



8. “IGWEBUIKE”, Identity and Alterity

i. The Problem of Identity and Alterity

With Rene Descartes (1596-1650 AD), philosophy started a new way, that of gnoseology. He defines a person in relation to self-consciousness. Descartes (1637), through his methodical doubt, discovers that something resists doubt. That is, the fact that it is he who doubts, and who can be deceived. He thus, arrives at *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I am). To the question, who am I? Descartes answers, a “thinking thing”. His transformation of the person from an ontological to a psychological fact, opened the door to a series of either great diminutions or of enormous exaggerations of the concept of person (Kanu 2012 and 2015). Since the time of Descartes, individual consciousness has been taken as the privileged centre of identity, while 'the other' is seen as an epistemological problem, or as an inferior, reduced or negated form of the same (Kanu 2013).

ii. Igwebuike and the Other

Contrary to Descartes' position, *Igwebuike* provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations (Kanu 2016a). 'To be' is 'to be with the other', in a community of beings. (Kanu 2015a). *Igwebuike* 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 (Kanu 2017a). A relationship in which case the two or more coming together make each of them a complete whole; it is a diversity of being one with each other. Thus, to put the other away removes the balance of being. Kanu (2018) avers that this presupposes a tailor-made-cloth, measured, cut and sewn to fit into the curves, contours, shape and size, peculiarities and particularities of a being. Therefore, every being has a missing part and is at the same time, a missing part. Ewulu (2010), writes that:

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. (p.189).

From the foregoing perspective, the self is not only completed in relating with the other, but attains self-realization through the other. Ewulu (2010) writes further:

I realize myself in the other because it is in the 'Thou-ness' of the Thou that my 'Is-ness' is realized. I am 'I' because you are 'You'. Without Thou there is no I. We are 'We' because they are 'They', and without 'They', there is no 'We'. (p. 189).

As a result of the dynamics of the relationship between the I and the thou, the Igbo would refer to the 'Other' as *Ibe*, which means 'a piece of' or 'a part of', as in *ibe anu* (a piece of meat) or *ibe ede* (a piece of cocoyam). The Igbo would, therefore, refer to the 'other person' as *ibe m* which means 'my piece' or *mmadu ibe m* (my fellow human being). This is the concept employed in reference to relationships and reciprocity: love one another (*hunu ibe unu n'anya*), help one another (*nyere nu ibe unu aka*), respect one another (*sopuru nu ibe unu*), etc. Since the 'other' refers to my own piece, it would mean that to love the other is to love oneself, to help the other is to help oneself and to respect the other is to respect oneself. Put the other way round, to hate the other is to hate oneself, to refuse help to the other is to refuse help to oneself and to disrespect the other is to disrespect oneself. From the African perspective, there is a link between the self and the other. This is because the self carries with it the mark of otherness. If reality is one with itself and consistent with itself, that is, different from others, then its uniqueness is always in reference to the other. In the I and the other relation, both participants exist as polarities of relation.

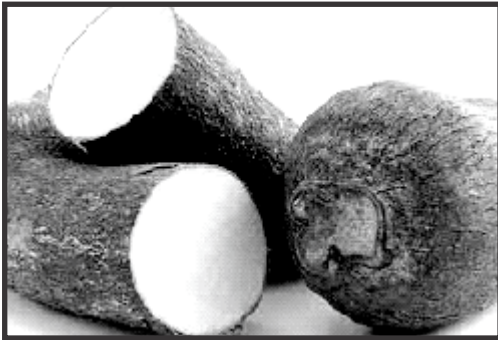


Plate 2: Ibe ji

iii. *Chi as the Ontological Basis for the Other as Ibem*

The concept *Chi* has been used in various capacities by the Igbo; first, in the capacity of the Supreme Being, and second, as a guardian angel or a spiritual being or force which every person possess. Its essence lies in the commonest everyday expression of the word *Chi*; verbally, in possessive singular adjectival form: *Chim* (my *Chi*), *Chigi* (your *Chi*), *Chiya* (his or her *Chi*), *Chi anyi* (our *Chi*) an Igbo interjection for surprise *Chim o* (My God) or a common curse among the Igbo *Chi ne'ke kpo gi oku* (May God burn you) (Chukwukere 1980).

However, the nuance employed here is the later in which Chi is understood as the divinity in every human person or the spark of the divine in created things. Chi has been represented by the Igbo in different ways: for some it is a special tree planted in the person's compound like the ogilisi or oha; for others, it could be a small clay pot and filled with sand with three sticks cut from a special plant thrust jointly into the sand. These representations are usually kept in a special place and an altar built around it for the offering of sacrifice.

It is this Chi, which is a thumb print or mark of Chukwu in each and every one of us that places the other in a special place in relation to the self. If I and the other have the thumb print of the same Chukwu, the spark of the Supreme being, it then means that we relate in a special way that goes deeper than our individualities. Our rootedness in Chukwu is what makes the other a part of me. To treat the other in a way that is undeserving of the divine mark in him or her not only affects the person but the ontological order we are all part of.