

**IGBO COMMUNALISM: AN APPRAISAL OF ASOUZU'S  
IBUANYIDANDA PHILOSOPHY**

*Innocent Chukwudolue Egwutuorah*

*Doctoral Candidate*

*Department of Philosophy, Imo State University,  
Owerri, Nigeria.*

**1. Introduction**

The individual is not self sufficient but has many needs which he cannot supply to himself. Hence, human beings agreed to submit voluntarily to a system and were bound to live in unison and solidarity. Through deep experiences as creatures, human beings realized their insufficiency and dependency. They discovered that they need each other to live a contented life. These experiences of life gave recourse to the idea of complementarity as a measure to survive the challenges posed by other vicissitudes of life. Inter dependency, inter-relationship, collectivism and mutual co-existence form the basis for Igbo life pattern as expressed in *Ibuanyidanda*; an aspect of Igbo- communalism.

Igbo communalism is expressed in living together and sharing responsibilities. The traditional Igbo society has a great asset in its practice of a mode of life called communalism. This used to be the bedrock and the result of the wonderful relationship prevalent in the Igbo- African community as well as the purpose of the existence of the Igbo community in particular and of the Africans in general. In the light of the above and in recognition of the ontological and trajectory relationship of living together and sharing responsibilities, Asouzu developed the *Ibuanyidanda* philosophy as an authentic traditional Igbo life pattern which has survived till today. "The concept *Ibuanyidanda* is drawn from the Igbo language and has as its nearest English equivalent the idea complementarity in the sense of *njikọka* (togetherness is greatest) *Igwe bụ ike* (strength in togetherness)." <sup>1</sup> J. O. Chimakonam in his

etymological grand-standing has argued that the Igbo concept *nmekọka* better interprets complementarity than *njikọka*. *Njikọka* he went on, better interprets a closely related theory integrativity or integrative humanism associated with G. O. Ozumba<sup>2</sup>.

The central issue here is the ontological explanation for the acceptance and practice of communalism as *Ibuanyidanda* by Igbo communities. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to highlight aspects of Igbo communitarian outlook. In other words, an attempt will be made to evaluate the purport of communalism within the context of *Ibuanyidanda*, its sense and meanings as well as its influence on different aspects of Igbo life. The idea of *Ibuanyidanda* as an aspect of Igbo communalism developed as a result of the fact that man is a social being who necessarily lives in the company of other human beings. “The Igbo sees this social collaboration as a natural legacy which ought to be lived, recognized at all times and therefore developed and preserved as a treasure”<sup>3</sup> developing and preserving communalism as a treasure within the context of *Ibuanyidanda* which implies that authentic Igbo communalism is not racial or tribal rather, it is realized within the *umunna* (kindred) and (*Ogbe*) village levels. Communalism implies group spirit. The concept “*Ibuanyidanda*” was expounded by I. I. Asouzu to clear a ground and draw a demarcation in the misconception of communalism. Thus he says;

In most contemporary African countries, what is understood as communalism, when carefully considered are diverse brands of tribal social arrangements designed to protect private and group interest against all forms of outside intrusion.<sup>4</sup>

The proper understanding of original practice of communalism in the pre-colonial African world is what we intent to buttress using the theory of *ibuanyidanda*.

## 2. Explication of Concepts

The terms to be explicated include; Igbo, communalism and *Ibuanyidanda*. Some Igbo scholars bend to two traditions for the explanation of the origin of the Igbo. The places associated with these origins are viewed as Igbo culture centres. These places are connected with the cultural traditions of non migration and migration. Nwala observes that;

The Igbo form one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Like their neighbours, they belong to the Negro race in Africa, and speak a language that belongs to the Kwa group of languages found in west and central Africa. Their language is Igbo with many local dialects<sup>5</sup>

The Igbo developed independently like other indigenous African peoples. The Igbo language is not spoken by any other peoples in the world. The Igbo is situated in South-Eastern Nigeria. The concentration of Igbo homeland is the whole table land east of the River Niger and West of the cross River. The whole area of Igbo homeland is bounded in the South by the delta and shares boundary in that area with the Ijaw and the Ogoni. The Igbo has boundary with the Idoma, Igala and Ogoja people in the North. The Western neighbours are the Bini and Warri people.

The River Niger divides Igbo land into two unequal parts, the western part and the eastern part. The people dwelling in these two areas are conveniently and respectively referred to as the western Igbo and the eastern Igbo. The western Igbo live in Delta State and constitute only about one –tenth of Igbo population. The eastern Igbo live in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States and they constitute eight-tenths of the population. The rest of the Igbo are in diasporas found in *Ahoada* and *Ikwere* in Rivers State and at *Igbanke* in Edo State. The most distinguishing characteristic of the Igbo is its social fragmentation and decentralization of authority. Green observes this fact thus;

This great people are broken up into hundreds of small, more or less independent social units, the largest being, in many cases what we may call the village group. This is a collection of villages bound together by certain ties, but each one at any rate in the district with which we are concerned largely managing its own affairs<sup>6</sup>

The view of Green above, explains the popular Igbo saying- *Igbo Enweghi-Eze*. The Igbo have no king. This is a very important fact about the Igbo which does not have to be disregarded in the study of social and political organization of the Igbo. Decentralization of authority and social fragmentation notwithstanding, the Igbo achieves a high degree of peace and order, unity and solidarity in their traditional society. The reason must be sought in their philosophy and thought pattern, namely; communalism and complementarity (*Ibuanyidanda*).

### **Communalism: as a Concept**

Communalism is a mode of social relationship which is marked by the intimate feeling of belongingness which all members share with each other and which they reciprocate. Communalism expresses egalitarianism and being brothers' keeper. The writings of some African scholars such as Nkrumah's Consciencism and Nyerere's Ujamaa socialism as well as Azikiwe's Neo-welfarism Point to communalism. It is a political and an economic arrangement that emphasizes collectivity. Communalism allows the community to co-operate and come together to harness their resources together for the good of every body. In a communal society, oneness and the love for one another exist among the community. Communalism is simply, the return to traditional political and economic practices and the rejection of the unsuitable aspects of alien culture. In this system, every body was part of government and no need for political parties which create divisions in the lives of the people. In traditional Igbo societies says Asouzu;

The community constitutes the point of orientation for almost all human activities and determines human life even if these societies were committed to the insight of mutual complementary relationship between units within any given framework, we see them tending towards extreme measures in view of undermining this commitment<sup>7</sup>

From the above, it is seen that what actually energizes communalism are the concepts of extended family (*Ime-nne*) kindred (*Umunna*) village (*Ogbe*) and clan, because at these levels, people live together and share responsibilities. Communalism is not tribal, it is not racial, rather there is the spirit of collectivism, egalitarianism and being brothers' keeper. It is not primarily for the individual, but rather for the community of which the individual is an infinitesimal part. Writing on communalism, Mbiti sees the existence of the individual as subsumed in the collectiveness of the community, thus, he said; "I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am"<sup>8</sup> this expresses clearly the Igbo belief that a tree cannot make a forest - *Otu Osisi anaghi emebe ohia!* Commenting on communalism, Steve Biko writes;

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the varied problems of life... Hence, all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism<sup>9</sup>

Communalism is opposed to individualism, for example, for individualism, the individual is paramount and the community is a consequent. According to Nze, "the relationship existing between the society and the individual in a communalistic society is analogous to that existing between a mother and her embryo, each is connected with the other through the Umbilical cord"<sup>10</sup> what this

means is that the individual cannot separate himself from the community. Thus, as he tries and strives to satisfy his personal needs and develop his abilities, he sees all his efforts and aspirations as aimed at maintaining and sustaining his relationship with other members of the community of which he is a part. Communalism is fraternal in the sense that it symbolizes a form of life of a people whose different members are held together by some parental link. Nobody can detach himself from his community because the community is the vehicle through which all activities are accomplished. Hence, solitary individual is an absurdity in Igbo communalism.

### **Ibuanyidanda as a Concept**

The concept *Ibuanyidanda* is a theory formulated to overcome the shortcomings inherent in communalism. Prior to Asouzu's conceptualization of *Ibuanyidanda* as the philosophy of collectivism, the concept had existed as part and parcel of Igbo vocabulary without any logico-philosophic interpretation. *Ibuanyidanda* is analogous and literally means that no load is insurmountable for *danda*. (a specie of ant) according to Asouzu;

The concept *Ibuanyidanda* draws its inspiration from the teachings of traditional Igbo philosophers of the complementary system of thought. For these Igbo philosophers, the idea of complementarity is inferred from observing a species of ants called *danda*. These ants (*danda*) have the capacity to carry loads that appear bigger and heavier than themselves. What this implies is that they can surmount very difficult tasks when they are mutually dependent on each other in the complementation of their efforts<sup>11</sup>

This simply shows the mutual dependence and inter-dependence in carrying out projects among the Igbo. *Ibuanyidanda* as an Igbo concept is an aspect of Igbo communalism, and can properly be

understood by pointing out some credible sources that tell something about its nature. Many African scholars of the modern and contemporary thought have said something concerning this concept either directly or indirectly. For many, *Ibuanyidanda* is the principle of (*Aka nri kwoo aka ekpe, aka ekpe akwoo aka nri*) reciprocity and collectivism. Iwe, for instance, used the term “collective egoism to express the inseparable relationship that exists between the individual and the community”<sup>12</sup> writing on the nature of Igbo social life, Nwala, implicitly expressed this concept when he maintains that

Igbo world view implies two basic beliefs (1) the unity of all things and (2) an ordered relationship among all beings in the universe. Consequently, there is a belief in the existence of order and interaction among all beings... Man’s nature is such that he acts first and foremost in accordance with those things which agree with or are in harmony with his feelings and desires, his comfort and well being... and are only meaningful in a situation of social relationship<sup>13</sup>

The view of Nwala expresses mutual reciprocal relationship which is the hallmark of *Ibuanyidanda* as a concept in particular and of Igbo communalism in general. *Ibuanyidanda* as an Igbo work song expressing unity and strength is echoed in this phrase;

Our husbandmen were singing and as they sang, they reaped, they were singing in chorus and reaping in unison. Their voices and their gestures were all harmonious; and in harmony, they were one, united by the same task, united by the same song. They were bound to one another. United by the same soul; each and everyone was tasting the

delight. Savouring the common pleasure of accomplishing a common task<sup>14</sup>

*Ibuanyidanda* is a living principle of which the basic ideology is community identity. It produces and presents the individual as community centred. In his book, *African thought and culture*, Onwubiko unconsciously expressed *Ibuanyidanda* as;

The intra-community relationship based on interpersonal relationship realized in a definite community, among its members, to express the practical traditional ... concept of human living<sup>15</sup>

In the above sense, individuals recognize their worth as human beings and what they can do for each other. Helping one another collectively without demanding for immediate remuneration since everyone is mindful of the fact that each person has something to contribute to the welfare of the community at one time or another.

### **3. Communalism: A Reflection on Traditional Igbo Social Life – Ibuanyidanda**

The permanent feature or behaviour pattern of Igbo social life is based on a logical system of thought and a complete positive philosophy – (*Ibuanyidanda*). The fact that the world is incomplete (*Uwa ezu-oke*) and nobody is perfect (*Onweghi onye ozuru*) necessitates collectivism in action. Asouzu describes Igbo social life as complementarity which is a concretely lived experience of every day life. According to him;

This idea derives from the general and fundamental human feeling of insufficiency and experience of relativity and fragmentation of historical process. From here arise the human fundamental inclination to solidarity, togetherness and community. In the same way arises all tendencies guiding such ideas



as mutual co-existence, co-dependability, co-responsibility ... etc<sup>16</sup>

The essential nature of traditional Igbo social life is conveniently expressed in the above quote. It emerged as a result of the realization that the community is better able to wrest on themselves, the means of developing, sustaining and re-producing themselves. *Ibuanyidanda* in this context is fundamentally a social relation of production. It is the act of doing things together; the spirit of corporate existence, mutual assistance in work by all and the spirit of collective effort found among traditional Igbo people. The life of the Igbo is group participation in which each individual participates according to his natural ability. This explains the complementarity. There are some Igbo metaphors that express this complementarity. Such as: gradual picking fills the basket (*ntutu ntutu juo ukpa*) Bigger fish to supply bigger firewood and smaller fish to supply smaller firewood (*Nnukwu azu kpata nnukwu nku, obere azu kpata obere nku*). For the traditional Igbo, says Asouzu:

Without complementarity, human life would be unbearable isolated struggles that easily lead to self abandonment. We can now understand why the traditional Igbo never cease to sound the clarion call to complementarity and solidarity in times of crisis<sup>17</sup>

There are factors which tie or bound the people in complementarity, such as blood relation. In fact, a community in Igbo land means “people of one blood” kinsmen, or brethren *Umunna*. Other factors that favour complementarity include territorial location (habitation) and physical proximity of members of the community which bring them into personal face-to-face relation. These factors that favour complementarity illustrate vividly the Igbo belief that (*Agbata-obi onye bu nwanne ya*) one’s neighbor is his relation.

#### 4. Limitations to *Ibuanyidanda Vis-à-vis* Modernity

The present individualistic life style of the Igbo is a deviant life. It is a perverted life brought about by the relegation to the background of the Igbo belief system. Today, the Igbo are no longer united by the same work. Neither is harmony still a part of their work atmosphere. In trying to bring back this traditional Igbo spirit, *Asouzu* has proposed the *Ibuanyidanda* philosophy; which in the literal sense means: no load is insurmountable for danda which implies complementarity or community spirit.

The advancement in education, science and technology has made many of our people to ostracize themselves from their communities and there by kill the community spirit. The entire Igbo world has relapsed into chaos and disorder arising from individualism. The sense of unity, oneness, dependency, interdependency, and mutual co-existence has been eroded. Commenting on the depreciation of the authentic Igbo values as contained in the *Ibuanyidanda* concept, Ekwuru writes:

As the situation stands now, one does not need the expert analysis of a social scientist nor the rigorous sample survey of an ethnoscientist or cultural anthropologist to size up the situation of Igbo societal malaise. For one who wants to be downright traditional in his analysis of the situation, the present period is seething with such kinds of events that evoke the proverbial sense of abnormality. Most of the present occurrences defy any reasonable explanation as they go contrary to every traditional canon of sense and sensibility<sup>18</sup>

The complementary community spirit that characterized the traditional Igbo society is today questionable due to the break through in world civilization as contributed by science and technology. The intimate face-to-face personal and humane relationship, interdependency, dependency, co-existence and co-responsibility that marked the community spirit is today opposed

by the technocratic society in which members of the modern Igbo community work out of tempo with nature and tries to meet up with the tempo of the science (machine). Consequently, depersonalizing, and individualizing the people and introducing *Ibu-nyiri-danda*. (Load unable to be surmounted by danda). The oil bean tree (*Ukpaka*) and the Egu (a species of centipede) is analogous to the Modern Igbo community. The oil bean seed before maturity is bonded and united but after maturity they scatter and disperse across the bush. The *Egu* on the other hand holds strongly on a tree branch while young and becomes weak at maturity.

Prior to colonialism, *Ibuanyidanda* as an authentic existential philosophy was practicable among the Igbo. In the post colonial era, the attendant proliferation of churches, materialism, modernization and other sources have put great questions to *Ibuanyidanda* as a complementary philosophy of existence.

## 5. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the effects of civilization on the modern society, one notices that Asouzu's attempt to identify *Ibuanyidanda* with Igbo communalism is a fruitful effort, apt and interesting. He contends that *Ibuanyidanda* is inevitable and will be very useful in understanding Igbo communalism. *Ibuanyidanda* as a concept accepts traditional socialism and recalls the humanitarianism and egalitarianism of the traditional Igbo society. It accepts libertarianism ingrained in some of the ideologies of the western societies.

Furthermore, its success as a uniting ideology of not only the Igbo, but also of all Africans, suggest the possibility of its success as a salvaging social philosophy. *Ibuanyidanda* as a philosophical concept must be embraced and lived by all Igbo communities because, in it lies the future of Igbo development and through it, authentic existence is realized.

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