

## The Igbo Communalism: A Panacea to The Problem of the Nigerian Socio-Political System (A Philosophical Reflection)

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### ABSTRACT

Man is by nature endowed with the grace, which enables him to dominate his immediate surroundings in particular and the entire created universe in general. This, he does by investigating his surroundings (environment) and giving meaning meaningfully to his life and that of the fellowmen. The discovery of this crystalline truth is actually the propelling force, which arouses the interest of the researcher into the investigation of the Igbo communalistic system of Life and how this can assist in solving the perennial Nigerian problematic socio-political system. However, for the Igbo, the individual exists only in the community. In other words, every single person is born a human being but every particular individual discovers his or her humanity in the community of persons. Naturally, an Igbo man desires highly to maintain ceaselessly a close relationship or link with the members of his or her community, starting with the members of his or her family, hence, the Igbo communalism, which be distinguished from the Western Communism. The researcher, therefore, primarily uses the methodological techniques of philosophical reflection to achieve the purpose of the study. Consequently, by the time the work is accomplished, it is hoped to have realized its major aim of establishing that the Igbo communalistic system of life, if applied meaningfully to the Nigerian economic socio-political systems, will go a long way in bringing to natural death the perennial Nigerian problematic socio-political systemic brouhaha.

**KEYWORDS:** Igbo-ness; Communalism; Ontological; Identity; Individuality.

### I. INTRODUCTION

**The Igbo Race:** The Igbo ethnic group is one of the most densely populated and the largest single ethnicities in Africa. Afigbo having been overwhelmed by the populousness of the Igbo people, commented thus: ... among the first things about the Igbo that impressed early European visitors were their great numerical strength and their impact on their less populous neighbours. In this century, the fact that the Igbo are among the numerous ethnic nationalities in Negro Africa (with a population estimated at between five and six million in 1906 and at between twelve and fourteen million today) has continued to draw attention and comment generally (Afigbo; 1981, p.1). Admittedly, there is no part of the world that they cannot be found. This is because of their overwhelming numerical strength. Leonard, therefore, succinctly and rightly observes: in southern Nigeria, the first in importance not only numerically but politically are the Ibo occupying the heart of southern Nigeria between the Niger and the Cross River (Leonard; 1964, p.232). Population of the Igbo in 1930 was estimated at about four million (Basden; 1966, p.xi). The tribe, nevertheless, numbered five and a half million in the year 1953 census. However, in the population record of 1979 by the Nigerian year book estimated the Igbo population at 9.2 million (Anyanwu; 1980, p.24). Nevertheless, the Igbo population in the recent time, is estimated to be about sixteen to seventeen million. Probably the Igbo have globalized the world long before the international community started talking about the world globalization. It is a popular Igbo saying that wherever an Igbo does not live, no human person should go there for it must not be a habitable place, where life thrives (Onwuatuegwu; 2011, p.8). Geographically, the Igbo enjoy a tropical climate with the average annual temperature of 80°f approximately and with about 5 to 10 degree range of variation in a cycle of one year (Uchendu; 1965, p.1). The season of one year is majorly divided into dry season and rainy or wet season. The dry period begins around November and stops around the month of March. The other months from April to October are taken by wet season.

Another phenomenon that is an accompaniment of dry season is what the Igbo called '*ugulu*' (harmattan). It is a period within the dry season during which cold wind blows from the Northeast. This is a very cold period in reference to the remaining period of the dry season. Igbo speakers mostly have their concentration in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. They have more than 18% of the total population of the country. Great number of them could be found in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. They have Igbo as their language. In Nigeria, the Igbo people are primarily found Ebonyi state, Enugu state, Abia state, Anambra state, Imo state and stretching to the adjacent states, such as Rivers state and Delta state (Madubukor; 1994, p.7). The Major and most popular cities in Igbo include the following: Enugu, Umuahia, Nsukka, Nnewi, Asaba, Onitsha, Afikpo, Okigwe, Owerri, Aba, Abakariki, Awka, Orlu, Ekwulobia and many others (Onwuatuegwu; 2010, p.8). Moreover, Igbo-land covers about 15,800 Square miles with the River Niger dividing it into two equal parts. The Igbo share boundary at east with the Ibibios and the people of Cross River. To the south they share boundary with the Ijaws and to the west with the Edo ethnic group. Again to the north they bounded by the Igala and Idoma speaking people (Nzimiro; 1972, p.3).

Hence, the Igbo people are very generous, hospitable and as well deeply religious. With regard to the religious inclination of the Igbo, Njaka meaningfully and correctly writes: Religion plays such a central role in Igbo life that it permeates every facet of the society. Neither the culture nor the political system of the Igbo can be understood with reference to the religion (Njaka; 1974, p.28) Following the above line of thought, Leonard without mincing words and superlatively affirms that the Igbo; ...are in the strict and natural sense of the word a truly and deeply religious people..... they eat religiously, dress religiously, and sin religiously (Leonard; 1964, p.429) For the Igbo, to achieve a good life, one must Invariably gain wisdom (*ima ihe*, or *ima ntu*). It is this wisdom that will enable one to know the correct principles of operation and as such, be able to put them into practice. Such principles include: the principle of justice, the principle of co-operation or collaboration (*igwe bu ike*), the principle of hospitality, the principle of truth or honesty, the principle of fidelity, the principle of humility, the principle of commitment and sacrifice and the principle patient endurance (cf. Ifeanyi; 1999, p.10). The above points confirms that the Igbo people are intrinsically religious. Hence, Dine among other voices emphasizes that: The Igbo, like their African neighbours, are very religious in the sense that they identify their existence with religion and move and breathe in it. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Igbo see religion in everything around them, for everything is created by *Chukwu* (God). These things manifest *Chukwu's* handiwork. All activities-religious and political- are regarded as the design of Providence for national existence (Dine; 1983, p.28).

The knowledge and the practice of such virtues or principles enhance good and healthy life. To neglect them, therefore, implies one messing up with one's life. Such life of neglect for the Igbo is rewarded with unfulfilled and regrettable death. Implicitly, the Igbo like the Scholastic philosophers equate knowledge with holiness. It is believed that the one who knows what is good must surely strictly adhere to it. This is because for the Igbo, to know the right things or the right manners of doing things, and yet do them the wrong way, makes one a child of abomination (*o malu o makpuwe bu aru*). They are naturally agricultural race. They have an enduring spirit and ability, very energetic and they are people of industry. Meanwhile, Igbo race by nature hate laziness with passion. They have the belief that group is strength and, therefore, live communal life. Hence, for the Igbo, man discovers or becomes aware of his or her humanity only the community of persons. It is a communalistic community in which an individual exists only in a community (Onwuatuegwu; 2010, p.9).

## II. IGBO IDENTITY

Who is an Igbo? What does the term 'Igbo' imply or refer to; or what is the Igbo-ness of an Igbo man? What identity do the Igbo bear? All of these questions and more have as their base in the issue of self – identity. In the field of contemporary African Philosophy, the quest for African identity in general and Igbo identity in particular has been a central project. As regard the question of Igbo man's identity, Ogugua writes, By implication, an Igbo is one who belong roots and branch, by birth and action to an Igbo community, he who participates in and lives the beliefs, ceremonies of the Igbo. To be detached from Igbo life and culture is to be non-Igbo. He must have an Igbo world-view. The Igbo parents can give birth to a son or daughter, this new creature is only Igbo if he despite his colour works towards remaining an Igbo (Ogugua; 2003, p.4). Hence, one by birth can be a citizen of Igbo land. However, someone that is born an Igbo person but who does not assimilate Igbo culture, world view and ways of living, automatically loses his identity as an Igbo. In other words, one should not just simply be an Igbo but should exist as an Igbo. He should allow the Igbo-ness to pass through him or her.

**The Ontological and Socio-Cultural Difference :** A people or a race is differentiated from every other races not on ontological basis or on the basis of colour of the body but on the socio-cultural ground. Ontologically all men are the same and have but one human culture. Therefore, what identify a race or a tribe or a group of people is a

socio-cultural difference and not an ontological difference. Ogugua hence, elaborates thus: The more a people loose sight of their culture which is the seed of their life, the more they will be distanced from the basic ontological and metaphysical principles which ground and do express this culture, the more they become porous, loose identity, worth and have their spiritual, ontological and metaphysical needs neglected and unattended to (Ogugua; 2003, p.2). Judging from this direction then, an Igbo is a being in the Igbo world. Consequently, he is not just a being there as Heidegger would think, but a being- with. Admittedly, of course, when an Igbo man is striped off of Western culture with all its infringement through the instrumentality of colonialization, neo-colonialization and imperialism, what remains for the Igbo is his cultural belongingness. Uchendu writes thus, Community spirit is very strong among the Igbo. Almost from the first day, the individual is aware of his dependence on his kin group 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 wherever he may live (Uchendu; 1965, p.34). 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. Yes! Because, with any of the parts lacking, the organism would not be complete or perfect any more. In Igbo community, no individual is taken for granted, but is seen as part and parcel of the community. Man, for the African, is never a lone individual. He is primarily an embodiment of relationship; a being whose ontological existence is often defined through the prism of the community to which he belongs (Ekwunife; 1996, p.36-37).

**Every Single Person is Valued in Igbo Community:** No wonder then an Igbo sees himself or herself in others; hence everyone within the community is everyone's 'nwanna' or 'nwanne' (brother or sister). Moreover, in the first instance, every person is valued for his or her own sake and not for material purposes or what will be gained (utilitarian motives). For Igbo people – 'mmadu ka aku' – he who has relations is richer than he who has wealth. Money is not the original meaning of wealth for the Igbo. Rather wealth is conceptualized in terms of parents, children, brothers, sisters or relations. Meanwhile, a childless man, an orphan a man who is without a relative are all considered poor. On the contrary, one who has children, parents, brothers and sisters or relations is considered or counted as 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 an Igbo desirously prefer human wealth to monetary riches. Moreover, 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. 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 world view. For the Igbo: 'enwe si na ya a anaghi atufu ma oreghi ure' - a monkey does not cast its young until it begins to decay. Everybody is, therefore, considered valuable. The aged for instance, even when they are no longer good at every other work; at least they are still very good at praying for the youths, the members of their family, their villagers and even the general public. The Igbo call this prayer by the elders 'igo ofo'.

**Igba Communalism:** 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 gradation in the recognition accorded to each person according to the person's function. Igbo communalism implies a community with communion as against Western communism. ...communalism remains the African style of governance. A system which abhors any contact with capitalist and individualist dimensions of the West. It is entirely an African way of life (Ozumba; 2003, p33). Ozumba explains further, 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 and sustenance of the communal life in the whole of Africa. Communalism therefore, is kind of social relationship that defines ones appreciation of another in a defined community (Ozumba; 2003, p.33). The spirit that moves and sustains Igbo man in his existential situation and possible circumstances is the spirit of belongingness and togetherness or communion. Even in his religious tendency towards the world beyond, the energy that keeps him on towards the good moral life is the possible hope of the engatheredness of the saints in the ancestral community. However, Igbo communalism as African communalism must be distinguished from Marxian communism in which there is class struggle. Again Western communism is atomic while Igbo – African communalism is community – individual relationship. As one realizes oneself as a "self", one is already at the same time immersed in one's community.

**The Ontological Nature of Igbo-African Individuality:** African individuality is ontological in the sense of being spiritual. Hence, they are communitarian, yet, the individual still retains his or her individual freedom but in consonant with the community. The individual's good or objectives do not contradict the communal good; neither

does the communal good trample the individual's good. Meanwhile, Communal good that is diametrically in contradiction with the individual's good is not considered good in the first instance. Despite the fact that it is in the community that the individual lives, yet, it is always true that it is the individuals that forms the community. Thus, ...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 (Iroegbu; 1995, p.350). The individual's good, therefore, should be put into balance with the communal good. However, for the Igbo, the community is superior to the individuals that make up the community. Hence Ozumba emphasizes,...the individual makes meaning only in the context of the community. Observably, it is interesting to note that the unity of the community should be strengthened, as the community is superior to the individual. In the event of conflict existing between the two, the community's interest has to be protected before the individual's interest (Iroegbu; 1995, p.350). Cosmologically, an individual is understood as existing in a community without losing his identity. Nevertheless, the identity of the individual is discovered and affirms in the community of persons. For instance, a child that is isolated in a room will immediately begin to cry: '*efuo mo-o*' I am lost. However on hearing someone's voice even from afar, the child will stop crying, because, his or her existence is assured by that mere hearing of a human voice. The awareness of the presence or the existence of the other or others affirms my own presence or existence (Onwuatuegwu; 2010, p.61). Succinctly speaking, therefore, the central point in the Igbo notion of man as being- with, is belongingness, togetherness or communion. This identifies every Igbo man and woman alike

**Igbo Communalistic System of Life as a Panacea to the Nigerian Socio- Political System :** Igbo communalism is defined as a communalistic system which accommodates its citizenry and where every single person counts. No one is neglected. The welfare of every individual in the community is taken care of. No individual person is or should be persecuted on the grounds of the circumstances of the person; such as being poor, uneducated, having no relatives, or being a weakling. The community in gradation, beginning with the family, extended family, kindred and clan are the instituted institutions that are there to protect both the communal and the individual's interests. In the present Nigerian situation, the question of the protection of life and property which is the ultimate primary duty of the government is nowhere to be found. The system has been high jacked by hooligans and cabalistic political players who are the measure of all things. The things that are right that they are right and the things that are not right that they are not right. The matter of the rule of law is a thing of yesterday. That the law is the respecter of nobody is a mere political memorization and diplomatic jingoism that is essentially lacking in both content and meaning. In Igbo communalism, no one is above the law despite and in spite of the person's position, age or endowment. Every individual in the community is treated equally and equitably. It is a different story when it comes to Nigerian socio-political system. The system is characterized with a divide and rule system. The issue of the so called federal character of the constitution is no longer mentioned, not to talk of putting it into practice especially by the present regime of the country.

Nigerian socio-political system is constructed in the form of self-willed government - where the one at the helm of affairs does whatever he wills without qualms. Many things are done outside the context of God and context of the constitution. The constant awareness of the divine presence in the midst of his created universe as it is the case with the Igbo communalistic setting, is seriously and conspicuously lacking in both content and meaning in the Nigerian socio-political system. The mentality is such that the worship of God is just a matter of lips service. God that is mentioned in the constitution and Nigerian pledge is nothing but an illusion or a mere legalistic and externalistic platitudes.

Where is the place of "all nations bound in freedom, peace and unity" that are enshrined in the Nigerian national anthem? Is the peace and the unity in practice or simply for a theoretical garnishment? The words are well coined. The problem is the concrete materialization of these well written anthem in the practical life of the country's socio-political system. Nigeria is a place where many things presently happened and no one dared question or reacting. Any form of criticisms whether constructive criticisms or otherwise, are considered criminality. Try to question or criticize the system, by the next day you will be proscribed a terrorist. It is a question of giving the dog a bad name and then killing it. On the contrary, the Boko haramism, Herdsmenism and banditry are trampling and destroying life and property of the citizenry and no one seems to notice that. Instead, the same terrorists are pampered and financially motivated by the government of the day. Life is sacred no matter whose life it is in question.

The leaders should brave up and face their responsibilities and citizenry should equally give attention to their civic responsibilities and the country will in no distant time becomes a place of solace. It is on this regard that Achebe warns that;the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders [and citizens] to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership and followership”

(Achebe; 1983, p.1). In Igbo communalism, the individuals make up the community but the community owns the individuals. Hence, the life and the wellbeing of the individuals matters much for the community. Secondly, the individuals talents and endowments are recognised, welcomed and appreciated. But in Nigerian system, it is rather a question of the state one comes from and one's religious affiliation. Consequently, the issue of meritocracy is dethroned and mediocrity is enthroned. But if both the human resources and natural resources with which God has blessed Nigeria is to be well harvested and harnessed, the country would have been another paradise on earth. Philips is of this opinion when he says: Nigeria remains one of the most important and fascinating countries in Africa, with abundant human and material resources, if these could be harnessed effectively (Philips; 2005, p.134) It is very reasonable to state at this point that the connecting dot beneath the problems of leadership and followership in Nigeria is lack of freedom. Freedom, however, is not a utilitarian or a deontologist theory but rather a sign of love. There is serious need to make the country a home where the citizenry will feel loved, cared for and recognised. Such conducive environment which can only be possible where love and freedom are created is what is needed in Nigeria. It is the environment of this kind that enables people to bring out their best in everything they do. After all in the words of Achebe;

there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else (Achebe; 1983, p.1) Both the government and the governed should learn to think about the common good and eschew selfishness and lack of consideration for others. Every action one takes should not be out of duty or obligation, or for the gain, but for the goodness of the act so as to spread love and promote happy living (Steiner; 1995, p.155). The leaders and the politicians should necessarily avoid dividing the country along the lines of religion and ethnicity or tribalistic divisiveness only to get to the political throne. When we achieve these, Nigeria will defeat radicalism and fanaticism together with their accompanying criminality and hooliganism in our politics and religions, corruption and incompetency will be dethroned in our socio-political life, and the country will surely become a pure home, a community where love is spread in order to bring peaceful, authentic, creative, transformative and free lives.

### III. CONCLUSION

Having gone through this research paper, one will no doubt, understand the reason why the social tie with community members is so much cherished by the Igbo, that nothing whatsoever is permitted to tamper with it. Hence, the Igbo saying: '*Si fufue okwu m, ma si atufula m*'. This saying literally implies that every Igbo person can easily and readily accept the rejection of his or her opinion, but cannot withstand being excommunicated from among the people of his or her community. Little wonder the worst and the most undesirable punishment that can be meted out to an Igbo is punishment by banishment or ostracization. It is certainly, this ceaseless and conscious struggle to maintain and nourish community tie even with the dead relatives, is the energy that propels an Igbo in his unyielding efforts to live up to expectation with regards to moral responsibilities and societal obligations.

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