

UNDERSTANDING PERSONHOOD IN IGBO PHILOSOPHY: A PRECURSOR FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The degree of development or retrogression in our contemporary society, to a large extent rests on the level of understanding people from diverse socio-cultural background living within a given geographical boundary. Consequently, without proper understanding among people of different socio-cultural backgrounds, peace and development would remain a mirage. The study employs a qualitative research method. In order to justify the study, a descriptive analytic technique was used to examine the variables. In the course of the study, it was discovered that Igbo philosophy consists of some universal elements that accommodates other socio-cultural groups. This is the precursor for national development.

Keywords: Person, Personhood, Igbo, Igbo philosophy

Introduction

The hankering for satisfactory life is natural instinct in mankind. The expectations for national development can never be really achieved without proper understanding of different people from their cultural background. Nevertheless, there is no universally accepted definition of the term 'person'. By implication, the concept 'person' has different meaning to different groups. The differences in the conceptions of 'person' are sometimes contradictory and naturally attract a puzzle about the wholesomeness of a person. Heidegger did not mince words in his assertion that "No epoch has had, as ours has had, notions so numerous and varied of a person, yet in all these, a person still assumes so problematic an appearance in the category of beings" (Searle 24).

However, from the range of social disorderliness and backwardness, ethnic discriminations and deprivations, tribal alienations and suppressions, crisis of diverse forms among other things, are prominent in our contemporary society. All these social ills are traceable to lack or partial understanding of people from their cultural settings. Philosophically speaking, some cultural groups have not developed the account of their history of civilizations in written form. On this ground, it would be difficult for such individuals to properly understand themselves: Who they are? Let alone understanding other groups with a given geographical boundary. Besides, the foundation for national development rest upon clear perspective of people, social integration and peaceful co-existence of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is against this background that prompted the study: 'Philosophical analysis of personhood in Igbo philosophy: A precursor for national development'.

Operational Definition of Terms

Personhood: A person is ascribed to man, in a way that expresses his entire reality. This term can never be used for plants or animals. In the other hand, personhood is the quality or status of being a person. In this study, the term “man” or “person” is used interchangeably.

Society: Individuals in groups do not exist in isolation, but exist and interact with other members of the group, and these interactions follow some laid-down patterns of behavior that are acceptable to the group. All these interacting individuals and groups, and their activities exist in a larger set-up called society. Society, therefore, refers to the whole range of social relationships within the set-up. In other words, society embraces human beings, their activities and relationships to one another and in relation to their natural and social environment (Ezewu 6). Here the word society and nation are used interchangeably.

Igbo: The origin or the meaning of the term “Igbo” has remained unknown, since there is no scientific proof of the origin but it stands for both the language and the people. Linguistically and according to Armstrong, the Igbo language is of “the *Kwa* sub-family of the Niger-Congo family of Languages”⁴³. Anthropological evidence puts the date of the emergence of the spoken Igbo language at about 6,000 BC.

Igbo Philosophy: Igbo philosophy is the philosophy that has local relevance to the Igbo people. That is to say, it must not be divorced from culture (Uduigwomen 5). Hence Igbo philosophy has a cultural dimension. It simply means that Igbo philosophy has its root or ramifications in culture. Igbo philosophy like any other cultural philosophy is adapted to explain reality from an Igbo perspective.

Conceptualizing a Person by Igbo Philosophers

Notable thinkers from Igbo extraction have proffered various definitions of a 'person'. A person in Igbo means '*mmadu*'. The term '*mmadu*' according to Metuh refers to 'human person' irrespective of his age, sex, or status (95).

Etymologically, Arazu claims that he learnt from an Igbo sage that the meaning of the word '*mmadu*' is from '*mma*' (goodness or beautiful), '*du*' (exists or life). The sage said this was first pronounced by God, when He looked at the man He had made and said '*mmadu*', 'let goodness exist' or 'beautiful life' (114). This implies that human beings are intrinsically made to be good or beautiful. This feature is expected to be seen not only in man's human appearance but also in his nature.

Edeh opines that *mmadu*, as a generic term, includes both men and women in their qualitative characteristics. *Mmadu* to him is described as the “master of things” (13). This implies that the Igbos identify 'person' as a member of the human species in a general sense. However, the Igbos believe that, even though a person (*mmadu*) is identifiable in human species, his qualitative characters (talents, charisma, etc.) are elements of his individuality. In Edeh's definition, *mmadu* is the 'master of things'; this suggests that human being is the land lord of the universe; he controls, manages and is in-charge of every other tenant inhabiting the universe.

From another angle, Mbaegbu quotes the words of Nze that among the Igbos “*mmadu* is the container as well as the content of the gods (167). It means that, the Supreme God or gods, personal god (*chi*), ancestral spirits (*eke*) can dwell in a person, and become the features that make a person 'who he is'. Hence his actions or behaviours, to a large extent are determined by the supernatural forces within. Mbaegbu further adds that ontologically, all men are 'rational'

beings and by this ontological definition 'all men are ontologically equal' (169). Rational faculty is an attribute of a human being, animals are not rational. Since only human beings are rational, that becomes the nature that makes every human being equal.

Ezeanya thinks that 'God has made a person the focal point of the universe' (15). The Igbo concept of reality is centered on man. To buttress this point, Oguejiofor rightly observes:

The Igbo, like many other communities in Africa, place human being (*mmadu*) at the centre of their universe. Nature, society itself, and a host of innumerable spiritual beings are relevant insofar as they affect human being (positively or negatively) (48).

He further argues that, it does not in any way mean that a person is the measure of all things. With the view that, there are beings superior to the human being. To complement this argument, Okolo observed that notwithstanding, human beings:

Rightly claims a central and strategic position in the hierarchy of beings, since the interactions and intercommunications between the visible created order and the invisible world of God, spirits, ancestors, are only possible through him. He is, therefore, the ontological means between beings existing above and below him, in this respect, human being in the Igbo world view is the centre of creation with intimate and personal relationships with beings above and below (125).

This shows that human being (*mmadu*) is positioned as a medium of interaction with the visible and invisible world, spirits and ancestors. In short, the existence of other beings depends on the existence of the human being. IkengaMetuh has posited that the word person in Igbo means '*mmadu*'. The word '*mmadu*' refers to human being irrespective of his age, sex, or status. *Mmadu* originated from God and will eventually go back to God. The person (*mmadu*) is a constituent of both the spiritual (*mmuo*) and the physical (*ahu*) aspects. The Igbo distinguish a person (*mmadu*) from the concept of self (*owem*).

Multiple selves: Person (*mmadu*) is one, an individual person created by God, while there are multitudes of selves. The selves are:

Obi (Heart or breath): *Obi* is a person's life force, the animating principle that links a person (*mmadu*) with other life forces in the universe.

Chi (destiny): As Metuh puts it:

Chi in the Igbo context, besides the Supreme Being (God) could refer to the 'personal god' or 'destiny'. In Igbo beliefs have it that *Chukwu* gives each person a *chi*, a personal god as well as destiny also called '*Chi*' an emanation of himself, which thereafter acts as a guardian angel of the person to whom it is assigned (26).

Thus, the Igbo believe that every event in a person's life, whether it be success or failure, is '*onataru Chi*', a gift from *Chi*. The goal of a person is to achieve his '*akara chi*'- destiny imprinted on his palm.

Eke: Is the ancestral character, traits or shade. In fact, Abanuka identifies the eke as the ancestral links (to a person and the community). It is believed that the ancestral shade goes to God to accept the *Chi* (the destiny of the child) when conception occurs. This accounts for the

resemblance of a child to his ancestor (50). In another words, the child can be said to be re-incarnated. This ancestral influence does not destroy the uniqueness of the child or substitute for it.

IfemesiaChieka took a different dimension to present a complete understanding of a person in Igbo philosophy. To attain this, it becomes unavoidably necessary to first understand the tradition of the Igbo people. The person in Igbo is '*mmadu*' which also mean a good life.

Nature of Igbo Person

1 Uniqueness: Even though, all other beings seem to fit perfectly into a natural order and determined by permanent principles. Human being alone occupies a unique status. As a natural being, he is determined by natural laws. As a human being, he must frequently choose; confined in his existence, he is unrestrained in his will. He thinks and decides, as such the course of his life is unpredictable, and no one can write his autobiography in advance. No two human beings are alike. One major mode of being human is uniqueness. Each human being has something to say, or think or do that is unprecedented. The individual identity of every person is highly preserved to the extent that in the midst of a million people, each person is quite distinct. Moreover, individual examples of any kind of being are nameless. But every individual claims a name (Onwochei 102).

2 Self- Consciousness: One of the vital features of a person is self-consciousness, for it differentiates a human being from other animals. It seems that human person is not free to choose whether or not he wants to attain knowledge about himself. It is like a necessity and under all circumstances; he possesses a degree of such knowledge, preconceptions, and standards of self-interpretation. We may ask: what does human being know about himself? This self-knowledge is part of his being. So in a sense, knowing oneself and being a self go together. Human person is the only being endowed with consciousness of his own being, not just the awareness of the presence of other beings. Moreover, human being in contrast to animals is a being who not only behaves, but also reflects about how he behaves. In a sense, therefore, sensitivity to one's own behaviour and the ability to question it, is an essential quality of a person (Onwochei 101-102).

Self-consciousness is a universal feature of a person. Every reasonable human person at one point pondered on the question: Who am I? The wonder encountered in this query is the foundation for self-consciousness.

To the Igbos a human being is a person with the ability to think, to reason, to understand situations and the logical link between a cause and its effect, the mental capacity to visualize a situation, to envisage a situation, to foresee the likely consequences of a given course of action, to draw the necessary conclusions and inferences from a line of argument or a statement, to deliberate over issues and situations. It is by the power of the intellect that all these human activities are carried out by man. Knowledge would be impossible of attainment by a person without the power of reason or intellect (Iwe 29).

3 Preciousness: Preciousness is a feature of being human. Human person is the only entity in nature with which sanctity is associated. The only kind of being we consider intrinsically sacred in human life. It is supremely valuable. Each individual is dear to someone, even if nobody cares for him; he is still a human being. A person is seen differently from other things. Everyone seems to be aware that he is not just 'everybody'. He knows he evolves as a self, as somebody, as a person, and as something that cannot be repeated, something for which there is

no duplicate or substitute (Onwochei 102).

Universal Elements in Igbo Philosophy and its Implications Towards National Development

1 Reciprocity (*Mkpuluonyekuu ka ogaigho*: We reap what we sow): Reciprocity is expressed under different guises in the various religions and philosophies of the world, though by whatever name it may be called, none of the traditions in the world denies it; each tradition in one way or another explicitly affirms it. It has a place in every culture. In the spiritual realm as in the physical, this principle of reciprocity applies. According to Otakpo, the Igbo reciprocity applies in this world and the next. In other words, reincarnation only makes sense in conjunction with the principle. The other reason is that Igbo metaphysics is overly deterministic; every event has a cause and every cause has its effects. For the Igbo, human life is cyclic (48).

Mkpuluonyekuu ka ogaigho is logically and metaphysically equivalent to *ifeonye nye ani, ka ani nenyeya* in terms of meaning. The principle means that there is reward for every act or omission either in this world or the next. If your reward, due or lot is not available in this world, it is available in the next circle of life. Hence, we reap what we sow expresses the fundamental moral principle in basic form. It also expresses a fundamental legal principle in a basic form.

To live by the sword is to perish by the sword. This is entirely retributive because it has echoes of the basic principle. By an inexorable moral law, every act or omission has consequences: good acts have good consequences, bad acts bad consequences. These consequences may be immediate, in the short or in the long term. There is no escape from the good or bad consequences of act or omission. For the perception of good consequences, the gods are also propitiated in order to (a) ensure that it does happen, (b) that it happens in good times, and (c) that it brings other benefits (Otakpo 49).

Coming from another angle, Onwochei opines that:

In infancy, human being begins to obtain and seize things he cares for. On developing and entering maturity, he becomes involved in giving and providing for those he cares for. Thus to be a person is to reciprocate, to offer in return for what one receives. Reciprocity involves appreciation. Biologically, we will take and give off (103).

This implies that reciprocity is a quality of a person. In early age it is not evident, but as one grows he begins to reciprocate what he gets from others. In complementing this Abraham asserts that: "I become a person by knowing the meaning of receiving and giving. I become a person when I begin to reciprocate" (46).

2. The principles of Justice and fairness/Live and let live (*egbebelu, ugobelu*): *Egbe belu, ugobelu* meaning the eagle and the kite each has a right to perch on the same tree. Anyone denying the other this right must have its wings broken, that is, loses the right to perch. As such the 'live and let live' principle is fully in operation among the Igbos. This expresses the desire for equity, fairness, consociation, accommodation and tolerance. To complement this, Otakpo opines that:

There are two critical issues raised by the application of this principle in

relation to justice. These are (a) equal rights and (b) non-interference. Justice is necessary for order and peaceful co-existence because *udokaogwumma*: which means that peace is preferable to disorder, anarchy and war. To ensure and guarantee peace there must be justice, and to ensure and guarantee justice there must be respect for the individual rights, personal tastes, and interests of individuals (60).

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For the Igbo when bad consequences are perceived, oracles are consulted and the gods are propitiated in order to (a) avert it, or (b) minimize the effects. But this is equivalent to a postponement of an evil day that must come. Given the nature and operation of this principle, it is clear that such propitiations do not work. They do not accomplish the objectives of those who engage in them. For the perception of good consequences, the gods are also propitiated in order to (a) ensure that it does happen, (b) that it happens in good times, and (c) that it brings other benefits (Otakpo 49).

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Human dignity: Human dignity is a principle that states that every person is intrinsically

valuable, a being that should be revered and respected from the very beginning of existence. This inalienable dignity is inviolable because it naturally belongs to every person. In this instance, even prostitute have dignity, she is only behaving in an undignified manner.

The expression 'human dignity' is used by a lot of people with different interpretations and meanings and under different contexts. The Igbo man's concept of dignity is drawn from primordial community context of his personality as already defined. The values cherished by the Igbo man in his community as "a man in community" qualifies as what he calls human dignity. Human dignity, though a universal concept, has cultural correspondence in all indigenous communities of the world. According to Younkings, dignity is etymologically rooted in Latin; *dingus* or *dingnitas* meaning "due a certain respect or worthy of esteem and honor". A fundamental inalienable dignity inheres in every human person by virtue of his uniqueness in distinction from all other natural creatures.... (1).

Human dignity is a core Igbo value. The Igbo man primordially, is able to perpetuate his race as a result of his 'community-in- person' values which propel and motivates him to strive to achieve and maintain self-respect, esteem, pride, sense of social shame, indignation and resentful for evil doing in the community. His 'community-in-person' values derives from his cultural and philosophical sense of dignity under primordial Igbo world. This sense of human dignity, is very strong when he maintains his commercial values, leads to the achievement of self-control, self-restraint, and self-regulation in the context of the pressures and challenges coming from his society.

Conclusion

From the study, it was discovered that till date there has not been a universally acceptable definition of a 'person'. Therefore, the best place to understand who 'is a person' is from his socio-cultural background. Even within people of same tribe, it was found out that there exist some forms of grammatical and dialectical similarity and in some cases of dissimilarity. However, a term can be comprehensively perceived as a whole. The study analyzes man from thinkers from the Igbo progenitor. This understanding will not only benefit the Igbos but for all who are interested in promoting national integrations and developments.

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