

The Philosophical Operative Conditions of Healing Shrines in Igbo-African Worldhood

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Abstract

This paper has studied the philosophical operative conditions of healing shrines in Igbo-African societies. The concept of philosophical operative condition is introduced into the study of Igbo-African healing shrines with the purpose of pointing out the philosophical principles behind the activities in these shrines. This philosophical dimension of African healing shrines is possible because of the nature of the relationship between religion and philosophy. This work, therefore, studied healing and healers in traditional African societies and the place and nature of healing shrines in Igbo societies. Though so much has been written about healing shrines and sacred places in traditional African societies, there is a seeming insufficiency of documents or literature on the Igbo-African healing shrines and the roles they played in restoring well-being to the people. More so, there is hardly a literature that focuses on the philosophical spirit behind the activities in Igbo-African healing shrines. This is the gap in literature that this present work fills. For the purpose of this study, this piece adopted the phenomenological, hermeneutic and historical approaches. This study is a qualitative research that has used both primary and secondary sources of data. It discovered that there is an inescapable element of philosophy in every dimension of African religion.

Keywords: Healing, Shrines, Igbo, African, Philosophical, Operative, Condition.

Introduction

A cursory glance at the historical evolution of thought reveals that right from the ancient world, thinkers have been concerned about the nature of the operative condition of reality. Within the parameters of philosophy, when Thales of Miletus pointed to water as the fundamental unity underlying the diversity of things, it was born out of the search for reality's operative condition. When Anaximander referred to a neutral element that is infinite, eternal and indeterminate, he did not only express the fundamental nature of reality, but the search for the unity of the plurality of things. According to Anaximenes of Miletus, Air is the underlying principle of all reality, and therefore, its operative condition (Omoregbe, 1997 and Kanu 2014).

The search for the operative condition of reality has been part of Africa's intellectual, documented and systematic tradition. In his work, *La Philosophie Bantou*, Placide Tempels arrives at a fundamental and underlying factor in Bantu philosophy, which he calls force. Tempels (1945) writes: "...the Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of being; force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force" (p. 431). Alexis Kagame, in his *Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de L'Etre*, develops Tempel's philosophy of force further. He argues that *Ntu* is the category of being or the generic meaning of something. This he classified into four: *Umuntu* (human beings); *Ikintu* (non-human beings); *Ahantu* (place and time); *Ukuntu* (Aristotelian category of quantity) (Kanu 2012a). *Ntu*, thus, becomes the unifying notion among all these, and the element of interaction between all these forces.

Edeh (1983) in his *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics* observes that *Idi* is the Igbo verb *to be*, and can be used as an adjective and suffixed to anything to show that it exists (Kanu 2012b). Iroegbu (1995) in his *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy* avers that *to be* is *to belong*. Thus, *being* is *Belongingness*. He defines belongingness as 'the

synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness' (p. 374). While Okere (1983) and Abanuka (2003) have proposed *chi* as an alternative concept for being in Igbo ontology, Asouzu (2011) and Njoku (2018) have introduced the concept of *Ibuanyidanda* as an intellectual framework to hang the being of society, and for Kanu (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) the operative condition of African philosophy, religion and culture is *Igwebuike*.

In this piece, the concept of philosophical operative condition is introduced into the study of Igbo-African healing shrines with the purpose of pointing out the philosophical principles behind the activities in these shrines in Igbo-African ontology. This philosophical dimension of African healing shrines is possible because of the nature of the relationship between religion and philosophy as there is always an inescapable element of philosophy in every religious thought or idea. This philosophical operative condition will reveal the spirit behind the practices and activities around Igbo-African healing shrines. This notwithstanding, what is healing, and who are healers in African ontology?

Healing and Healers in African Traditional Religion

Researches have been conducted by scholars of African religion within the areas of African traditional medicine and the medical practitioners (Maclean 1971, Twumasi 1975, Ademuwagun 1979, Ityavyar 1982, 1984, Madu, 2004, Kanu 2012 and 2015). These healers, also known as medical practitioners principally concern themselves with sickness, disease and misfortune. They symbolize the hope of society: hopes of good health, security and prosperity. In African traditional societies, sickness, disease and misfortune were generally believed to be caused by the ill will or ill action of one person against the other or a spirit against a human person. The medical personnel is consulted to diagnose the type of sickness; he or she also traces the cause of the sickness either to a person or a spiritual force (Kanu 2015). The

satisfactory answer that people need at a time when the question of the cause is sought is that ‘someone’ or ‘some spiritual force’ has caused it. As a solution to the problem in question, the cause must be found, counteracted, uprooted, punished or placated where necessary. It is also the duty of the medical practitioner to provide counter measures that can counteract future inflictions. Mbiti (1970) refers to these healers as the friends, pastors, psychiatrists and doctors of African traditional societies who have a language, symbolism, knowledge and skill of their own.

Quarcoopome (1987) refers to these healers as traditional doctors, traditional healers or herbalists, because of their possession of the power to control herbs. Among the Igbo, they are called *Dibia* and *Waganga* in Swahili. Unlike the priest who is limited to his or her shrine, the medicine man or woman is mobile. There are times when they keep the sick in their homes and take care of them. There are also times when they visit the sick in their homes, especially when they are not living far away from the medicine man or woman. There are times when the nature of the sickness determines the place for treatment. Some treatments could only be administered in designated areas of the community. While some are treated in public, others are treated in private. Usually when the cases are still at their lowest levels, Ityavyar (1990) avers that the family medicine man or woman takes care of it, but if it does persist, a specialized medical practitioner is consulted. Mbiti (1970), observes that medicine men are the greatest gift to African societies and the most useful source of health. It is, therefore, not surprising that every village in traditional Africa has a medicine man or woman within reach. They are accessible to everyone at almost every time and come into the picture of the people’s life as individuals and as a community.

Some complicated cases, such as bewitchment are treated in shrines, pools, isolated hills, thick forests, river deltas, road junctions and other places deemed therapeutically acceptable to the healer and

his spiritual friends. Perhaps, these places are more convenient for the healers to evoke spirits, converse with them and appease them with appropriate sacrifices. However, just like in the case of a priest, Ityavyar (1990) holds that every family has medical personnel that practices half time rather than full time. Full time medical services are provided only by the publicly consecrated medicine men. These notwithstanding, the medical practitioners have an office personality which is not easily accessible to the common villager. This makes the study of them complicated, and, thus, created the room for the Europeans who encountered Africa earlier to misunderstand their practices as pagan; it is, therefore, not surprising that African medical practitioners suffered much in their hands and more so in the hands of European-American writers and missionaries who often called them witch-doctors, alongside other derogatory names. These medical practitioners are categorized into herbalists (*dibia ogwu*), diviners (*dibia afa*), general practitioners, faith healers, bone setters, native gynaecologists and midwives, witch doctors, blood letters, traditional surgeons, etc.

Medical practitioners in African traditional societies, as members of the same group, have overlapping functions. For instance, among the Ndebele, Hughes and Van (1954) observes that the medicine-man performs functions that belong to the priest and diviners. He combats witchcrafts by sending them back to their authors. There are times when he performs sacrifices on behalf of the sick; in this case, he plays the role of a priest. When he tries to trace the cause of a sickness or misfortune, either as coming from the spiritual world or human, he performs the work of a diviner. However, in any of these functions, he or she brings healing and wellbeing to the African people.

Igbo-African Healing Shrines

Onuh (1991) avers that “Igbo” is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in the eastern part of Nigeria. There is, however,

an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term 'Igbo'. In the contention of Ekwuru (2009), the difficulty of arriving at a precise etymological and semantic clarity of the word "Igbo" has its trace in the unprecise nature of the history of the Igbo. In the contention of Afigbo (1975a), compared to the state of research as regards origin in relation to other tribes in Nigeria, the Igbo history can without much exaggeration be described as *terra incognita*. However, Afigbo (1975b) observes that the Igbo are not indifferent to this crisis of identity. Their experience of colonialism, and even the Biafran War has sparked off in them the quest for a historical identity (Isichei, 1976).

As regards the territorial identity of the Igbo, even though Hatch (1967) describes them as a single people, Uzozie (1991) and Ekwuru (2009) observe that there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of territory. However, Kanu (2014a&b) avers that what may be considered the territory of the Igbo stretches from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta. They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions; they believe in a common Supreme Being known as *Chukwu* or *Chineke*. While the *Northern Centre Theory* posits that they migrated from the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermetic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre, the *Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland* asserts that they originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions (Onwuejeogwu, 1987).

Sacred places and shrines in particular occupy a fundamental place in Igbo religion and life, and, therefore, make up the historical, religious and philosophical identity of the Igbo people. Like every other African, they are notoriously religious (Mbiti, 1970) explaining why

Chi (personal god/spark of the Supreme Being) has its place in almost every Igbo name (Chima- *God knows*, Chidi- *There is God*, Chiemeka- *God has done great*, Chidinma- *God is good*, Chibuzo- *God is first*, Chidiogo-*God is generous*, Chika-*God is greater*, etc). They believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, deities, spirits and ancestors; they believe that these supernatural forces have the capacities to wield their powers not only in the spiritual world, but in such a manner that it can echo in the human world. The Igbo also believe that these spirits can rest on natural places and objects, explaining why such places are treated with respect, fear and awe.

Igbo healing shrines belong to the category of sacred places; they are the abode of the spirits (Arinze, 1970) and places of consultation with extra-human forces to obtain answers to unanswerable questions with the hope of allaying fears and overcoming challenges (Ojiekwe, 2014). Because of what they stand for, they elicit fear, and inspire awe and reverence (Iroegbu, 2009). They are also places for religious worship, conflict resolution, social control, cultural education, moral development, etc. Sacred places among the Igbo are dedicated to specific deities, ancestors, heroes, martyrs, etc. They are very important in the Igbo world of uncertainties and probabilities, explaining why you find them in every home in Igbo traditional societies most times dedicated to their *Chi*. These shrines are places where the Igbo find healing and well-being (Foley, 2010) and are, therefore, protected (Gadgil and Vertak 1975). Examples of these healing shrines in Igbo-land include:

- a. ***Ogbunike Cave***: This cave is situated in the valley behind Ogba hills in Anambra State. It is a cave with a network of sandstone chambers and tunnels, cocooned in a valley with tropical rain forest and lush vegetation. The caves are homes for bats and the surrounding vegetation the abode of antelopes, deers, alligators, porcupines, snakes, etc. It has ten tunnels decorated with small pools that flow into the Nkissa river. Apart from serving as a place

for hiding and moral control, it is also a place where the people find healing through the mediation of the priest of the sacred cave.

- b. *Unubi Cave:*** The cave was named after the town Unubi where it is located. Unubi is in Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State. This cave served as a final court of appeal. Those who refuse to confess the truth before entering the cave will end up disgracing themselves by instant shouts of confessional lamentation or death. It was also a place where the people found healing as they commune with the deities that have residence in the cave.
- c. *Ofia Nri:*** It is a sacred place in Ora Nri town in Anambra State, and serves as the location for the palace of the Eze Nri and also the place for the installation of the Eze. It is a place where final decisions were taken, and thus becomes binding. The Igbo also find healing in this sacred place as it is associated with Eri the Igbo Proto-ancestor who is close to Chukwu the Supreme Being.
- d. *Odo Shrine:*** This shrine is located in a big forest in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State. It is in this forest that the famous Odo shrine takes its place. It is a place where people visit to find peace and tranquillity with one another and with themselves. It is also a place where the sick find healing through the mediation of the priest of Odo, who is considered capable of communicating with Odo on their behalf.
- e. *Iyi Nta Okoko:*** This is a shrine that is located in the northern part of Abia State by a small river. There is a priest that ministers there, standing between the people and the divine. The priest among others, administer oath-taking and covenant agreements. In this river, many find healing to all kinds of diseases through washing

themselves in the river or offering of sacrifices. Through drinking the water, many also get the fruit of the womb.

These healing shrines taken from different parts of Igbo-land does not constitute all the healing shrines among the Igbo but have been chosen as samples to concretely express the reality of these healing shrines and what they stand for among the Igbo-African people.

Philosophical Dimensions of Igbo Healing Shrines

The philosophical principles that define, direct and determine Igbo-African healing shrines include: symbolism/dualism, cause and effect, being-with-the-other, belongingness, cosmological balance and harmony, anthroposophy and environmentalism.

a. Symbolism/Dualism

Symbols within the African context are religious and cultural realities that are imbued with deeper meanings than can be seen by any direct act of perception or apprehension, in the sense that they represent the abstract in a concrete form- pointing a unique form of dualism. In this case, they symbolize, express, represent, reveal and indicate (Ilogu 1974; Ukaegbu 1991). According to Dukor (2006):

Symbolic relationships are essentially tied to culture, as they show an essential function of the human consciousness which is basic to our understanding the language of a people through which the world and reality are penetrated. For our consciousness to really produce ideas of realities, logic needs to establish a relation and necessary connection between this consciousness and reality. (p. xvi).

Within the African world, symbols are an attempt by the human person to present the invisible in a visible manner, the in-corporal in a corporal manner, the intangible in a tangible manner. In this case, it involves the human spirit's effort to represent the realities of the world of the spirits

in a manner of mediation between two worlds; the realities of the world of the spirits are spirit forces that underlie every African reality. In this process of mediation, that which is not related in terms of meaning is employed from the human world to express that which is in the spiritual world. Echekwube (2005), therefore, avers that “Symbolism is an interpretation of an object in order to make it signify that which ordinarily it is not” (p. 6). These symbols give rise to thought; thought about the truth of the nature of the African world (Rubio 1985).

In relation to African healing shrines, symbols are indispensable, as these healing shrines are not only considered caves, or rivers or forests, but abodes and representations of the spiritual forces. It is through these symbols that they become present to the worshipper or seeker of healing.

b. Cause and Effect

Aristotle had argued that there are two ways of coming to know reality. First, reality could be known through knowing individual things or events as individual things and events, and as they appear to us; this form of knowing excludes the underlying principle or ultimate causes of the reality that is known. This kind of knowledge is acquired through sense perception and is common to all kinds of people. Second, we can also know reality through going beyond the perception of the senses, beyond the perception of things and events as individual and isolated, to the perception of the ultimate causes or underlying principle of reality. A cause here, speaks of that which brings about a certain effect, and the effect is that which the cause brings about. In some cases, while the cause is invisible, the effect is visible.

The Ionians were concerned with this level of knowing when its representatives like Thales spoke of water as the underlying principle of being; Anaximenes spoke of a neutral element as the ultimate cause of reality and Anaximenes spoke of air as the basic unity in the midst of the plurality of things. Aristotle categorized this kind of knowledge

as philosophical knowledge born out of intellectual reflection. He classified the causes of things into four: material cause, which is the material with which a thing is made of; the formal cause, which is the form or essence which makes a thing that particular thing; the efficient cause, which is the source or agent responsible for bringing a thing into being; the final cause, which is the purpose or end for which a thing is made (Kanu, 2012a&b).

For the African, according to Aja (2001), the world is an ordered universe in which all events are caused and potentially explicable. Thus, Gyekye (1987) maintains the doctrine of universal causation in the Akan-African world. The African does not just speak of mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions like his Western counterparts; he also speaks of a metaphysical kind of causality, which binds the creator to the creature. Reacting to the Western concept of chance, which believes that things could happen by chance, Ozumba (2004) argues that what they call chance is only the ignorance of the series of actions and reactions that have given rise to a given event.

Although Gyekye (1987) maintains a universal doctrine of causality in African ontology, he emphasizes that greater attention is paid to extraordinary events and not natural events or regular occurrences when issues of causality is discussed. Regular or natural events would include, rain during rainy season, drought during dry season, a pregnancy that lasts nine months, the growth of plants, catching of few fish at some particular times of the year etc. Such events do not constitute a problem for the mind of the African, because, as Gyekye argues “such events are held by them to be part of the order established by the omnipotent creator” (p. 77). They are empirical, scientific and non-supernaturalistic. They have been observed by people who now know that there is a necessary connection between such events, for instance, they know that during dry season, the river dries up, or that a child stays in the mother’s womb for nine months before delivery.

Extraordinary or contingent are those that engage the minds of Africans, and such events would include, a woman being pregnant for more than nine months, drought during rainy season, a tree falling and killing a man. These events according to Gyekye (1987) have particular traits that make them mind disturbing, “They are infrequent and hence are considered abnormal; they are discrete and isolated; they appear to be puzzling, bizarre, and incomprehensible; they are not considered subsumable under any immediate known law of nature” (p. 78). The events are deemed insufficient to explain their causes, thus, the ultimate cause of the event is sought. The interest is not on what has happened but why it happened. Thus, not that the tree has fallen, but why it fell on a particular man and not on the ground or on any other man.

The African principle of causality is expressed in the following Igbo and Akan sayings: *ife na-akpata ife* (something is caused by something); *odighi ihe gbaraka mee* (nothing happens without a reason); *nwata no nuzo na-agba egwu, odi nwa nnunu na aguru ya egwu no 'hia* (a child who is dancing on the road, there is a bird singing for it in the bush), *You cannot see the rabbit in the afternoon in vain*. The Akan would say, “whenever the palm tree tilts it is because of what the earth has told it”. Within the context of the present ecological crisis, it understands the changes in nature as a consequence of a cause, that is, as effects of a cause. And to address the issues associated with present crisis, there is the need to trace the causes as a first step (Kanu 2014a&b).

The thought behind going to the shrine in search for healing is because of the belief that there is a cause that has effected the reason for the search for healing. More so, the activities at the shrine by the worshipper and the representative of the deity resident in the shrine, as he or she searches for the cause of the human condition, is weaved around the philosophy of cause and effect.

c. Being-with-the-otherness

The African world is a world of relationships: relationships between the living and the dead, the spiritual and non-spiritual, the divine and human, the animate and the inanimate. These relationships are shaped by the category of forces that are involved. In these relationships, forces in nature or realities in nature influence one another in a positive or negative way. Thus, Tempels (1959) avers that: “The world of forces is held like a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (p. 60). Expanding our understanding on relationships in nature, Maurier (1985) writes that:

Relationship as the fundamental category of African philosophy, is the vital and active link between persons. The term ‘vital’ wishes to underline that outside ‘relationship’, the person tends toward inexistence. The term ‘active’ recalls relationship is not simply thought, an object of abstraction; but is one that acts without stop in very tangible concrete acts. (p. 60).

Iroegbu (1995) adds that:

Not only is relationship vital... It is also active. Active relationship is one that involves concrete actions, facts and events in its network of expression... Passive relationship belongs to the inactive, the moribund, the death. To be alive at all entails having active relationships that link one with others, below and above, and that integrates one in the community. Activity is vital. (p. 370).

The idea of relationship captures the nature of the African universe. It is a relationship not only between human beings, or between human beings and spiritual beings, but also between human beings and nature. It is a world in which the human person is a being with the other- in the case of African healing shrines, being with the supra-human otherness that has the capacity to serve healing.

d. *Igwebuikeness of Being as Belongingness*

Igwebuike philosophy understands the world as being interconnected, and therefore, to be is to be interconnected, and to lose the interconnectedness of your being is to suffer self-alienation and thus derail into being-lessness. It is in this regard that Ireogbu (1995) argues that it is not enough to be in a relationship in the African world, every reality must belong or not be at all. To be and not belong is to suffer self-alienation. Ireogbu describes belongingness as the synthesis of the reality and experience of belonging.

The way to belong is to participate, that is, engaging the active side of relationship. This is the level of relationship with the whole that gives meaning to human existence or existence in general. It is also within this level of relationship that the human person gives himself or herself an identity within his or her community of being (Kanu. 2017a-e). When the Igbo-African visits a healing shrine, he or she does not only renew his belongingness to an ontological and cosmological belief system, but also to a human community and spiritual world.

e. *Cosmological Balance and Harmony*

The major reason why sickness or any form of ill health emerges in the Igbo-African world is simply because of a cosmological imbalance and disharmony. It is this imbalance that manifests itself as a sickness, and when the human person seeks healing, he or she actually seeks for the restoration of balance in the universe or the human world. When the Igbo troop to healing shrines, it is a manifestation of an inner hunger for balance and harmony.

Conclusion

This paper has studied the philosophical operative conditions of Igbo-African healing shrines, with the purpose of discovering the spirit behind the activities taking place at these healing shrines. This led to a discussion on the nature of healing shrines within the parameters of the

Igbo world, with concrete examples in different parts of the eastern part of Nigeria. During the research, the researcher discovered that in spite of the central place and role that these shrines occupied and played in traditional Igbo societies, the advent of Christianity, colonialism, western civilization, urbanization, etc., have dwindling effect on the activities in these healing shrines. They are now perceived by many as demonic, archaic, pagan, etc. Many of them in the name of crusades, have been destroyed and the lands used for schools, hospitals and church buildings. A good number that have not been invaded are neglected and abandoned.

This notwithstanding, in most African cities, these healing shrines are still relevant to many Africans. Politicians who are afraid of opponents do consult them; church authorities who want to overwhelm their congregations with miracles and, thus, keep them, visit them; young men and women who are in love with each other and who intend to preserve their love visit them for love portion, students at secondary and tertiary levels visit them to help them pass their examinations; business men and women patronize them for success in business, etc. Daily, city dwellers march their ways into villages in search of them to help them solve their problems. And because of the high demand for their services in the cities, mediators from these shrines visit the cities to provide services to their clients. From this, one gets the impression that healing shrines will continue to be relevant, especially as they help to solve modern problems in a traditional way that seems to make more impact for many.

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