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The Concept of Human Person in African Ontology: A Critical Reflection on the Igbo Notion of Man

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Abstract

This paper is a critical reflection on the concept of human person in African ontology. The topic is situated within the context of the Igbo traditional society of the south eastern Nigeria. In this society, man (a generic term for human beings) is seen as a being who is simultaneously material and immaterial, whose personhood should be adequately understood in terms of his moral and metaphysical composition. The objective of this study is to revive the primordial conception of the human person among the Igbos with a new appreciation of his/her dignity and inherent value in the modern mind. The main thesis of this paper is that the set of values ascribed to human beings in the Igbo traditional society are universalizable. It recommended the adoption of some relevant aspects of this African experience as a panacea to the rising desecration of the sanctity of human life across the globe.

Key words: ontology, human person, values, dignity, sanctity

Introduction

The notion of man is at the centre of all human problems. Every philosophy, every religion, every culture has to take up some position here. Conflicting views have not been lacking recently: enthusiastic essays, impassioned debates and sharp critiques. We have no wish to add yet another theory to all the others. We shall simply try in these pages to bring out the Igbo notion of the human person - the most paradoxical of all realities. As Mouroux (1961) beautifully put it:

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 (p.114).

Both ethical and metaphysical reflections on man cannot but terminate in a profound respect for the human person. Indeed, as we explore his being, the more does man appear paradoxical, mysterious, and in one word sacred. What is at stake in our civilization is whether man shall remain or re-become a sacred being. In our modern world torn asunder by materialism and materialistic values, a breathless age where people seem to be constantly racing towards the next material plum, it is important that we rehearse the primordial affirmation of the truth about the worth and dignity of human life. To do this, we have situated our work within the context of the Igbo traditional society of Nigeria.

The Igbo Notion of Man

Mmadu is the Igbo name for human being. It makes no particular reference to sex. The etymological meaning of this word is very interesting. *MMA-DU* is really a sentence, let there be goodness or, better still, let goodness be. *MMA* means goodness, order, beauty and peace, depending on the context in which it is used. *DU* is the imperative of *DE* or *DU* meaning to be. So, the word is *MMADU* and should be pronounced *MMA, DU*, let there be goodness, order, beauty and peace (Esomonu, 1982, p.121). This reminds one of the descriptions which Shakespeare puts on the lips of Hamlet:

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, (lie beauty of the world, the paragon of animal (Act 2, scene 2).

According to an old Igbo centenarian, God created all things beautifully. Then at last he created what he called *MMADU*, let goodness be, as a synthesis of all that is good in visible creation. Man, later on pronounced this name so fast that it became one word, such that many do not advert to its original meaning. This interpretation for man given above is common to the Igbos but is heard of only in special cases, like when people are quarrelling. The elders who settle the disputes often recall to the litigants the meaning of their being as men, 'let there be peace and goodness'.

Man, according to the Igbo world-view, possesses what may well be called spiritual instincts making him capable and desirous of the supreme values: truth, goodness, peace and beauty. These values designate a totality of hierarchised values, all which is loved, desired and realized by *MMADU*, man who lived in this world. Above all, man possesses *chi*, Igbo image of God which elevates him and places him above all visible creation.

Unfortunately, modern industrial society with its emphasis on productivity, money and profit, become only a means to attain those ends, as Kaunda (1966) posited:

Man was intended to be an end in himself. This is surely implied by the Bible's claim that he is made in the image of God and has been given dominion over all living things. But he has been reduced to a means. The industrialist uses him as a means to wealth. To the demagogue he is the means to power, to the selfish lover the means of gratification. The war-monger uses him as cannon-

fodder, to the economist he is a statistic, to mass entertainer, he is an instrument to be manipulated. Everywhere man is being used (p.46).

In this case, anyone who terminates his life or that of another in order to escape from painful circumstances uses a person merely as means to an end. As regards necessary duties or those of strict obligation towards others, he who makes lying promise to other for example, would be using another man merely as a means for the achievement of an end. These are all immoral acts from the Kantian perspective. This is why Kant's 'Categorical Imperative' commands that we should so act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only (1988, p.58).

Therefore, man must be respected not only because he is goodness, beauty and peace, but also, he is a microcosm of the created universe and in the visible (created) world he has been placed at the summit. Gifted with a spiritual soul and metaphysical faculties of intellect and will, he is capable of a happiness and perfection. This leads us to consider metaphysical composition of man according to Igbo thought.

Man, as a Material and Metaphysical Being

In every age, every culture in the world has a certain picture of man vis-à-vis his essential nature. This description of the nature of man determines a whole gamut of other things about him: his role in the society, his worth as human person and his relations with the individual. Africans, Igbos in particular, have an intellectual perception of something in man other than that circumscribed by mere experience. They believe that the human psyche is not an element commensurate with the human physiology. According to this world-view there is something in man that transcends the matter of his physiology and outlives it (Okafor, 1974, p.15). This is why the traditional African concept of man is conceived as composite of body and soul, not body alone, nor soul alone. The soul animates the body. It is believed that when a man dies, it is the body that suffers disintegration and decomposition, while the soul departs to assume a separate existence. In reality, to the Igbos the terms soul and spirit are synonymous, in spite of the fact that they have a separate word for each namely: *Nkpuruobi* (soul) and *muo* (spirit). Although they recognize a difference between the two, it is merely a difference without a distinction. Olisa (1972), gave us a detailed information about the soul:

We Igbo, living in this part all believe that inside the body of every man is soul, which we call *Nkpuluobi* and that without this a man cannot see or touch, but a thing which they can feel. It is without form, or substance such as man or animal has, and we believe that, all souls are of one kind, and that each person has not more than one soul (p.1).

The reason why the soul does not perish with the body is because it is the only thing which the Great Spirit wants from each person individually, so that as soon as the body dies the soul naturally goes back to *Chukwu* (the Supreme God), except in certain cases, where it is claimed by evil spirits. It is believed that all souls survive after death, and that none perish, and that when the soul leaves the body and goes to its destination in the spirit land, it becomes a spirit. With regards to any difference in the soul and spirit, it is not known except that it is spoken of the former as a soul when it is confined to the body of a man or animal or transferred to a plant or object, and the latter as spirit when it is not so confined (Leonard, 1906, pp.140-141).

The soul for the Igbo is an element of mystery in the life of man since it is indefinable and invisible, and it is where his claim to dignity worth lies. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution recognizes this profound truth when it proclaimed that all men are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are 'right to life' and 'to dignity of the human person' (p. 34). The text of the 1999 Constitution reads:

Every person has a right to life, to dignity of the human person, and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life, save in execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence of which he has been found guilty iii Nigeria (p. 34).

In general, we may say that man for the Igbo is the sum total of goodness, beauty and peace, and he is conceived in philosophical thought patterns as animated body. It is the soul that elevates him above all visible beings and there lies his dignity and worth.

The Igbo Life View: An Exploration

From the ancient tradition of Igbo humanism and their metaphysics comes the life view of the people. For them life is basically a gift, *Chinyelu* (Gift from God). Because it is from God (*Chinwendu*), it is a mystery. It is to be lived to fullest because it is a gift from God. The Igbo accept the totality of life, both joy and suffering, for to live is to know conflict and to experience the tension of being pulled in different directions by many forces. Yet these tensions are good, reflecting a fundamental acceptance by the people. Life is a gift from God, and from this belief everything else follows and develops.

Another important aspect of Igbo life view is unity of life as the centre of cohesion and solidarity. By this we mean a relationship of being and life between each individual and his descendants, his family, his brothers and his sisters in the village, his antecedents and also with God, the ultimate source of life. One can say that unity of life is the vital link which unites vertically and horizontally the living and the departed; it is the life-giving principle which is found in them all. It results from a communion or participation in the same reality, the same vital principle which unites a number of beings with one another.

One might ask what is this life? It is a whole life of the individual inasmuch as it is received by each being which exists and communal or collective inasmuch as each being draws from a common source of life. There is no break between life and death, but continuity between the two. This life is therefore neither purely bodily nor purely spiritual but a life of the whole man comprising of the physical and the metaphysical. It is the whole of life, the entire being in its totality. This totality of being includes all that belongs to it, the inheritance, family wealth, etc. Indeed, for the Igbo, human personality cannot be thought of without its belongings. Life in this sense which is the primary concern of the people is not only empirical but also super empirical life, life beyond the grave, because for the Igbo the two are inseparable and interdependent.

Where the names apply to life, they are supposed to depict the Igbo understanding of it. Thus, the keynote to understanding the Igbo value and respect for life lies in the examination and analysis of Igbo names, as the following examples reveal.

Names showing the values of life

Ndu - Life. Some are simply named *Ndu*, meaning life.

Ndubuisi - Life is the prime necessity. Life goes first.

Ndukaku - Life is superior to wealth. The most important treasure a man possesses is his life.

Osonduagwuike - One can never exhaust his/her strength while running to preserve or save life.

Ndukwe - If life permits, I will make it.

Ndubia - May life come and abound.

Chinwendu - Life belongs to God. There is nothing the Igbo prizes more than life, nothing more precious yet nothing more delicate.

For the Igbo life is sacrosanct. We are told that when the Igbo first came in contact with the Europeans, they were so struck by the marvels he could do that they said: 'The white man is capable of all things, except creating human life and bringing the dead to life' (Esomonu, 1981, p.129). These latter two are powers only God could have. As a necessary being, God does not derive His life or existence from any higher Being. He is life in himself and absolutely self-sufficing. He gives life to men considered to be contingent beings. The Igbos demonstrate this fact whenever a new child is born through the name they give to it.

Names That Show Love and Appreciation of Children

Nwadiagu - A child is desirable. Literally man is consumed with the hunger for children.

Nwa-amaka - To have a child is a very beautiful thing.

Ifeyinwa - Nothing is like a child.

In Igbo moral and social life, the question of offspring is of paramount importance. Its priority is such that it tends to tune down other moral demands. No matter what happened or what event surrounds the bearing of the child - was it through adultery, was it by concubinage or fornication, was it by one whose husband has died, all these may and are sometimes reprehensible, but in the face of the fact that a child is forthcoming or is already born we must tune down our moral sensitiveness, because nothing is like a child.

Another name is *Nwakaego* - A child is greater than wealth. This name teaches that ambition for wealth should not be placed over or valued more than human life. A man that has children is worth more than a rich but childless man.

Nwabudu - A child is a one's fame. *Udu* is fame as resounding everywhere. This is true of Igbo societies because to have many children is every one's ambition.

Nwajindu - A child sustains life in many ways not only by bringing harmony to the parents but also in growing up to look after his parents and his junior brothers and sisters.

Names that express the Importance of Life which Death Tries to Vitiolate

Onwubiko - A prayer to death to please spare. It shows that the parents have lost many of their children by death and pray that this one may survive.

Onwuatuegwu - Death does not yield to any kind of fear.

Ozoemena or *Ozoemezina*m - Let there be no more death. Death is a senseless break, i.e. something opposed to natural impulse to continue to live on. The Igbo do not wish death to occur.

Onwumere - Death is responsible for the sad state of affairs. *Onwuka* - Death is the greatest enemy of life.

From the analysis of Igbo names which we have carried out, it is obvious that the Igbos regard human life as highly valuable. Hence Ilogu said that through names like these, the Igbo give expression to their belief that life is a very important value to be conserved (1974, p. 129).

Igbo Life View and Hospitality

Igbo hospitality shows that the Igbo society is man-centred organized to satisfy the basic need of all its members in food, drink and shelter (Ezedike, 2012, p.344). Traditionally, the Igbo society has never experienced the problem of beggars until recently. Everyone is valued, not for what he can achieve but the fact that he exists as we earlier stated. Unlike what our contemporary society's understanding of the value of life is today. Too often it attributes value to human life only in terms of what one makes, does, accomplishes, or possesses. The Igbo value of life does not depend primarily on the wealth one accumulates, the position of power that one obtains, but the fact that he is. Life does not derive the right to exist from the quality which circumstances seem likely to give to it. Therefore, we can say that Igbo hospitality shows their concern for man.

Conclusion

From all we have examined in this paper, it is apparent that the Igbo conception of man and respect human life is a product their metaphysical world view. In this paper we have delineated the various ways in which the Igbo express their belief in the worth or value of man's beingness. Although the core of this philosophy tends towards humanism, it is obvious that this humanistic tendency is quite different from secular humanism which excludes all religious and metaphysical theses about his origin and welfare. It is quite germane to point out here that African ontology is basically pluralistic in nature (Gyekye, 1995, p. 68). In the hierarchy of beings, man is believed to be next the spirits and ancestors before God. He is both spirit and matter, possessing body and soul, both corporeal and incorporeal, thus, deserves to enjoy a life that is sacrosanct. The Igbo, nay, African ontological view of the human person (generically represented as MAN), is thus, closely associated with their metaphysical idea of immortality of the soul and destiny (Uduigwomen & Akpan, 2012, p. 1). In this regard, an assault on human life is believed to be capable of vitiating and upsetting the transcendent ontological order that binds all existent things (Asouzu, 2004, p. 2004).

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