concept, *Igwebuiké* is derived from three Igbo words: *Igwe bu ike*. This Igbo expression can be understood as 'strength in number', strength in many' or 'power in multitude'. In this regard, one can say that *Igwebuiké* has to do with synergy in human relationship.

It is important to note at this point that the contemporary understanding and usage of *Igwebuiké* in African discourse was popularized by Professor Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, a renowned contemporary African scholar. Kanu (2016a) explains that "when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force. At this level, no task is beyond their collaborative capacity" (p.3). The point here is that *Igwebuiké*, as an ideology, underscores the existential reality that a part can never be bigger than a whole. It hinges on the need for a cordial interrelationship and interaction among human beings. Kanu (2016a) further explains:

As an ideology, *Igwebuiké* rests on the African principles of solidarity and complementarity. It argues that 'to be' is to live in solidarity and complementarity and to live outside that

parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation. 'To be' is 'to be with the other' in a community of beings. This is based on the African philosophy of harmony and complementarity, which is the underlying principle and unity of African Traditional Religious and Philosophical experience (p. 3).

The above citation amplifies the understanding of *Igwebuiké* as an ideology. One thing to note here is that *Igwebuiké* is an ideology of togetherness; it is an ideology that tends to unite the views and ingenuity of people to achieve a common goal. *Igwebuiké* is a philosophy of complementarity and solidarity. Experience has shown that every human person needs the other in order to survive or to make meaning in life. Kanu, as cited in Ogbaki (2019), avers that *Igwebuiké* has to do with sharing. He relates:

Igwebuiké as a complementary philosophy understands life as a shared reality. And it is only within the context of complementarity that life makes meaning. Life is a life of sharedness. One in which another is part thereof. A relationship, though of separate and separated entities or individuals but with a joining of the same whole. It is a relationship in which case the two or more coming together make each a complete whole; it is a diversity of being one with the other ... if the other is my part or a piece of me, it means that I need him for me to be complete, for me to be what I really am. The other completes rather than diminishes me. His language and culture make my own stand out and at the same time, they enrich and complement my own (Kanu as cited in Ogbaki, 2019, p. 170).

The above reflection pictures the existential and complementary nature of *Igwebuiké*. The ideology presupposes that no one is actually complete without the other. In a musical parlance, it is said that a particular music is melodious when all the musical instruments and voices are harmonized together. Without the harmonization of the instruments and voices, it will be very difficult to perceive the melody

of the particular music. One thing we must note is that “Kanu’s perception of Igwebuike is such that is all-embracing: it is a philosophy of inclusiveness” (Ndubisi, 2019, p 143). In this regard, Kanu affirms that *Igwebuike*, as an ideology, is the Igbo-African search for meaning in all spheres of life (Kanu 2016b, p.5; Kanu 2017, p. 9). The Igbo-African, in particular, and the human person, in general, can only find meaning in life through the proper understanding and application of the *Igwebuike* ideology. For sure, no man is an island. The *Igwebuike* ideology, as understood and championed by Kanu, sees complementarity as the fundamental requirement for human existence. For one “to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation” (Kanu 2016a, p.3). It, therefore, follows that the authentic human existence can be understood and achieved in the other. Aliba (2019) corroborates: “In Igwebuike, co-relating with each other is an essential part of survival because it aids mutual understanding and co-existence. This gives the idea that whatever happens to an individual person affects the community” (p. 163). Onebunne (2019) relates the *Igwebuike* ideology to belongingness. He argues that *Igwebuike* ideology is expressed in the philosophy of belongingness. Every human person belongs to each other; every human person depends on the other in order to survive. He strongly argues that it is the “experience of life that gave recourse to the idea of complementarity as a measure to survive the challenges posed by other vicissitudes of life. Inter-dependence, inter-relationship, collectivism and mutual co-existence form the basis for Igbo life pattern as expressed in Igwebuike and Belongingness: the metaphysics of effective communal relationship” (p. 71).

One thing that is clear is that the *Igwebuike* ideology is at the heart of Igbo-African understanding of reality; it explains how the Igbo-African relates to reality within and around him. It can be seen as the totality of African philosophy, religion and socio-political experiences.

Following the nature of this study and also having given the basic understanding of the *Igwebuiké* ideology, the next subtopic shall focus on Martin Buber's theory of I-Thou relationship.

I – Thou Theory in Martin Buber: A Brief Exposé

It was in 1923 that Martin Buber wrote his famous essay, *Ich und Du* (I and Thou). It is in this work that he expressed his doctrine of I–Thou relation as the mode of human existence. Buber explained that there are two modes of encountering the world, namely, I–Thou and I–It. He used these two modes to explain interpersonal relationship in the world. One can relate to things in the world as either persons (Thou) or as objects (It) (Buber, 1958; Buber, 1968; Buber, 1970). The understanding of the I–Thou relationship, according to Buber as cited in Okonkwo (2014), is that of “a relationship of mutuality, openness, recognition, directness, reciprocity and above all presence. It is a relationship in which the whole being of an individual is engaged in an unassuming relationship with the other” (p.21). One important thing to note about Buber's notion of I–Thou is that it is essentially a relationship of mutuality. It is such a relationship where mutual relationship among human beings is enthroned. In this type of relationship, the particular human person only discovers himself/herself not in relation to himself/herself, but in relation to others. This, for Buber, is possible when individualism is removed and mutuality is emphasized.

More so, Buber maintained that the I–Thou relation is possible in an atmosphere of openness. Both the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’ must be open to each other. The fact is that the other can only exist for me, and I exist for the other when there is openness. This type of openness is devoid of deception. Buber remarked that the I–Thou relation is devoid of any prejudice or pre-conceived ideas. Any form of prejudice, according to Buber, constitutes a barrier to I–Thou relation (Buber, 1958, p. 11).

Another important element in I–Thou relation, as conceived by Buber, is reciprocity. This understanding entails a mutual response of individuals to the actions of the other. There is no intention

whatsoever of individual in I–Thou relationship to gain from the other. As soon as a person sets goals or objectives to be achieved prior to the relationship, there can be no mutuality because one's intention in the relationship would be to realize an objective which is very often at the expense of the other. In this regard, I–Thou is seen as mutual relationship and not a parasitic or exploitative type of relationship (Buber, 1970, p.115).

It is important to note that Buber's strong position is that no one can be fully human without experiencing the other, the world around him/her and also God. It follows that these tripartite expressions constitute, for Buber, the essential elements for one to be fully human and to experience an authentic existence. Furthermore, another important thing to note in Buber's position is that the doctrine of I–Thou is not only related to other human beings alone; it also relates to things (I– It) and the Eternal Thou (God). This means that the particular human person can find meaning in life as he/she relates with other human beings, the environment and God. Buber argues that I–It relationship is very essential as it helps the human person to develop and accumulate knowledge. He explains: "The primary relation of man to the world of *It* is comprised in experiencing, which continually reconstitutes the world, and using, which leads the world to its manifold aim, the sustaining, relieving and equipping of human life" (Buber, 1958, p. 38). As the individual relates with the *Thou* and the *It*, there remains the *third* party, which Buber called the *Eternal Thou* (*God*). It is the relationship with the *Eternal Thou* that helps to authenticate one's existence. In sum, Buber's relational mode for authentic existence is manifested in a triad relation: I–Thou, I–It and I–Eternal Thou. This is a kind of existential relationship that is required for a harmonious interpersonal relationship (Koyeli and Roy, 2002, p. 192).

Igwebuike Ideology and Buber's I–Thou Theory: A Model for Authentic Existence

So far, we have been able to discuss the *Igwebuike* ideology as propounded by Kanu and also presented a highlight of Buber's I–Thou

theory. One thing that is clear is that both the *Igwebuiké* ideology and the I–Thou theory are geared towards an authentic human existence. The human person can only authenticate his/her existence as a social being when he/she collaborates with the other. The overemphasis on the ‘I’ cannot bring about an authentic existence. The human person, in the light of this study, is required to move beyond the ‘I’ in order to have meaningful relationship with the other. It is in a relationship with the other that life can be said to be meaningful to an individual person. This explains the reason this present study argues that both the *Igwebuiké* ideology and Buber’s I–Thou theory can be seen as a model for an authentic human existence, especially in our contemporary society that is carried away by individualism and scientism.

It is an existential truism that no human person or anything at all can be said to be absolutely useless. And so, a particular individual can gain from another individual when they engage in a relationship. As a model for an authentic human existence, it means that the *Igwebuiké* ideology and the I–Thou theory emphasize the essential character of complementarity. In a society such as Nigeria, it should be noted that all of us need the other in order to experience an authentic human existence as Nigerians. There is something in an Igbo person that the Hausa person needs; there is also something in the Yoruba person that the Tiv person or the Fulani person needs. This is an existential fact! No person, tribe or nation can exist in isolation; there is always the need for complementarity.

One important thing to note is that the emphasis on *Igwebuiké* and/or Buber’s I–Thou theory does not in any way negate individual differences, choices and interests. It means that individuals in a relationship have to work together to achieve a common goal. Without working to achieve a common goal, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve anything or derive meaning in life. Uzukwu (2019) discusses the importance of the *Igwebuiké* ideology, thus: “The social, economic, political, religious, physical and gender differences of the members [of a particular society] are important for the varieties

of contributions and as well as the proportionate strength of the group” (p. 145). The implication of Uzukwu’s position is that the strength of economic growth, peaceful coexistence, political stability, etc., that is observed in a particular society is highly dependent on the level of synergy or collaboration experienced in that particular society.

Conclusion

The *Igwebuike* ideology and Buber’s I–Thou theory constitute, in the view of this study, a model for an authentic existence. No one can claim to live for oneself alone. There is no way an individual’s history can be written without reference to the ‘thou’. Authentic existence implies living in solidarity, collaboration, synergy and complementarity with other human beings. There is always the essential need to foster a common ground for human relationship. As Aliba (2019) avers: “Human association remains an inalienable aspect of our human nature. The human person as a being, is not independent, but rather needs the other to foster his own existence” (p.163).

The fact is that human relationship is inevitable and very essential for an authentic human existence. This relationship, to achieve its goal, in the light of the *Igwebuike* ideology and Buber’s I–Thou theory, should be hinged on openness, reciprocity, trust, sincerity, truth, mutuality, respect for the other, justice, among others. It should be devoid of deceit, bias, inferiority or superiority complex, objectifying the other, using the other simply as a means to an end and not as an end in itself, etc. Our contemporary society needs to understand and appreciate this model for authentic human existence as derived from the *Igwebuike* ideology and Buber’s I–Thou theory.

References

- Aliba, S. I. (2019). “A Comparative Study of Igwebuike Philosophy and Ujamaa: Towards a Common Brotherhood”. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 2, No. 4. Pp. 156- 165.

- Aristotle (1953). *The Nichomachean Ethics*. J. A. K. Thomson, trans. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Buber, M. (1958). *I – Thou*. G. R. Smith, trans. New York: Charles Scribers
- Buber, M. (1968). *Between Man and Man*. London: Collins
- Buber, M. (1970). *A Believing Humanism: My Testament*. New York: Simon and Schuster
- Kaitholil, G. (2010). *Communion in Community: A Renewal Programme for Religious, 6th ed*. Mumbai: St. Pauls
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). Igwebuike and the Question of Superiority in the Scientific Community of Knowledge. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities, Vol. 3, No. 1. Pp. 9 – 18*.
- Kanu, I. A. (2016a). Igwebuike as an Igbo-African hermeneutic of globalization. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 2, No. 1. Pp. 1-6*.
- Kanu, I. A. (2016b). Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy for Christian-Muslim Relations in Northern Nigeria. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 2. No. 2. Pp. 1 – 9*
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African philosophy for Christian-Muslim relations in Northern Nigeria. In Mahmoud Misaeli (Ed.). *Spirituality and Global Ethics* (pp. 300-310). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African philosophy for the protection of the environment. *Nightingale International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. Vol. 3. No. 4. pp. 28-38*.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike* as the hermeneutic of individuality and communality in African ontology. *NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 162-179*.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017a). *Igwebuike* and question of superiority in the scientific community of knowledge. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol.3 No1. pp. 131-138*.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017a). *Igwebuike as a philosophical attribute of Africa in portraying the image of life*. A paper presented at

- the 2017 Oracle of Wisdom International Conference by the Department of Philosophy, Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State, 27-29 April.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017b). *Igwebuiké as a complementary approach to the issue of girl-child education. Nightingale International Journal of Contemporary Education and Research. Vol. 3. No. 6. pp. 11-17.*
- Kanu, I. A. (2017b). *Igwebuiké as a wholistic response to the problem of evil and human suffering. Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 3 No 2, March.*
- Kanu, I. A. (2017e). *Igwebuiké as an Igbo-African modality of peace and conflict resolution. Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars. Vol. 1. No. 1. pp. 31-40.*
- Kanu, I. A. (2017g). *Igwebuiké and the logic (Nka) of African philosophy. Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. 3. 1. pp. 1-13.*
- Kanu, I. A. (2017h). *Igwebuiké philosophy and human rights violation in Africa. IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 3. No. 7. pp. 117-136.*
- Kanu, I. A. (2017i). *Igwebuiké as a hermeneutic of personal autonomy in African ontology. Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 14-22.*
- Koyeli, C. and Roy, A. (2002). *Interpersonal Relationship and Human Dignity. Indian Philosophical Quarterly, 29. Pp. 2 – 13.*
- Ndubisi, E. J. O. (2019). “*Igwebuiké Philosophy in I. A. Kanu vis-à-vis the Validity of Truth-claim in African Epistemology*”. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development, Vol. 2, No. 3. Pp. 141- 147.*
- Ogbaki, P. E. (2019). *Nigeria and the Debate of Leadership and good governance: Perspectives from Igwebuiké Philosophy*”. In E. J. O. Ndubisi, A. A. Ichaba and J. Nnoruga (Eds.). *Igwebuiké Philosophy: An African*

Philosophy of Integrative Humanism: A Book of Readings in Honour of Professor Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony. Bloomington, USA: Author House. Pp. 154 – 208.

- Okonkwo, I. E. (2014). “I -Thou Relationship in Martin Buber’s Existentialism: A Critical Analysis”. (Unpublished Project, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University, Umunya).
- Onebunne, J. I. (2019). “Igwebuiké: An African Metaphysics of Communal Strength” in J. I. Onebunne, P. T. Haaga and E. J. O. Ndubisi (Eds.). *Igwebuiké Ontology: An African Philosophy of Humanity Towards the Other: Papers in Honour of Professor Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, OSA.* Bloomington, USA: Author House. Pp. 63 – 81.
- Uzukwu, G. N. (2019). “Igwebuiké as an African Expression of the Pauline Theology of Collaboration in Mission”. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development, Vol. 2, No. 4.* Pp. 141- 155.