
Theophilus I. Okere's Critical Influence on Pantaleon O. Iroegbu's Formation of the Concept of Being as Uwa

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Abstract

The exact articulation and eventual formation as well as proper translation of the metaphysical concept of being has been a perennial issue in philosophical enterprise for philosophers within philosophical traditions. Western Philosophical Tradition (WPT) started with the materialistic and elemental idea of being in their philosophical excursus having Thales as their first philosopher who proposed water as the *urstoff*, the original matter or the basic stuff of reality. Other traditions of philosophy have their turns in such conceptual articulations. In African Philosophical Tradition, the likes of Okere, Theophilus and Iroegbu, Pantaleon were front-liners in the proper formative translation of African philosophical concept of being. Using the method of historico-hermeneutical approach, the researcher finds out that Okere, who has been premier in the use of the concept of *uwa* to literally translate being influenced Iroegbu, who has over the time appreciated the concept of being as *uwa* in his contemporary African philosophical traditional engagements. More so, Iroegbu was very apt to express such an ideological concept in his *uwa* ontology and went further to emphasize that belongingness is the modality of this being understood as *uwa*.

Keywords: Philosophy, African philosophical tradition, being, *uwa*

Introduction

Okere and Iroegbu master and student, remain philosophical giants of our time. Okere taught Iroegbu in philosophy then in Bigard Major Seminary, Ikot-Ekpene. Both of them later went to the same prestigious Catholic University of Louvain for further studies and came out with impressing results in their doctorates. Having been *opportuned* to have encountered both of them separately and having been influenced so much by their scholarship-authorship and studentship-mentorship respectively, I have decided to take this project of deciphering the influential asperity as well as the degree of influence Okere had on Iroegbu as regards the issue and the proper conceptual translation of being in Igbo-African philosophy.

This academic exercise appreciates the philosophical chronology of personalities that informs and inspires the philosophers in this write-up as such. The philosophical icon of contemporary African Philosophy Theophilus Ibegbulam Okere left an indelible mark as the first Nigerian to have studied philosophy in the prestigious Catholic University of Louvain, obtaining a PhD in 1972. On the other hand, Pantaleon Iroegbu and Innocent Maduakolam Osuagwu as well as other astute philosophers like Jude Uwalaka, Josephat Obi Oguejofor and Godfery Igwebuike Onah were students of Okere and by implication they were linked to Okere in matters of scholarly appreciation. The researcher is privileged to have been tutored and mentored by Pantaleon Osonduagwu Iroegbu, Innocent Maduakolam Osuagwu and Jude Uwalaka in his undergraduate days as a philosophy student in Seat

of Wisdom Seminary, Owerri (the brainchild of Okere as the first rector) as well as the postgraduate student (masters and doctorate) of Josephat Obi Oguejiofor at Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Incidentally, J. Obi Oguejiofor helped as the second internal reader to supervise his doctoral dissertation on *Being as Belongingness: A Hermeneutic Investigation in African Metaphysics*. The beautiful thing here is that it seems that we all drank from the right academic source in different degrees and relevance, sharing in the wisdom of the masters with their *Midas* touch on African philosophy coming to be, as it is today, as a discipline of its own sharing too in the world philosophical heritage.

African Philosophy in this contemporary era was of the masters' great concern. Okere was very positive and premier with his seminal thesis: *Can there be African Philosophy-A Hermeneutical Inquiry into the Conditions of its Possibility*. This seminal work gave rise to his *magnusopus* published in 1983 titled *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation into the Conditions for its Possibility*. Iroegbu in his later works delved into teaching and producing texts on African philosophy. This work, therefore, looks at Philosophy and African Philosophy in general with a proper appreciation within the context of African Philosophical Tradition. Later, there will be discussions on the personalities of Okere (and x-raying his work on *Uwa*) and Iroegbu (showing his grounds on *Uwa* and belongingness). At the end, the influence of Okere on Iroegbu will be laid bare.

Theophilus Ibegbulam Okere and His Philosophical Excursus

Monsignor Theophilus Okere (1940-2020) was ordained a priest of the then diocese of Owerri in 1962. The same year, he proceeded to Ireland where he read for a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English at the University College, Dublin, graduating with honours in 1965. He then studied Philosophy at the prestigious Catholic University of Louvain, obtaining a PhD in Philosophy in 1972 as the first Nigerian to do so. His doctoral dissertation (PhD), *Can there be an African philosophy: A Hermeneutical Inquiry into the Condition of its Possibility* was original. It set a good stage for later researches in the areas of African philosophy, having demonstrated definitely and definitively that philosophy, any philosophy and therefore African Philosophy, can be itself, only as a hermeneutics or interpretation of its culture. And since his own culture is rooted Igbo worldview, the logic of his thesis has placed him as one of the foremost Igbo thinkers. His commitment to and familiarity with Igbo culture manifest in his conversations, writings, lectures and sermons to the extent that he has once been dubbed “an unrepentant native”. Monsignor Okere taught philosophy at Bigard Seminary (1972 – 1976), St. Joseph's Major Seminary as Rector 1981 – 1984, and Jesuit St. Joseph's University Philadelphia 1994 – 1999. It is his long stay in the seminary system that has made him pre-eminent as the spiritual and intellectual father of more than half of the priests serving today in Igbo land. Hundreds of these men adoringly greet him with “*Okere wu Agbara*” (Okere is Deity) as a tribute to what they perceive as his versatility and his encyclopaedic wealth of knowledge. Monsignor Okere has served the Church in various capacities including a tenure as Consultor to the

Vatican Dicastery at the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with non-believers. Back home, he is the first President of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria and has written books and articles, lecture and homilies; over 200 titles to his credit. He is a laureate of the two prestigious lecture series in Igbo land; Odenigbo (1997) and Ahiajoku (2007) both of which he delivered in Igbo Language.

Oguejiofor J. Obi in his *Editorial Notes* to the *magnum corpus* on Theophilus Okere titled *Okere in His Own Words: The Hermeneutics of Culture, Religion and Society, the Literary Legacy of Monsignor Professor Theophilus Okere Vol. II* writes, Monsignor Theophilus Okere is no doubt one of the most prominent philosophers and theologian that our clime has produced in the past fifty years. Okere became a shining light after defending his doctoral thesis at the Catholic University of Louvain in the early seventies. The main point of that famous thesis is that it stressed the fact that philosophy is hermeneutics, and that African philosophy should be the aggregate of the outcome of the hermeneutical process within the African context. This position has since become one of the most discussed themes in Contemporary African philosophy and Africana philosophy. Maduakolam I. Osuagwu in his *Philosophy of Non-philosophy: Okere's Trilogy on African Philosophy* chaptered in the work of Oguejiofor J. Obi and Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, eds. *Africa Philosophy and the Hermeneutics of Culture, Essays in Honour of Theophilus Okere*, writes: Okere is a repository of, a phenomenal compendium of knowledge, an *obaako* to say it in Igbo, and to put it another way in French, a *doyen* of the disciplines. We can justifiably call him an oracle thundering 'clear and distinct ideas, with melodious and admirable voice of authority that commands profound respect and assent, anywhere, any time. Since early in the 1970s, Okere initiated many of us into the intricacies of philosophy. (Oguejiofor & Onah, 2005).

Review of Okere's *Magnus Corpus*

Okere's 1971 dissertation was titled: *Can there be African Philosophy-A Hermeneutical Inquiry into the Conditions of its Possibility*. This germinal work gave rise to his *Magnus Corpus* published in 1983 titled *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation into the Conditions for its Possibility*. Okere adopted an interpretative approach of all realities within African world-view. It was an approach of a methodological moment with hermeneutics. Okere's work set the stage for later researches in African and Africana Philosophy having definitely demonstrated that any philosophy, and in particular African philosophy, can itself be hermeneutics of its culture and realities. His work demonstrated priceless scholarship of relationship between philosophy, culture and hermeneutics. For Okere, beyond the way of life, culture which is against natural dispositions and givens, is a man's creative output that touches every aspects of human activities as a sociocultural animal.

Philosophy or African Philosophy as Interpretation of Cultural Weltanschauung

Philosophy, as love of wisdom or habit of the intellect and will, dwells more on the world-view of the people especially the culture of the people. Philosophy is wondering on the reality and the world-

view of the people in question. Omoregbe (in Boudorin, 1985) asserts that “human experience is the source of the reflective activity known as philosophy” (p. 1). It is by this singular human exercise of interpreting realities and reflecting on the peoples' world-views and symbolic cultures that one attains the level of wondering for the love of wisdom which is *philosophia*, and of course as the habit of the intellect and will. Hence, Paul Riceouer (in Okere, 1983) asserts: “one can philosophize from culture, or at least from those elements of culture that can be called symbols” (p.18). Okere (1983) buttressing further remarks that “symbols are pregnant with meaning...philosophical discourse is, therefore, a hermeneutical development of the symbols, these enigmas which precede and nourish it” (p.18). Continuing, Okere (1983) writes:

We assert, however, that in black Africa there exists a reservoir of cultural *philosophemes* from which any future philosopher can inspire himself or borrow his share of philosophical raw material. In such a culture a philosopher can plant his roots and from inside it, and as forming part of it, develop a philosophy with his culture as non-philosophical background (p. 120).

This is Okere's significant and profound submission that has made it possible for African Philosophy to worth the salt as an independent and unique philosophy like other philosophies. Onebunne (2019a) rightly affirms that many African literatures gave credence to Okere's work on African Philosophy as an *avanteguard* in the application of hermeneutics of culture as philosophizing *per excellence*. Oguejifor & Onah (eds) (2005) interpreting Okere further writes “taking inspiration from some European hermeneutic philosophers, Okere argues that philosophy, every philosophy, is essentially hermeneutics of culture (in the fullest meaning of the term culture)” (p. x). Furthermore, Okere (1983) asserts greatly of the possibility of African philosophy and its ultimate source thus:

But designating what is, African Philosophy needs some criteria. Philosophy is a unique cultural form and, despite affinities, is not to be confused with other forms such as myth, Weltanschauung and religion. But it grows out of a cultural background and depends on it (p. I).

On African Concept of Being

Philosophical excursus is a product of critical inquiry on cultural symbolism; that is, a kind of reflection on the symbols of culture, amidst implications it embodies. Philosophy *ipso facto*, as a human enterprise, is a reflection on symbols than signs which are pregnant with sensible intuitions and meanings. However, the unique relationship of culture to philosophy is explained in the natural constitution and traditional understanding of man as *animalculturalis* and *homocogitans*. African cultures being symbolically structured are laden with vital and significant meaning. Hence, a critical reflection on these symbols trying to make the inherent and underlying meanings open and explicit would give credence to what constitutes African Philosophy.

African Philosophy is *scientia rerum per ultima causas* within African realities. Therefore, form

onset, African Philosophy has been a discipline and a movement. It was more of a movement as it tries to reclaim its position as a discipline within the world philosophical heritage. Hence, as a discipline, African Philosophy is a critical cursory look into the inherent problematiqués and prospects of Africa as part of the world philosophical heritage. As a movement, African Philosophy searched for the authentic knowledge that is philosophy and African. However, such profundity in the critical appreciation of African cultural world-views make of them, veritable moments for African philosophy. With the methodological moment of proper hermeneutics, one can dependably and realistically infer that African philosophy is philosophy with African source and is nourished from African culture as its cultural reservoir and primary critical nourishment. Okere (1983) was the *primus inter pares* in asserting authoritatively that culture is the foundation of philosophy by hermeneutically engaging Paul Ricoeur extensively on the existing relationship between culture and philosophy writes thus:

It is by interpreting the symbols of a culture that one can arrive at reflexion, philosophy. Ricoeur defines reflexion as the connection between the comprehension of signs or symbols and self-comprehension. Reflexion is the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be across the works which bear witness to this effort and this desire. It is the incorporating of our new understanding of our culture into our own self-understanding. After these preliminary definitions, here is how the author conceives his strategy. In a methodical process from culture to philosophy, the movement from symbols to reflective thought, Ricoeur proposes three stages, or levels of interpretation: the phenomenological stage...the hermeneutical stage... and the reflexive stage... Thus for Ricoeur, one can philosophise from culture, or at least from those elements of culture that can be called symbols. Symbols are pregnant with meaning... There is no symbol which cannot become reflexion or comprehension through an interpretation. (p.58-79).

African Philosophy, therefore, has a share in the mainstream of philosophical traditions growing as a human enterprise as a result of critical interpretation of tradition and cultural realities. Okere (1983), however, asserts that “all philosophy is essentially an historical and time bound interpretation of being” (p.38). Amidst all sorts of bizarre and false ideas on the capability of African man to philosophize, questioning the depth of their philosophy, one can boast of African philosophical scholarship as well as African authorship.

Okere (1983), however, was very apt in trying to appreciate the concept of being within his translational conditions for the possibility of African Philosophy thus: “as the Welmers put it, “English 'be' corresponds to three quite different Igbo verbs in the sentences – 'It is a pot' (identification); 'He is here' (location and specifically for inanimate beings) and 'It is not' (description). And in countless cases 'be' plus an adjective is expressed by a verb or a verb noun phrase in Igbo which has nothing to do with an equivalent of 'be' as such.” Thus far, Okere in his dogged search reiterates on the connectedness in the lingual and translational competencies that “as for the substantive, there is no connection between any of these Igbo verbs and the equivalent of *ens*

as substantive; the Igbo word *ihe* means “thing” as specifically inanimate and is never used for persons. Persons and things can never be brought under a common denomination in Igbo. Against this background, Ede (1985), in his seminal work *Towards Igbo Metaphysics*, using empirical method which is never a philosophical method of philosophizing was misled to translate being as *ife di*. Thus, the all-inclusive term of Being, *esse*, *sein*, *être* which seems to determine the very essence of philosophy would not be able to play the same identical role for the Igbo and seems not to be so relevant here”. Concluding Okere (1983) was able to summarize thus his findings on the exact conceptual word that fittingly translate Being in Igbo worldview for African philosophy thus:

If philosophy is to be auto-generated from a culture, if it is to represent an articulated self-expression of man within his culture, one has to look for a different metacategory, more pertinent to Igbo culture than Being. Perhaps the notion of life, perhaps even the Igbo conception of *uwa* (literally the world, but really englobing both the cosmos, nature, and destiny), could take over the role of Being. This need not imply that an Igbo cannot understand the notion of Being or a philosophy based on this notion. It means, however, that a philosophy original to this culture would not take its orientation from a concept so strange to it (Okere, 1983).

Pantaleon Osonduagwuike Iroegbu and His Philosophical Enterprise

Iroegbu (1951-2006), a student of Okere remains one of the greatest Contemporary African Philosophers of the twentieth century A.D. He is an Igbo of the South-Eastern Region, precisely from Umueze-Umunumo, Ehime Mbano, Imo State, Nigeria. Iroegbu had his primary education at St. Charles' Primary School Umunumo (1959-1965). Later, he gained admission into Immaculate Conception Seminary, Umuahia, Abia State, where he sat for and got his Ordinary Level (O'level) and Advanced Level (A' level) in General Certificate Examinations. He proceeded to Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu (1973-1980) for his Diploma in Philosophical Studies and Bachelor of Theology with resounding first class honours. Iroegbu having been ordained Catholic priest in 1980 was sent for further studies to the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. There, he bagged masters in Philosophy and Ecclesiastical Sciences with corresponding double doctorate degrees within an unprecedented time. However, his doctoral dissertations were titled: *Communalism: A Theory of Justice for Contemporary African Communities* (Philosophy) and *Theology and Community: Through Narrative Theology to an African Ecclesiology* (Theology). These works, exuding complete exercise in *afocentricism*, were upheld as original contributions to African philosophico-theological Studies. With his academic background deeply rooted in African realities (thoughts and culture) and as a very prolific writer, a sound academician with accolades of academic laurels, an avowed original thinker and novel theorist, Iroegbu while serving as a lecturer in Seat of Wisdom Seminary Owerri (an affiliate of Urbanian Universitas, Rome as well as Imo State University, Owerri) and later in Major Seminary of All Saints, Uhiele, Ekpoma (an Affiliate of University of Benin), developed and manifested his great interest in African Philosophy and African Studies when many of his contemporaries were pessimistically branding African Philosophy mere

cultural-philosophy, philosophical sagacity, nationalist ideological philosophy with all sorts of negative nomenclatures and approaches, doubting or probably negotiating on the possibility of African Philosophy.

However, Iroegbu was a student of Okere at St. Joseph's Major Seminary Ikot-Ekpene, Nigeria and later he went to same University where Okere was trained in Louvain. Iroegbu, nevertheless, has contributed immensely to African Philosophy by his astute critical engagement with African *Weltanschauung* and *philosophemena* in all his critical and ideological discourses knowing very well that for every philosophy to worth the salt, it ought to be relatively cultural, appropriately traditional and ethno-philosophically founded. Onebunne (2022) has a paper that reads: *The Ethno-Philosophical Foundation of Pantaleon Iroegbu's Uwa Ontology: A Hermeneutic Investigation* which reiterates that “the emergence of contemporary African metaphysicists, in the *chequered* history of African philosophy, allows for a coordinated attention to this age-long problem on the proper idea, apt understanding and fitting meaning of being in other philosophical traditions”.

Furthermore, alluding to this view, Iroegbu (1994) was vehemently bent on this general understanding of Philosophy as the global participation of all realities and entities in the general fact and understanding of *being as being* whether in African, Asian or Western Philosophy (p.122). Hence, his critical engagement reflecting his cultural milieu and continental world-view made him to propound few famous indigenous philosophical and theological theories as *Enwisdomization Theory, Hermeholiontic Theory* (for proving the existence of God). Among his other philosophical discourses that reflect ethno-philosophical coinages are: *Uwa Ontology, Belongingness* (as the African Metaphysics of *ToBe*), *Communalism: Kpim of Politics* and *Metaphysics: Kpim of Philosophy, The Kpim of Time: Eternity* with rigorous introduction of other philosophical neologisms into philosophical lexicon like *Umunna Ecclesiology, Ohacracy, Nkuziology, Omenalism, Afroxiology*, etc. The entire gamut of Iroegbu's rich intellectual tradition in philosophical enterprise or what one may refer to as Iroegbu's legendary literary legacy is not only African oriented but ethno-philosophically rooted and based, in line with what Theophilus Okere (an erudite scholar and one time teacher of Iroegbu) was very foremost to refer as *philosophemes* (that is a cultural reservoir of philosophical raw material within ones world-view, that is, deposit of conceptual data or realities for philosophical enterprise). Iroegbu, however, died in 2006 leaving behind many literal works of repute while trying to complete a work on Time titled: *African Concept of Time*.

Iroegbu's Uwa Ontology

African Philosophy, therefore, has a share in the mainstream of philosophical traditions growing as a human enterprise as a result of critical interpretation of tradition and cultural realities. Iroegbu borrowed heavily and completely in his appreciation of being from Okere's concept of being as *Uwa*.

His *uwa* ontology was simply an expansion and refreshing of Okere's *proto* idea. Okere (1983) asserts that “all philosophy is essentially an historical and time bound interpretation of being” (p. 38). Amidst all sorts of bizarre and false ideas on the capability of African man to philosophize, questioning the depth of their philosophy, one can boast of African philosophical scholarship as well as African authorship. However, Iroegbu (1994) an optimistic contemporary philosopher was very apt in defining African philosophy as: “the reflective inquiry into the marvels and problematics that confront one in African world, in view of producing systematic explanation and sustained responses to them. It is an inquiry with two aspects: *philosophical* and *African*” (p. 116).

Iroegbu was very *premier* in giving this succinct definition. In this definition one can read a *kind* of defence reaction as regards African philosophy. This is why for Iroegbu, African philosophy is a *philo-sophia*, a quest for African wisdom. However, Iroegbu was academically astute enough to reiterate that “African philosophy is philosophy done in an African context...the different aspects and complexities of existence that challenge him as an African person. In this respect, every philosophy is contextual philosophy”. For Iroegbu (1994), therefore, these philosophical concepts alone “are what we generally call the African philosophical *philosophemes*: raw materials for philosophical reflection, questioning, responses, analysis and eventual synthesis”. In this statement of fact, Iroegbu continue to echo his teacher Okere Theophilus who had earlier conceived the idea of *philosophemes* as deposit of conceptual data or realities for philosophical enterprise.

Iroegbu in his philosophical excursions posited his master's view of *uwa* now as *uwa* ontology and the *gini* and *kpim* of things? They were his attempt at explaining being and its mode of operation. Iroegbu has different connotations of being and concepts of *Uwa*. Iroegbu's concept of being is enshrined in his concept of *uwa*. The *uwa* has a direct and simple translative comprehension of world (English), *le monde* (French) and *Die Welt* (German). And to Iroegbu, *uwa* has a more comprehensive meaning than the English translation. This deeper meaning of the concept of *uwa* is summed-up in his connotations of *uwa*. The term, *uwa*, is not just a material but something much more than the physical world. Hence, Iroegbu posited some connotations of *uwa*, thus:

- *Uwa m* (Life existence): My world, meaning my life, my existence.
- *Uwa*: (Cosmos), English world.
- *Uwa di nta* (the world of hunters): field of action.
- *Uwambu ka mma* (Time and space) the old or ancient world is better than ours now)
- *Uwa-oma* (Destiny): Good-world, good destination.
- *Uwa-ojoo* (fate): Bad- world.
- *Uwaalighili* (Condition) a world of difficulties.
- *Uwaumuaka* (Age limit) children's world.
- *Uwaosisi, Mmiri na Kpakpando* (Nature) the world of trees, rivers and stars.

- *Ndiuwa, umuuwa* (persons) people, children of the world
- *Uwaanyi na ha mekoroihe* (Nation) The world (people) with whom we have dealings.
- *Uwa Igbo, Ala Igbo* (land) this *Ala* came to represent different connotations and identifications of realities in African Metaphysics.
- *Uwa*: Totality. This is the abstract, unqualified subject of all speech and prediction. *Uwa* in this totalitarian or universal sense is, as pointed out above, all englobing. It is the most universal concept in Igbo language and culture. Whatever is, in so far as it exists, is *uwa*, (Iroegbu, 1995).

Equally, Iroegbu had six zones of *uwa* and their relationships. Iroegbu had spatio-geographically divided the *uwa* into zones. We must know and maintain the singularity of *uwa* as a concept. From the concrete perspective, however, considering the other aspects of *uwa*, we have six zones: *uwaanyi*: cosmos; the Divine-world is the world of Supreme Being who is *Chukwu*, the great or High God; *ala* is the world of the powerful spirits (as well as *anyanwu, amadioha* etc) who govern the world. *Good-spirit world* is the spiritual area where the (beings) spirits of the dead dwell and from where they operate. *Bad spirit world* is the abode of the inimical spirits of the dead. Here the living – dead, called ancestors (*ndiichie*), operate and care for their *Ancestral world*, families still living here in *uwaanyi*. These were ancestors who have graduated into spirits because of the loss of world probably due to act of their living members and concrete kith and kin relation with their families.

The central focus of operation of all these connotations of *uwa* and different zones is the cosmos, the *uwaanyi* in which we live and operate, has and fulfils the essence, nature of our being. And man is central in this operational relationship. Therefore, it is a form of anthropomorphism, man-centeredness, in his operation in the zonal and connotational forms of *uwa* showed their relationships. This relationship among the six worlds, we must assert, is dynamic. It is a process, fluid and often *unsystematized*. The meta-empirical geography of the zonal existence of the worlds has no fixed boundaries. They co-penetrate each other's world – zones.” In Iroegbu's *uwa* ontology, there is what he refers to as the *itemic* contents of *Uwa* and other relationships with other beings that exist. This form of relationship or confrontation is a dialogue in its dynamism. However, making analogy of this with a newly born baby, with his or her cry as the very first reaction at birth, Iroegbu, P. notes: “what confronts the baby is *uwa*. Its cry is thus directly a natural, mystical-romantic dialogue with that *uwa* in its crudity and amiableness with the new babe in its human world experience” (Iroegbu, 1995).

It is the synthesis of the connotations and zonal concepts of *uwa* that is well expressed more in the community-individuality of being and things in the world of existence of which *Uwa* ontology seeks to define properly. We must note that African community which necessitates African experience has different understanding of community-individuality form of relationship. This community-individual relationship is basic in finding the definitional matching concept of being as the community relationship is very fundamental. And the individual in a community is very

foundational. The relationship between them is very strong in African experience and African ontology. Hence, Iroegbu (1995) observes:

In the community to which I have been born, we have shared needs and expectations, one way, even if varied in details in various places, of religious beliefs and expression. We have shared customs and a solidarity of communal actions and interactions. Indubitably, I realize that that which dominates the entire life and world is not the individual just there, but the community, society or group to which he/she belongs (p. 346).

It is, therefore, a patently obvious truth that the community determines a lot of what life is, of what the individual makes of it, and the values that each individual adopts and realizes. The decisive factors of achievement are community-determined. To this effect, Iroegbu is seen gradually shifting from identifying being as solely *uwa* in African experience. This being or *uwa* is not to be understood in a general sense without reclining to something still to this effect, we have come to the fundamental fact of this reality known as belongingness. The community, undoubtedly, determines a lot about living and existence. In African experience and ontology, the community gives the individual his existence and meaning to such existence. J.S. Mbiti has classically proverbialized this community-determined role of a person in the popular cultural statement of *I am because we are*. And because *we are*, therefore *I am*.

This statement is filled with meaning. It seems to sky-rocket the problem of African communalism with regard to the definition of freedom as regards communal identity and representation. The question is where are the *I* and *we* in African ontology? Through belongingness the *I* is clearly located in the *we*. Belongingness makes this possible. However, in the principles of African communalism, the human being has a place in the community without losing its place to the common representation. This is to say that the *I* and *we* have a place in the other without losing their identity of belonging. By belonging, a being maintains its individual *I* and communal identity *we*. Belonging as such, becomes an identification and characteristics of this being.

Being as *Uwa* in Belongingness

Having gone this far, belongingness remains a word with hidden and loaded meaning in African metaphysics and communalism. Belongingness in its nuances of meaning is thereof: *be-on*, *be-ongoing*, *be-long* and *be-longing*. For Iroegbu, there is always a starting point passage from an *off-from* being, to an *on-in*, inside, being (be-on). Continuing, he reiterates that this being that is realized by being *put-on* into existence is meant for ongoingness (be-ongoing). These analytic contents of belongingness reveal the inner significance of being as essentially referential. Equally, these analytic nuances are realized in the African languages, African traditions and African cultural values. Definitely, Iroegbu (1995) writes that belongingness is the synthesis of the reality and experience of belonging. Any act of a thing belonging to something often shows a possession. It is a kind of participation. This is the belongingness of a being. It equally explains the participation of a

being in a community of beings and in relation to reality (world, *uwa*). For Iroegbu (1995), “belongingness comes out to be the *kpim* of *uwa*” (p. 382). Continuing, Iroegbu, maintains, “belongingness comes from the verb, to belong, meaning to be part of, member of, in the group of... Thus my belongingness is a substantive that summarizes all the things that I possess”(Iroegbu, 1995).

Belongingness is 'the reality of whatever is in so far as it is, being a part of, therefore belonging to reality (*uwa*). Belongingness, however, is simply derived from the basic understanding of reality. It has a character of identification with and within a community. And in such societal disposition, belongingness finds a powerful basis and sustenance. All these are seen in the developmental structures of African communalism. As Iroegbu reiterates, belongingness implies the basic commonness that makes a given African community as such, (Onebunne, 2019a).

For Iroegbu, belongingness constitutes the most important mode in which being expresses itself. Although he holds that “belongingness” is an abstract term, an ontological one that specifies that a thing is, because it belongs, he articulates the idea of belongingness within the context of the theory of communalism. To belong for Iroegbu, is to belong to the basic community after the traditional Igbo model of *umunna* (kindred), (Onebunne, 2019a). Hence, the specific articulation and understanding of belongingness embodies various definitions and meanings: conceptual, psychological, existential and physiological. And, what should be noted here is that communalism makes belongingness an indispensable conceptual starting point. Belongingness, according to Iroegbu (1995), therefore, is the synthesis of realities seen in the statement of *to be is to belong. To belong is to be*. More so, Iroegbu (1995) confirms, “our natural expression of belongingness is the term *umunna*. Literary, *umunna* means children of one father. The sense of *umunna* transcends the nuclear family ... in another sense, a people with the same political arrangement is a political *umunna*” (p. 376). *Umunna*, however, is the synthesis of the connotations as well as the zonal concepts of *Uwa* that is well expressed more in the community-individuality of being and things in the world of existence of which *uwa* ontology seeks to define properly. We must note that African community which necessitates African experience has different understanding of community-individuality form of relationship. This community-individual relationship is basic in finding the definitional matching concept of being as the community relationship. And the individual in a community is very foundational as the relationship between them is very strong in African experience and African ontology. Nevertheless, Iroegbu (1995) observes:

In the community to which I have been born, we have shared needs and expectations, one way, even if varied in details in various places, of religious beliefs and expression. We have shared customs and a solidarity of communal actions and interactions. Indubitably, I realize that that which dominates the entire life and world is not the individual just there, but the community, society or group to which he/she belongs (p. 345).

It is, therefore, a patently obvious truth that the community determines a lot of what life is, of what the individual makes of it, and the values that each individual adopts and realizes. The decisive factors of achievement are community-determined. To this effect, Iroegbu is seen gradually shifting from identifying being as solely *uwa* in African experience. This being or *uwa* is not to be understood in a general sense without reclining to something still to this effect, we have come to the fundamental fact of this reality known as belongingness. The community, undoubtedly, determines a lot about living and existence. In African experience and ontology, the community gives the individual his existence and meaning to such existence. John S. Mbiti has classically proverbialized this community-determined role of a person in the popular cultural statement of *I am because we are*. And because *we are*, therefore *I am*.

Iroegbu fundamentally asserts that that being, however, belongs. Belongingness, for Iroegbu, then becomes an “arrangement of the fundamental structure of society (laws, duties, privileges, positions, jobs, offices, advantages and incumbents of the community), such that it incarnates and manifests the commonness of origin, of history and of general destiny of all the members of the community. Belongingness, therefore, is *umunna* concretized. Commenting on this, Abanuka says: Iroegbu sees belongingness as constituting the most important mode in which being expresses itself. Although he holds that “belongingness is an abstract term, an ontological one that specifies that a thing is, because it belongs”, he articulates the idea of belongingness within the context of the problematic idea of communalism, (Abanuka, 2011).

Iroegbu, in developing this fundamental character of being in belongingness, initially defines belongingness as a definitive principle of African communalism. He used belongingness in a technical sense. It is, thus, for Iroegbu, a principle of membership applied to a given community. By this expression, belongingness implies the basic commonness that makes a community a community and, in our context, what makes a given African community as such. Iroegbu shows that communalism makes belongingness an indispensable conceptual starting point for communal existence. According to him, one native expression of belongingness is the term, *umunna*. In this sense, *umunna*, as a basic community, transcends the nuclear family to mean, by extension, people of common lineage as well as commonness of origin. Belonging, however, is the human need to be an accepted member of a group. Abraham Maslow suggested that the need to belong was a major source of human motivation. And since *no man is an island*, the need to belong to and with one another becomes a basic demand for man's existence and co-existence. This will take us to Iroegbu's popular usage of an Igbo expression of the real ideal synthesis of community-individuality in the old but famous proverb: “*egbebere, ugoberere, nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya*. (Let the Kite perch, let the Eagle perch, if one says that the other should not perch, let that one's wings break.)”

We must acknowledge that this proverb is primarily a principle of justice. Nevertheless, Iroegbu's

analysis of this proverb points to the fact of belongingness that entails not only being but a fundamental relational activity as well. *Bere* (perching) here connotes being as a way of belonging. Therefore, in African communal ontological existence, the *egbe* and *ugo*, represent different individuals and the act of perching that presupposes a locus of operation, forming a relationship that fundamentally starts with belonging as perching. This is a form of contact with the other as well as a contact that spells belonging. The concept of contact is a backdrop of a person's realization of his belonging as a being immersed in one's community. This is summarized in the saying, *I am because we are*, that is, ubuntu. This is a communitarian view that places being on belongingness. Iroegbu re-establishes his stand on belongingness with his writing on the political significance of belongingness thus: "belongingness holds that our existence as human beings as well as our integral participation in the society in which we find ourselves are to be defined by our being given sense and substance of belonging. There should be solidarity of belonging and a belonging of solidarity in the way and manner in which we are to live and relate to one another as fellow citizens of the world. This sense of belonging or belongingness has two basic aspects: Being tuned-on...Being 'on-going'... Thus, if we belong, we are. If we don't belong, then we are not".

Okere's Influence Beyond Iroegbu

Placide Tempels' work, *Bantu Philosophy*, initiated the great giant limp unto the reality of what we have today as African Philosophy. The theme of Okere's dissertation was timely as people were dreaming of philosophy that is African and many who tried to dream of it were doubtfully unsure. Okere's 1971 seminal work: *Can there be an African philosophy: A Hermeneutical inquiry into the condition of its possibility* which was later published 1983 as: *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation into the Conditions for its Possibility* assures scholars of good prospects for African philosophy and qualifies him as the father of Contemporary African Philosophy as such. Okere's influence in African Philosophy remains top-notch. It's noteworthy that, in the heat of the debate on the to-be or not to-be of African philosophy, Okere by his dissertation and *magnum corpus* maintains that African philosophy is very much possible and that its methodology is hermeneutics. Oguejiofor & Onah (2005) were able to describe the whole saga of existence and non-existence of African Philosophy with Okere's seminal intervention thus:

Theophilus Okere first added his voice to the debate on African Philosophy in 1971 with a doctoral dissertation he defended at the Catholic University of Louvain (an extract was published in 1983). He immediately caught the attention of others because he pointed a new direction in the discussion. In addition to tackling the question of the foundations of method in African philosophy, he also brought to the fore, for the first time, the relevance of hermeneutics "to the founding of tradition of rational philosophy in Africa". Okere is thus recognized as the initiator of the hermeneutical orientation in African philosophy (p. x).

Every philosophy is, in line with Okere, hermeneutics of culture. There is philosophy, therefore, for

every people with culture, every people with a way of life. Equally, humanity as cultural animal is very disposed for philosophical innuendoes. Unless they don't think nor thinker on their culture and cultural dispositions. This is why the issue of philosophical labels (Western or African, Christian or Regional) often particularizes philosophy than universalizes it. However, Philosophy *qua tale* remains and shares in world philosophical heritage as love of wisdom and habit of the intellect in spite of any label. African philosophy is beyond any particularism or mere label. It remains the love of African wisdom, *Africana philosophia*. Okere's appreciation of philosophy as *hermeneutics of culture* influenced many philosophers in favour of African philosophy. Most salient of his philosophical jargons that were very influential were *philosophemes* and *uwa*. *Uwa* for Okere is the nearest in conceptual understanding, translational limits and lexical appreciation of the notion of being in Igbo culture. This lengthy extract from Okere's (1983) seminal work suffices better:

Looked at this way, the problem of philosophy has an interesting feature, from the point of view of Igbo culture. The notion of Being which has been used as a decisive concept in the Western understanding of ontology and philosophy, would, on close examination, not seem to play the same role in the Igbo conception. Thus, there is no Igbo equivalent to the Indo-European verb *to be*, nor a possibility of the convertibility from verb to substantive of the type *esse/ens*. There are three possibilities in Igbo: *wu* or *bu*: indicates identity; *di*: indicates a quality or a state, it also indicates location for an inanimate object; *no*: indicates location for animates... As for the substantive, there is no connection between any of these Igbo verbs and the equivalent of *ens* as substantive; the Igbo word *ihe* means *thing* as specifically inanimate and is never used for persons. Persons and things can never be brought under a common denomination in Igbo. Thus, the all-inclusive term of Being, *esse*, *sein*, *être* which seems to determine the very essence of philosophy would not be able to play the same identical role for the Igbo and seems not to be so relevant here. If philosophy is to be auto-generated from a culture, if it is to represent an articulated self-expression of man within his culture, one has to look for a different metacategory, more pertinent to Igbo culture than Being. Perhaps the notion of life, perhaps even the Igbo conception of *uwa* (literally the world, but really englobing both the cosmos, nature, and destiny), could take over the role of Being. This need not imply that an Igbo cannot understand the notion of Being or a philosophy based on this notion. It means, however, that a philosophy original to this culture would not take its orientation from a concept so strange to it (p. 70).

Iroegbu (1995) borrowing from Okere maintains that:

my perception of reality in its different aspects is synthesized in my perception of *uwa*. *Uwa* defines being. It summarizes being and beings for me. It englobes all beings in the bosom of *uwa*-being. *Uwa* ontology thus is the way I envision the questioning of, and the responding to, the problematic which whatever is, confronts me with particularly and universally. Whatever is, in so far as it is, is *uwa*. *Uwa* is reality and reality is *uwa* (p. 338).

Next to the philosophical jargon of *uwa* is *philosophemes*. And Okere (1983) writes:

We assert, however, that in black Africa there exists a reservoir of cultural *philosophemes* from which any future philosopher can inspire himself or borrow his share of philosophical raw material. In such a culture a philosopher can plant his roots and from inside it, and as forming part of it, develop a philosophy with his culture as non-philosophical background (p.78).

Equally, Iroegbu (1994) was vehement in opting that there are ten areas (as geo-environmental, socio-cultural, epistemic, mythico-religious, political-moral, historic, ethnic-linguistic, existential, phenomenologico-pragmatic, the ontological) that “are what we generally call the African philosophical *philosophemena*: raw materials for philosophical reflection, questioning, responses, analysis and eventual synthesis” (p. 122).

Therefore, Okere having proposed *uwa* as his translation of being or reality as such remains the first and definitely influenced his student Iroegbu in the same later proposal of *uwa* as the proper and functional translation of being. Nevertheless, Iroegbugave *uwa* a wider explanation and as well showed the implications of *uwa* in ontology. More so, Okerewas equally the premier in the conceptual proposal of cultural *philosophemes* as philosophical raw materials and Iroegbu seconded him historically within the bounds of time to as well propose *philosophemena* as raw materials for philosophical *excursus*. These critical issues having been handled first by Okere (teacher) with his seminal publication in 1983 and secondly, by Iroegbu (student) with his publication in 1995, it is very pertinent to allude and succinct to conclude that Okere greatly influenced Iroegbu in the formation of many of his philosophical lexicons especially the lexical concepts of *uwa* and *philosophemena*.

Conclusion

Ogwejifor and Onah (2005) in their *Introduction to African Philosophy and the Hermeneutics of Culture: Essays in Honour of Theophilus Okere* aptly reminded us that Okere has inspired many scholars especially in the area of African Philosophy. For them Okere remains such a historically significant figure “of a man who has had such a profound influence on so many of us.” Consequently, there is this tapestry of the profundity of Okere's special academic influence on Iroegbu which remains very enormous and enduring. Okere simply influenced Iroegbu in his philosophical *excursus* right from his days as an undergraduate. Okere being the master cannot but influence his student Iroegbu. However, beyond the normal master-student influential relationship, there is this concrete influence Okere had on Iroegbu on the conceptual formation and appreciation of *uwa* as being. Hence, in the *Foreword* to Iroegbu's seminal work: *Metaphysics: Kpim of Philosophy*, Dr. Raph Madu writes thus, “here, he (Iroegbu) tries to concretise and develop the view held by some Igbo philosophers like T. Okere, that the Igbo term *uwa*, meaning literally, the world, can replace the classical philosophically all-inclusive term BEING in any serious Igbo Ontology (p. vii)”. It's a truism and a very enduring significant fact that Okere's *uwa* had an interesting and lasting influence on Iroegbu's *uwa ontology*. More so, any serious African Philosophy that is deep rooted in

appreciable interpretation of African Weltanschauung owe much to Okere's premier intervention with his seminal work: *Can there be African Philosophy-A Hermeneutical Inquiry into the Conditions of its Possibility*. Okere was very astute and magisterially offered to the academe this priceless gift that philosophy is all about *hermeneutics of culture*. Hence, philosophies and philosophers within the ambience of the englobing philosophical traditions owe much to Okere. However, Okere's expansive academic influences have saved African philosophy from centuries of relegation and disregard as non-philosophy amidst derogatory name on ethno-philosophy or cultural philosophy, to mention a few. Onebunne (2022) summarily maintains in his abstract for. The *Ethno-Philosophical Foundation of Pantaleon Iroegbu's Uwa Ontology: A Hermeneutic Investigation* that:

The concept of *Uwa* for Iroegbu, deeply rooted in his sociocultural milieu and ingrained in the Igbo-African weltanschauung, rightly expresses being as holistic reality. Using the method of hermeneutics, this paper tries to locate and situate *Uwa* ontology as a metaphysical offshoot sprouting from an ethno-philosophical foundation and background. *Uwa* ontology, deeply rooted and reflected in Theophilus Okere's philosophemes, therefore, is Pantaleon Iroegbu's attempt at universalizing the concept of being both in its Africanity and philosophicality.

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