



The Centre of Igbo Ontological order through the Philosophical Analysis of the Past and Present Experiences of the Igbo Man in his Universe

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Abstract— *The notion of man is at the center of all human problems. Obviously, every philosophy, every religion, every culture, has to take up some position here because, all has a notion particular to them with regards to the notion of man. Thus, we shall in this work, bring out the Igbo notion of the human person—the most paradoxical of all realities. The foremost significance of this work is to respond to the need of a more documented idea on the concept of man as the centre of Igbo Ontological order through the philosophical analysis of the past and present experiences of the Igbo man in his universe; and by all means contribute to knowledge and scholarship by provoking more serious thought on this subject and serving as a meaningful point of reference for anyone who wishes to carry out further researches on the subject. Using the evaluative, analytic, historical and critical research methods, this research work advances the thesis that in Igbo world-view man is conceived as the centre of Igbo Ontological order.*

Keywords— *Man, Ontological order, Eschatology, Union of body and soul, Communalistic notion of man.*

I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Due to the limitation in written literatures which investigates the Igbo understanding of man, there has come to be variations in the Igbo conception of the reality of man considering the complexity of man's earthly existence and what becomes of him at the moment his earthly dwelling is terminated. Thus this research work aims at solving this problem through investigating into the authentic Igbo notion of man from the perspective of the Igbo ontological order.

II. THE IGBO NOTION OF MAN

It was Mouroux who avers that man is “a being who is simultaneously spirit and body, closed and open, existent and yet to be achieved; or if you prefer it, the paradox of a

being in a state of tension between the two principles of his composition, between himself and his fellows, between himself and his God.”¹

In this wake of thought, human being is referred to as ‘Mmadu’ in Igbo cultural milieu. This nomenclature makes no particular reference to sex, thus is a unisex word generally conceived by all. As a diptote (i.e a noun with only two cases), the meaning of this word is very interesting in its etymological perspective. While some argue that it is literally pronounced ‘Mma-du’ translating to ‘let there be goodness’ or better still, ‘let goodness be’ (Mma-Goodness; Du-to be),² most others believe that it is etymologically pronounced—‘Mma-Ndu’ translating to ‘the Beauty of Life’ (Mma-Beauty; Ndu-Life). Following this latter understanding, the word ‘Mmadu’ stands to

signify the aesthetical apex of all created things; put the other way, the apogee of God's creation.

It is on this understanding that we base the theme of this research, having in mind that life is sacred and divine to the Igbo; thus, man being the beauty of life, makes him the highest amongst all things and beings in creation. Small wonder Shakespeare puts these descriptions of man on the lips of Hamlet thus: "...a piece of work, that is noble in reason, infinite in faculties, in form and moving, express and admirable, in action like an Angel, in apprehension like a god, lies beauty of the world, the paragon of animal[s]."³

III. THEORETICAL REVIEW OF MAN IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

Invariably, it was very obvious from the philosophical history that the very question 'what man is' is contemporaneous with the Greek civilisation and thoughts. Not withstanding, the early Greek thinkers characteristically turned their focus primarily to unraveling the origin or the causes of the material universe. Admittedly, the issue of the nature of man is intertwined with the problem of the universe in as much as man is considered as part or constituent of nature. It can be said without any equivocation that the study of man in a particular and exclusive form started with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Nevertheless, Descartes in his *Meditations of First Philosophy* actually is the one who can be considered as the rightly known philosopher of modernity that more intensely and strongly raised the question of man with his soul-searching query: "What then have I previously believed myself to be? Clearly I believed that I was a man."⁴

More so, the issue of man is not new to Western philosophers. The obvious negative contribution from this question of man is that it divided the West and the entire philosophic traditions into various warring groups and as such compounding the problem in question. As regards the issue of the essence of man, that is the intrinsic nature or indispensable quality of man, the philosophers of the West are classified into three categories. Those in the first category considered man as essentially 'all soul', that is that man is a rational being. Plato, Aristotle and Augustine are among the proponents of this. The second group held that man is 'all body'. Following this view, man unwillingly lost his metaphysical status and definition and thus became a mere material, not more than the rest of material bodies or entities. The proponents of this theory include the ancient Atomists, Hobbes, Lucretius, the eighteenth and nineteenth century materialistic philosophers like Feuerbach, Holbach and others. The last but not the least

are those who propounded that man is a constituent of body and soul. Thus, for proponents of this category, man is unity of some sort. The Thomistic-Aristotelian school and Kierkegaard are regarded as major propounders of this idea.

Western philosophers, on the one hand conceived man as a paradox as regards the complexity of man's operations. Consequently, this gave rise to various other aspects of man. Hence, man is variously viewed as a religious being, a political animal, an economic being, a language using animal. Little wonder Ernst Cassirer emphasizes on man's characteristics as he succinctly puts that, "he sings, makes tools, creates languages, art, and lives in a symbolic universe where language, myth, and religion are part of this universe."⁵ On the other hand, it is an irresistible fact that the issue or the question of man is commanding much more attention from the Igbo philosophical scholars in the recent times. This in turn has equally divided Igbo philosophers into various warring groups. Obviously, it is no surprise to witness such in a new discipline like Igbo Philosophy just as it was the case in all known philosophical traditions of the human world.

What is very conspicuous about the Igbo conception of the essence of man is the fact that it is markedly distinct from the Western conception of man or the self. The Igbo Ontology provides entirely a new sense of man which in no small measure satisfied to our understanding, the need of man in the Contemporary world with particular reference to creating a community of persons. Outside the consideration of man as a rational being, the Igbo conceives man not as egocentric, a lone-range or an individualistic being, but meaningfully as a 'community being' (a being-with-others). In this case man realises his humanity in the community of persons. Thus, Onwuatuogwu quoting Uchendu writes:

Community spirit is very strong among the Igbo. Almost from the first day, the individual is aware of his dependence on his kin and his community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group to which he owes so much. He seldom, if ever, becomes really detached from the group whenever he may [leave].⁶

The Igbo therefore, see the community as an organism. An organism has different parts and each and every one of the constituent parts is very essential to the organism in question. This is because, with any of the parts lacking, the organism would not be complete or perfect anymore. In Igbo community, no individual is taken for granted, but is seen as part and parcel of the community.⁷ Little wonder

an Igbo sees himself or herself in others; hence everyone within the community is everyone's 'nwanne' or 'nwanna' (brother or sister). Moreover, in the first instance, every person is valued for his or her own sake and not for material purpose or what will be gained (utilitarian motives). For instance, the Igbo people answer such name like, 'Mmadu ka aku' (he who has relations is richer than he who has wealth). This means that money is not the original meaning of wealth for the Igbo. Rather, wealth is conceptualized in terms of parents, children, brothers, sisters and relations.⁸ Meanwhile, a childless man, an orphan and a man without relatives are all considered poor. On the contrary, one with children, parents, brothers and sisters or relations is counted a rich man. Abjectness of life is not considered from monetary point of view by a true Igbo. Nevertheless, the condition of having no children, parents, brothers and sisters, relations and friends is what the Igbo regard as being or living in abject poverty. It is therefore; simply easy to comprehend why a traditional Igbo man desirously prefer human wealth to monetary wealth.⁹

Nevertheless, both the old and the young, male and female, rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy, are all human beings and hence important in Igbo community. This idea finds inspiration in the proverbial expression—'onye nzuu mara mma iji kwuo ugwo ozu mana obu mgbe ajubalu, osi na ama onye?' (An insane person fits to be exchanged with for a dead person; but this becomes a problem once his lineal identity is enquired). The aged and the sick are shown by people around them that they are still being valued and needed. The idea of invalidity or liability of a human person is foreign to the Igbo.¹⁰ For the Igbo, 'enwe si na ya anaghi atufu ma oreghiere' (a monkey does not cast its young until it begins to decay). Everybody is, therefore considered valuable. The aged for instance, when they are no longer good at every other work, are at least still very good at praying for the youths, the members of the family, their villagers and even the general public. The Igbo call this 'igo ofo'¹¹ which counts in the Igbo communal system of living, of which we are to look at.

Igbo communalism is by way of definition, a system or situation where everyone belongs, is valued, needed, counts, is associated with and as well as protected. It is a situation where every single person within the community is recognized even though there may be hierarchy in the recognition accorded to each person according to a person's function. Igbo communalism implies a community with communion as against Western communism.¹² Onwuatuegwu quoting Ozumba writes: "Communalism remains the African style of governance. A system which abhors any contact with a capitalist and individualist dimensions of the West. It is entirely an

African way of life."¹³ In addition to his position, Ozumba further avers that, "what the label communalism tends to place in the minds of Africans is nothing but the idea of common spirit, a collective spirit of being together, harmoniously working for the benefit of all in the whole of Africa. Communalism therefore, is a kind of social relationship that defines one's apprehension of another in a defined community."¹⁴

To this end, the spirit that moves and sustains an Igbo man in his existential situation and possible circumstances is the spirit of belongingness and togetherness or communion. Even in religious tendency towards the world beyond, the energy that keeps him on towards the good moral life is the possible hope of the en-gathered-ness of the saints in the ancestral community. Thus Pantaleon Iroegbu writes: "...the individual is individual-in-community, not outside it, yet he is not a helpless victim or communal constraints. His adherence to the community is constructive not passive and blind."¹⁵

What is more, that the Igbo Ontology is communalistic does not necessarily imply that certain social anomalies such as tribalistic tendency or bias towards or against other people on the basis of tribal affiliation or cultural background is completely vanquished in public life. Hence, Prof. C. B. Okolo noted that Tribalism "is a stage of weakness in the evolutionary growth of a people."¹⁶ It is the condition of being human. The Contemporary Igbo man in his endeavours to achieve more progressive and developmental leaps, therefore, continues in his ceaseless efforts against tribalism as a societal decay. Thus, to borrow Nkuruma's own phrase, the struggle continues until the militating problem is completely solved.

This communalistic concept of man does not in any way imply that the individual is completely swallowed up in the anonymity of the cloud. Prof. C. B. Okolo timely cautioned against this gross misconception of the idea of man in Igbo-African Ontology. He warns thus: "even though individual human beings belong to a class, yet experience shows that they cling to their own individuality as marks of distinct selves which they cannot part with nor allow to be merged with others. To ignore this aspect of man or to treat it inadequately by any philosophic system would certainly constitute a weak spot in that system."¹⁷

Therefore, the self or man in Igbo Ontology is not entirely swallowed up in his relationship with others, though the individual cannot be conceived outside the context of the community.¹⁸ It must also be emphasized that in Igbo Ontology, man is not completely regarded as a mere object or thing as earlier mentioned. His place and role in nature, confers on him some dignity and sacredness. It must however be admitted that instances abound when

individuals are sacrificed to the gods or killed in tribal wars; or even as slaves. These instances are exceptions rather than the rule.¹⁹ This is quite radically differentiated from the modern man's present day understanding of man as individualistic and in which the good of the individual person is what matters.

IV. MAN AND ESCHATOLOGY IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

Apart from the above understanding of man as communalistic, a being in belonging-ness, man in Igbo world-view is imbued with a dual nature: 'Ahu' (body) and 'Mmuo' or 'Mkpuruobi' (soul).

4.1. Ahu (Body)

'Ahu' is the visible part of man which is perceptible to the senses. The Igbo take time to preserve the physical body. The aim is to ensure that the individual is not only healthy, but energetic, so that as he reaches adulthood, he will be able to contribute meaningfully to the development of the community. In their effort to preserve good health, the Igbo avail themselves of the services of the native doctors (ndi Dibia) for they are quite convinced that neglect of health leads to death; and death is the logical end to life in the present world. Consequently, they avoid any action that involves a breach of 'Omenala' (culture) or that which offends the divinities and the spirits; for such offence call down punishments consisting of sickness, hardships or even death.

To avoid these evils, they consult oracles to find out which divinities have been offended and what must be done to appease them. By and large, the Igbo have found through experiences that life in a community devoid of peace can be detrimental to health and mutual co-existence. They, therefore, try to cultivate cordial interpersonal relation; for an environment free from strife and quarrels, makes for happiness, peace and love. It ensures the progress and greater improvement in human condition.

4.2. Mmuo or Mkpuruobi (Soul)

The soul is the invisible and indivisible part of man. According to the Igbo conception, the soul is the most important aspect of man. It is the life principle in man which continues to exist long after the body has disintegrated. There is however, a lack of agreement as to the correct Igbo name for the English word 'Soul.' Anyanwu used the Igbo word 'Mkpuruobi' to designate the soul.²⁰ Nwala employed the same word as well to signify the human soul.²¹ An analysis of this term reveals that 'Mkpuru' is 'Seed' and 'Obi' is 'Heart,' so that the combination of the two words 'Mkpuruobi' literally means the 'Seed of the heart'. Exponents of 'Mkpuruobi'

hypothesis maintain that inasmuch as the heart is essential for the continued existence of the human person, any internal essence of the heart would certainly be the vital principle of life. For them therefore, the seed of the heart is the soul. This hypothesis is deficient in the sense that it not only localizes the soul in the heart which is just an aspect of the body, but also connotes the idea that the soul perishes with the body at death.

Amongst the respondents interviewed on this issue, a good number of them vehemently argued that the named 'Chi' is most acceptable because 'Chi' as the principle of life comes from and resembles 'Chi-Ukwu', the Great 'Chi'. The researcher discovered however, that this term is not widely used in Igbo land. It seems that this reluctance in the use of 'Chi' arises from the fact that it can easily provoke the impression that God and man share the same attributes. On the other hand, the Igbo name 'Mmuo' seem to convey most appropriately the Igbo idea of the human soul. Some prominent Igbo philosophers like Edeh and Nwoga hold the same opinion as well. To this end, Edeh writes that:

...the Igbo idea of the human soul is most appropriately conveyed by the term Muo sometimes written as Mmuo. Basic to this term is immateriality. It is suggestive of that which is unseen in contradistinction to that which is seen. Muo would be the most appropriate term that brings out the Igbo concept of the soul for the following considerations: (1) Muo can be prefixed or suffixed to anything to mean the immaterial, spiritual or unseen component of that thing [for eg] Muo-Madu—a human soul, Muo-mu—my soul, Aru-na-Muo—body and soul; (2) Muo cannot be located in a particular area of the body, and may not even be confined to one body, yet it can be regarded as the spiritual counterpart of a material body.²²

Thus, 'Mmuo' is the vital principle in man. Through it the individual holds communion with the Supreme Being, the divinities and the ancestors. It shares the nomological qualities of the spirit-beings.

4.3. Union of the Body and Soul

Metaphysically speaking, the Igbo regard the body (Ahu) and Soul (Mmuo) as essentially one. Both are intimately united and play complementary roles in sustaining man in his physical existence. The soul is the sustaining principle of the body. But the body, on its own part, helps to maintain the soul by providing it with spiritual food through acts of religious worship and religious ceremonies.

Therefore, the Igbo do not find any difficulty in proving the human existence and the human soul, including their basic constituents or characteristics. One of my respondents, Nnamdi Osuagwu from Orlu in Imo state, said that experience and common sense show that man's basic needs are of mixed nature, namely - those of the soul and those of the body. He argues that just as the body needs food, rest and medicine, so also does the soul seek after truth. What each aspect of the human seeks, is ultimately for the good of the entire man.²³

In view of this, the Igbo view of man is certainly on clear contrast with the interpretation of the materialists who conceive man as essentially matter and argue that man is no more than the aggregate of molecules and atoms. Similar to the Igbo idea are the views of Thomas Aquinas and the medieval philosophers who held that man, even though he is of two basic elements, is yet substantially one being.²⁴ For them, man is not only a rational animal or an incarnate spirit but, above all, a person with unique qualities.

What is more, the mysterious and intricate nature of the human person with its accompanying complicated activities as regards the passing nature of human existence, the superior role man plays over the rest of nature under his control and which serves to achieve the betterment of human existence, man's weaknesses and strengths, intermingling of joys and sorrows in life, accomplishments and non-fulfilment, and the variously human experiences with regard to the realities of life, with particular reference to man's self auto-transcendence, all of which keep the traditional and contemporary Igbo in ceaseless marvel and keep resonating the issue of the composite nature of man and what becomes of him at the end of his earthly existence. The static nature of the Western conception of reality makes it more difficult to resolve the contraries, contradictions or oppositions that punctuated human existence and experiences. Anyanwu succinctly describes the situation thus:

First, we have the contradiction between the ego and the world...We have a contradiction between Body and Mind (Spirit and Soul). All contradictions which human beings face stem from the duality of experience. These include: the contradiction between one and many; individuality and universality, Time and Eternity, freedom and necessity, Reason and sentiment.²⁵

Arguably, in contradistinction to this Western static conception of reality, is what could be considered as the contrasting theory; the dynamic nature of all existing

things in Igbo philosophy. In the first instance, the Igbo world-view accept and acknowledge a harmonious intermingling and interpenetrating the subject and the object, matter and spirit, visible and invisible unlike the Western conception that is dichotomized in nature. Despite the fact that everything has its 'double,' 'inner-side' or 'opposite'; yet they intermingle, interpenetrate and interact with each other. Hence, the idea of individualism in the sense of separate beings that are entirely independent of one another has no place in Igbo-African philosophical framework. All things that exist within the ecosystem, in their characteristic communalistic harmoniousness are ontologically bonded with one another. This is to say that the whole of reality is unified in a cobwebs-like relationship.²⁶ This harmonious nature of things in African worldview is simply alluded to by Adebayo Adesanya as he observes that:

This is not simply coherence of fact and faith, nor of reason and contingent facts, but of a coherence or compatibility among all the disciplines. A medical theory, e.g., which contradicted a philosophical conclusion, was rejected as absurd and vice-versa...philosophy, theology, politics, social theory, land-law, medicine, psychology, birth and burial, all find themselves logically concatenated in a system so tight that to subtract one item from the whole, is to paralyze the structure of the whole.²⁷

Suffice it here to state that the essence of the Igbo world-view is such that, existence is not discrete but is a series of interactions and interpenetrations. Thus, there is no dichotomy in the Igbo nation of life and existence as can be discovered in the Western philosophy. Consequently, this became the basis of understanding man and eschatology in Igbo Ontology. Thus, Pantaleon Iroegbu in his historical survey of the contributions of modern African philosophers pointedly says: "when R. Onwuamibe, E.M.P. Edeh and C.B. Okolo, studied the concept of the person and immortality in Igbo metaphysics, they discovered also that the human person consisted of 'ahu' (body), 'obi' (heart), '[M]kpuru-obi' (soul), 'muo' (spirit), 'ume'(breath)."²⁸

To this end, the Igbo distinguish from 'Mmadu', his 'Ahu' (body), his 'Onyinyo' (shadow); his 'Mkpuruobi' (heart), and his 'Chi' (the divine spark in man or spirit). The body and heart represents the material components of a person; the soul, spirit and breath are the spiritual components of a person; while the shadow is the psychological component of a person. The psychological component effects the

union of the physical and the spiritual. Hence, man in Igbo ontological conception is constructed of body and soul. Janheinz agrees with this idea in his discussion on the question of man's essence that goes into the making of the self in African Philosophy,

“the origin of a human being, however, is represented as a double process. On the one hand, [it] is a purely biological union of shadow and body according to the principle of Buzima.”²⁹

But at the same time, something spiritual, *Nommo-force*, if we say so, unites with the body, for the production of a human being is a process of body and spirit.”³⁰

V. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Evaluation

Man in Igbo Ontology, in the light of the above understanding is, therefore, imbued with a dual nature- the body and soul. Consequently, man as man is, therefore, capable of higher metaphysical operations. Man with his characteristic rational knowledge and understanding are placed over and above the brutes, inanimate and animate realities that are classified as the 'ihe' (ordinary things). It is in the human person that the body and spirit meet in a concrete human life. Admittedly, man is the union of the body and the spirit. This is the condition that qualifies a person as belonging to the category of 'Mmadu' (human being).

Though man shares in common the mortal body with other animals, however, his soul or spirit distinctly differentiates him from the rest of animals. Thus 'Mmadu' (man) in Igbo conception, is inconceivable outside the context of the body. In the same vein, the conception of 'Mmadu' in his body without the spiritual principle would be simply an absurdity. A human being of such kind would be a monstrosity, and, therefore, has fallen into a domain that is outside the category of human beings. Matter and spirit are the two principles that make the being of man and, hence, in Igbo Ontology man is not and must not be conceived neither in isolation nor independent of either the body or the soul. This points to the complemental nature of man in Igbo Ontological order. It is the unity of the soul and body that equips man with the power to function as a complex and paradoxical being he is. Having said the above, therefore, what is the situation of a person after this earthly passing existence or 'the ultimate limit-situation', as the Existentialists would put it.

To this end, the Igbo conceives the existence of man in the world of things as temporal. This temporality of the human earthly existence is made manifest in Igbo saying 'azota

ndu edobere onwu' which implies that the struggle of man to survive is simply a preparation for the end which must surely happen someday. However, death is not conceived by the Igbo people as an annihilation, but as a transformative travel or journey. For the Igbo, the age of a person at death, moral standard of a person during the person's life time, perpetuation of oneself through marriage and procreation of offspring, the kind of death (whether natural death, evil death or wasteful death), and rendering of full final burial rites, are all that come to determine the new status of the dead person. Apart from the few dissenting voices in respect to the final end of man in Igbo Ontology, the plurality of opinion is that the attainment of ancestor-hood (sainthood) is the ultimate goal or ultimate desired fulfillment of man in Igbo conceptual framework. This concept seems a more reasonable ground to hold.

Arguably, the notion of after-life is one of the fundamental assumptions of the Igbo that clouded their conception of man and immortality. But the concept of life or union with God in the here-after is not conceived by the Igbo-African early thinkers as God is an exclusive other who is far removed from the human world, though his influence is felt in the world. It is not within the category of thought which reason alone can attain. Among the major contributions Christianity renders to the Igbo traditional world-view as well as to the Igbo traditional religion is the concept or the doctrine of God as the ultimate good (summon bonum) or the final goal of all things, with particular reference to man.

5.2. Conclusion

Finally, our discussion on man, his essential components, his complex functions and his final destination at the end of man's sojourn in the world, necessarily brings us to concordance with Francis Cardinal Arinze who observes that:

When a person dies, his Mkpuruobi and Mmuo (soul or spirit), wonders till it is received into the blessed company of his forebears on condition that the relations on earth celebrated the full burial ceremonies. In some places, this belief requires also that the person must have been a good man on earth or at least that a cleansing rite be performed over the corpse before burial. The main passport, however, is the performance of the funeral celebrations.³¹

Furthermore, that the Igbo community which is essentially communalistic in nature (in other words an Igbo man is a brother to his neighbour) will remain a source of strength for the Igbo, cannot be doubted; for with such cordial

interpersonal relationship, the community as a whole will continue to strive to maintain its members while maintaining itself as a unity. This idea finds inspiration in the old adage which says – ‘anyukoo mamiri onu, ogbaa ufufu’ (united we stand, divided we fall). Hence, man is not in isolation the centre of Igbo Ontology order. Instead, he is the centre of Igbo ontological order in communalism, for man discovered his humanity in the community of persons.

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