

## IGWEBUIKE AS AN AFRICAN INTEGRATIVE AND PROGRESSIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

**Prof. Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, O.S.A.**

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Tansian University, Umunya

Anambra State

ikee\_maio@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

*Responses have emerged in the works of many African scholars regarding the question of who a person is in African ontology. While some scholars have spoken of the African personality in terms of Africa's geo-numerical identity, some have spoken of Africa in terms of her civilization and colour-based identities. These perspectives notwithstanding, this piece focuses on the relational-based identity of the African personality. It studies the concept of personhood in traditional African ontology with the purpose of establishing the nexus between ancient African traditional society and the present conceptual package, and understands the African living person as a dialectically relational organism, with a coherent pluralism or a composite of complex elements within the same self. It argues that it is this complex dialectical relational character of the African personality that gives the African his or her identity in the midst of alterities. For the purpose of this research, the hermeneutic and phenomenological methods of inquiry would be patronized in the collection and interpretation of data. It is envisaged that a study of this kind would enlarge the understanding of the African personality, and thus, predispose the African for development.*

**Keywords:** Africa, Identity, Person, Personhood, Philosophical, Self.

### **Introduction**

The concept of the human person cultivated by various indigenous African peoples is a core value in each individual socio-cultural context, and more so, a determinant of thought and relationships within the socio-cultural milieu. This is based on the fact that the human person is at the centre of the African universe. Mbiti (1970), therefore, asserts that "Man is at the very centre of existence and African people see everything else in its relation to this central position of man... it is as if God exists for the sake of man" (p. 92). Corroborating Mbiti, Metuh

(1981), avers that "Everything else in African worldview seems to get its bearing and significance from the position, meaning and end of man" (p. 109). The idea of God, divinities, ancestors, rituals and sacrifices are only useful to the extent that they serve the needs of the human person. Contrary to the mechanistic concept of the human person, the human person in the African worldview has a purpose and mission to fulfill; he comes into the world as a force amidst forces and interacting with forces. Good status, good health and prosperity are signs of the wellbeing of a person's life-force, and man struggles to preserve it through an appropriate relationship with the spiritual forces around him. The goal of every human person is to achieve his destiny imprinted on his palm by his creator. He is not just an individual person, but one born into a community whose survival and purpose are linked with others. Thus the human person is first a member of a clan, a kindred or a community (Kanu 2015a&b).

This notwithstanding, studies in the area of African personality have been done in the direction of reflections on symbols and patterned behaviours associated with one level of personality or the other, like the *Chi*, which in Igbo is the symbol of a person's guiding spirit; the *Ofo*, the symbol of a man's individuation, the *Ikenga*; and *Odu Enyi*, symbols of a person's personal achievement. Although the exposure of African traditional values to western culture and influence has brought about a lot of alterations in African perspectives, this piece studies the concept of personhood in traditional African ontology with the purpose of establishing the nexus between ancient African traditional society and the present conceptual package. In studying the traditional African concept of personhood, it would be engaged from the dimensions of African personhood as a coherent pluralism and its dialectically progressive character.

### **African Personhood as a Coherent Pluralism**

African personhood is studied against the background of Igwebuiké philosophy which has been developed from the Igbo thought. It is a principle that is at the heart of African thought, and in fact, the modality of being in African ontology. Igwebuiké is a composite word made up of three dimensions (Kanu 2015). Therefore, it can be employed as a word or used as a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuiké*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. The three words involved: *Igwe* - a noun which means number or population, usually a huge number or population, *Bu* - a verb, which means *is* and *Ike* is another verb, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu 2016). Thus, put together, it means

'number is strength' or 'number is power', that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force (Kanu, 2017). Its English equivalents are "complementarity", "solidarity" and "harmony". The preferred concept, however, is 'complementarity'. In relation to the different dimensions of the African personality, Igwebuiké philosophy holds that there is a complementary relationship between these dimensions.

In African anthropology, the human person is made up of three principal distinctive but coherent elements: the spirit, the body and the heart. These constituent elements that make up the individual person, according to Ejizu (2017), also provide the basis for the relatedness of the total personality. Thomas (1971) describes the African personality in this regard: "Similar to modern chemistry, it is a veritable epistemological revolution which is in operation if one wishes to comprehend the coherent pluralism of the self which seems to have characterized the complex structure and dynamism of the Black African Personality" (p. 387).

The focus of this study would be the Igbo-African worldview. And within this context, the three elements include: the spirit (*Muo*), the Heart (*Obi*) and the Body (*Ahu*). These elements are in the self, defining the distinctive character of the self. Without all these elements, the self would lose the power of context, and thus the strength of visibility and relevance.

### 1. The Spirit (*Muo*)

*Muo*, in Igbo, is a name used to describe whatever that is immaterial, like God, the deities, ancestors, however, it is also used to describe the immaterial part of the human person. This introduces the idea that the human person is not completely a material reality, it has a spiritual dimension which must be considered in every discussion about personhood. Okere (2015) avers that: "Muo is therefore conceived as the intangible, invisible element in man, the seat of will and emotions, the principle of life and point of connection, similarity and sharing with the world of the spirit" (p. 164).

This spirit in the human person is the principle of life; such that the absence of the spirit would mean the absence of life. This explains why for many Africans, the death of a person is seen as the departure of the spirit of the person. Okere posits that the *Muo* carries out the following activities in the human person:

1. *Uche*, which means thinking, considering or reflecting.
2. *Iru eruru*, which refers to a deep reflection, usually over something sad or

tragic.

3. *Ncheta*, which means to fetch out from the past through thinking, that is, to remember, to recall, to think out.
4. *Nghota*, which means to understand, to comprehend, to grasp or to get the full implications of something.
5. *Izu* means deliberation, consensus, or the information that is the result of consensus and deliberation.
6. *Ako* means prudence, cleverness and wise.
7. *Ngege* means imagining, surmising.
8. *Atutu* means to plan, to project and to order the execution of some plan.

This notwithstanding, the spirit of a person, which derives directly from the Supreme Being and the ancestral world also links him or her ontologically to God and the ancestral spirits. It is the point of connection between the person and the spiritual world.

## 2. The Heart (Obi)

When the missionaries came, for want of word and due to ignorance of the local language and culture of the Igbo, they foisted the foreign concept of the soul on the native word: Mkpuru Obi (the seed of the heart), to mean the spiritual element that is in man that is destined for eternal life. The obi is the psychological centre of emotions, sensation and sympathy. It is the seat and centre of virtue and vice, of conscience and morality as well. The quality of a person's heart determines the quality of the person's way of life. The life that a man lives mirrors the kind of heart that the person has. In fact, when an Igbo wants to describe a person in relation to his attitude, the heart is used to present a picture of him (Okere 2015). For instance:

- a. Obi kara ka: a brave heart
- b. Obi mgbawa: heart break
- c. Onye obi miri: weak or sentimental person
- d. Obi kporo nku: a wicked person
- e. Obi nwayo: a gentle or kind person
- f. Obi ike: a strong person
- g. Obi ojo: a bad person
- h. Obi oma: a kind and happy person
- i. Obi ebere: a merciful person

## 3. The Body (Ahu)

The body in Igbo language is *ahu*. Etymologically, it can be traced to the Igbo word- *hu*, which means 'to see'. In relation to *ahu*, it means that the body is that part of the self which can be seen, it is visible, seeable, tangible. Thus, Ejizu

(2017) refers to the body as the centre of the manifestation of a living person. When a child is born, his *ahu* helps people around him in identifying him. When a person has polio, the sight of him and the nature of his *ahu* helps a person to identify him. The *ahu* also expresses the state of the human person. This is why the Igbo would ask the other: *Ahu gi kwanu*, meaning, how is your body? The body is thought of as the indicator of the health of the person. This explains why when the Igbo says *Ahu ojoo* or *ahu njo*, meaning bad body, is used to mean ill health.

When an ancestor reincarnates, sometimes the *ahu* helps the family into which the child has been born to identify the ancestor who has returned. For instance, in cases of an ancestor who lost his five fingers while he lived, and when a child is born after his death without five fingers, even before divination, it is believed that it is the ancestor that has returned. In most cases, the divination confirms it. In a situation of this kind the child could be named *Ahunna*, that is, the father's body, if it is the father who has reincarnated in him. Thus, the *ahu* helps in identifying a person as an individual who is different from the other. While the spirit relates a person to the spiritual world, God and ancestral spirits, the body relates a person to the parents, the lineage and the physic-social order, that is, animate, inanimate and social environment.

It must be noted that, although the *ahu* occupies a very important place in identifying a person, the *ahu* is not the self, but an outward expression of the self. It is through the *ahu* that the self is known and expressed. In relation to the individuality of each person, every *ahu* is unique. There are no two *ahu* that are the same. Each person has his or her own *ahu* which differentiates him or her from the others (Okere 2015).

### **The Self (Onwe) as the Unity of Plurality**

Having discussed the dimensions of the human person as including the body, the heart and the spirit, does it imply that they exist merely as independent dimensions of the human persons- a kind of three persons? No, there is a coherence. This coherence is achieved through the self- the *onwe*. The self is the unity amidst the plurality of the human person. It is also that which remains permanent in the changes that occur in the human heart, spirit and body. Thus, Okere (2015) describes the *onwe* (the self) as the:

Core subject of identity, perduring and enduring all human experience. It is not describable and has no name and no function except as the ultimate author of all the functions of the individual, the carrier of all experiences. It is the link between the experiences of yesterday and today, the basis of that proprietorship by which

these fleeting multitudes are one and are mine. (p. 164).

The original root of the word *onwe* can be traced back to *nwe* which means 'to own'. Thus, *onwe gi*, would mean he that owns himself, *onwe ya*, would mean he or she that owns himself or herself. Therefore, it is the same person that owns the body, the spirit and the heart, and since the person owns them, the person exercises control over them and directs their purposes towards the will of the self (Kanu 2017).

### **The Dialectically Progressive Character of African Personhood**

The human person is also conceived by the Igbo-African as a life-long project. Ejizu (2017) refers to this as a progressive and role-oriented affair within one's socio-cultural milieu. The human project is, therefore, not achieved at once when a person is born, but progressively as the person moves from one stage. The progressiveness of the human personality lies in the fact that the human person through roles and initiations recreates his personality from one stage to another. This is evident in the different rites of passage that the African goes through, and its elaborate nature indicates the importance that the African places on it.

Although the pregnancy rites is meant to facilitate the birth of the child and to protect the mother and child from evil powers and malignant persons through offering a sacrifice, Metuh (1985) maintains that it is a rite of separation of the child from the world of the ancestors and incorporation into the world of human beings. It begins as soon as the woman misses her period. Among the Igbo, oracles are consulted as soon as a woman conceives and sacrifice offered to *Ala*. The movement from the world of the ancestors to the world of human beings brings about a shift in the personality of the human person that is involved (Kanu 2016).

In most African cultures, there are two stages of it: purification rites and naming ceremony. The purification rites according to Metuh (1985), begins after the woman gives birth, she and the child are secluded for purification. It is only after purification that she can begin to move around in the community. It is usually a ceremony of days, the number of days depends on the culture. To establish the community ownership of the child, the umbilical cord connecting the mother and the child is cut as a sign of the incorporation of the child into the community. After the purification rite, the naming ceremony begins, which as Quarcoopome (1987) opines humanizes and socializes the child, making him a member of the human family. During the birth rites, the child's personality is

child earns a woman the prestigious title: Eghu-Ukwu (Goat for the Waist).

### Conclusion

The exposure of traditional cultural values to the multiple forces of colonialism, Christianity, western education and urbanization which is breaking down the walls that distinguished micro societies and building a macro society, and scientific technology, in the contention of Ejizu (2017), has led to a tidal wave of change, engendering a significant revolution in traditional perception of the living person. While this might be true of the changes that occur in the expression of manhood or womanhood as in the case of symbolic objects, institutions, ritual forms, it might not be true of the substance of personhood. For instance, in areas where manhood was measured by how many wars a person has successfully fought, this might not be possible because of minimal reduction in inter-tribal wars; and where how many children a woman has given birth to, like ten children, might have been used as a symbol of womanhood, this might not hold again for the modern woman and society. The African concept of a person as a coherent pluralism still remains unchanged by the current changes, also, the African concept of the human person as a dialectically progressive reality has not been altered by the current changes. What is perceived as change is nothing but the adaptation of an old reality to new mediums of expression.

## References

- Ejizu, C. I. (2017). *African personality in symbolic and ritual forms*. A paper presented at the 2017 International Conference of the Association of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars (AATREPS). Held in June 15, at the PG Auditorium, Nnadi Azikiwe University, Awka.
- Kanu, I. A. (2015a). *African philosophy: An ontologico-existential hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.
- Kanu, I. A. (2015b). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications.
- Kanu, I. A. (2016). African Life Circle Rituals as a Socio-Cultural Context for Education. International Conference of the Society for Research and Academic Excellence. University of Nigeria, Nsukka. 8<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> February.
- Kanu, A. I. (2017). *Towards a hermeneutic of personal autonomy in African ontology*. A paper presented at the 2017 Pan African Conference on Inter-Disciplinary Studies on 20-25 September, Auditorium, Holy Trinity Basilica Onitsha.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1970). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- Metuh E. I. (1981). *God and man*. Southampton: Carmelot.
- Metuh, E. I. (1985). *African religions in western conceptual schemes: The problem of interpretation*. Jos: Imco.
- Okere, T. (2015). *The hermeneutics of philosophy, religion and culture*. J. O. Oguejiofor (Ed.), A. C. Onuorah (Comp.). Colour Print Group: USA.
- Quarcoopome, T. N. O. (1987). *West African traditional medicine*. Ibadan: African Universities.
- Ray, B. C. (1999). *African religions: Symbol, ritual and community*. Vintage Books: London.
- Thomas, L. V. (1971). *Le pluralism coherent de la notion de personne en Afrique noir traditionnelle*. Paris: CNRS.