

IGWEBUIKE AS A HERMENEUTIC OF INDIVIDUALITY AND COMMUNALITY IN AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

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

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Tansian University, Umunya

Anambra State

ikee_maio@yahoo.com

Abstract

One of the allegations against African philosophy and acting is that of collectivism, which excludes individuality in the African universe. The present work on schedule responds to this allegation by attempting to prove that there is individuality in the African communal universe. This is achieved by relying on Igwebuiké philosophy taken from the Igbo-African socio-cultural background. The Igbo concept of the self was studied to see how in differentiating the self from the other in Igbo ontology, individuality and identity is unveiled. It further studies the use of personal pronouns and names in Igbo ontology to reveal how the Igbo express the individuality of persons in the community. The Igbo philosophy of the body was employed as an instrument of personal identity to show how, through the body, the Igbo-African differentiates individual persons from others in the community. Finally, the concept of Chi, which is an Igbo principle of individuation for the interpretation of personal historical and religious experiences, was studied to see how the particular is not lost in the universal. The phenomenological and hermeneutic methods were employed for this research. This paper submits that in the African universe, while the ontology of the person is founded on the particularity of the individual, implying that it is the metaphysics of the particular that founds identity, it is the community that gives meaning to such an existence and grounds such an identity.

Keywords: African, Communal, Igwebuiké, Individuality, Philosophy, Self.

Introduction

African thought, philosophy and ethics have been accused by both Western and African scholars of swallowing up the individual and his or her personal identity in the community-oriented pattern of thinking. This perspective is the product of an interpretation of the African way of life, which is community focused and reinforced by the African's cultural orientation characterized by love,

brotherhood, concern for the other and a sense of belonging to the community. The community has set laws which members follow for the purpose of order and the preservation of the community. From the foregoing, it would look to a distant observer that everyone acts, thinks and behaves in the same way. According to Edeh (1983):

From this, it would seem that by living in such a community, the lucidity of one's self-consciousness is veiled and therefore one is not yet in a completely realized communication since one is not yet aware of autonomous selfhood or will. In such a community, it could appear as if each person is reduced to an ego point which is substitutable for another mere ego point (pp. 135-136).

In the midst of the questioning of the quality of the individuality of the African individual within the context of the community, this work makes an attempt to study the African concept of the self as it relates to the community against the background of Igwebuiké philosophy. Igwebuiké philosophy has been developed from the Igbo background. 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* is a noun which means number or population, usually a huge number or population. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *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'. From this philosophical background, questions such as these would be responded to: Is the African an individual person who is capable of deciding on his own what to do and what not to do or is he a lump of persons who act in a chorus? Is the African capable of individuality or is he locked up in communalism? This is the burden looming at the horizon of this piece. It would, therefore, study the African concept of the self, names, personal pronouns, *Chi* principle and the human body to see if there is the possibility of a simple individuation and identity within the complexity of the community.

Cartesian Conceptualization of the Self

An attempt to understand the conceptualization of the self within the context of Igwebuike philosophy would be best appreciated against a different background. And the different background that would be of concern here is the western conceptualization scheme of the person, which is expressed in the Cartesian concept of the self. The Cartesian concept of the self without the other can be traced back to the medieval ages.

Boethius (480 AD) in his *De Persona et Duabus Naturis*, held that a person is an "individual substance of a rational nature" (*persona est rationalis naturae individual substantia*). This later became the classical definition of a person. St Thomas Aquinas (1224 AD) after Boethius, in his *Summa Theologica*, defines a person as the *subsistens rationale* (a rational subsistent). According to Okon (2010), Thomas Aquinas' concept of a person implies that:

- a. A person is a substance, not an accident.
- b. A person must have a complete nature, and so that which lacks completeness and remains only a part of nature does not satisfy this definition.
- c. It is subsistent by itself; the person exists in himself and for himself, being the ultimate subject possessor of his nature and all his acts and so is the ultimate subject of predication of all its attributes.
- d. It is separated from others.
- e. It is of a rational nature, this excludes all supposita that lack rationality.

This notwithstanding, with Rene Descartes (1596-1650 AD), philosophy started a new way, that of gnoseology. He defines the person in relation to self-consciousness. In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes (1637), through his methodical doubt, discovers that something resists doubt. That is, the fact that it is he who doubts, and who can be deceived. He thus arrives at *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore, I am). To the question, who am I? Descartes answers simply, a "thinking thing", a thing that essentially has mental experiences. Descartes' transformation of the person from an ontological to a psychological fact, opened the door to a series of either great diminutions or of enormous exaggerations of the concept of person. Since the time of Descartes, individual consciousness has been taken as the privileged centre of identity, while "the other" is seen as an epistemological problem, or as an inferior, reduced or negated form of the same. The self, in the Cartesian scheme, sees itself without the other (Kanu 2016 and 2017). This perspective has influenced western philosophy.

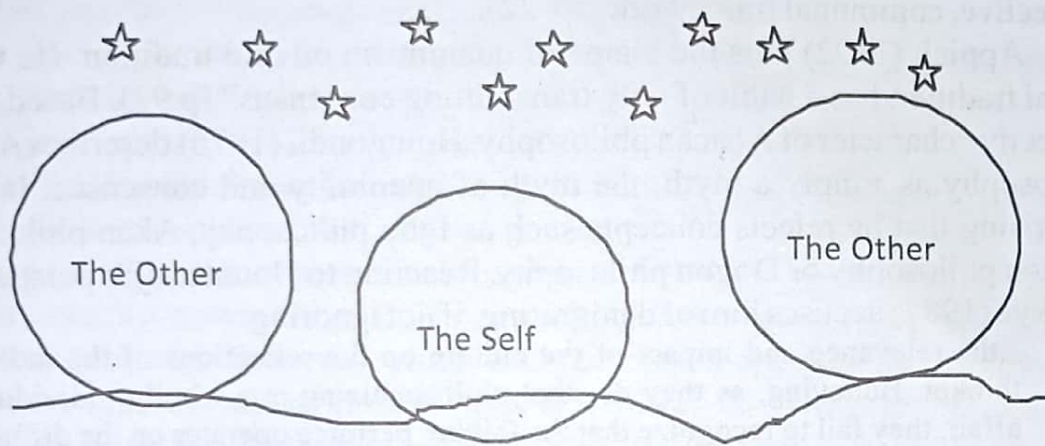


FIGURE 1: The Self In Relation to the other in Western Conceptualization Scheme

The study of the historical development of Western philosophy and the evolution of African thought unveils an obvious diversity between the Western conceptualization scheme and the African conception of reality. From the Cartesian model, Onyeocha (1997) and (2006) points out that while the Western pattern of thought is exclusivistic, depersonalized, objectivised and more concerned with analysis, the African scheme of conceptualization is inclusivistic, integrative, non-reductionistic, concrete, personalized and subjectivised in all its manifestations, expressing the interconnectedness of reality- a world of relationship, harmony, continuity and complementarity. The dualistic and exclusivistic Western perception of reality understands a person in relation to the other in terms of “*I and Not-I*”. This creates a dichotomy that brings in a strong divide between the “*I and the other*”, which could set groups and individuals against themselves.

The Problem of Collectivism and Unanimism in African Philosophy

While individualism defines the Western conceptualization scheme, African philosophy has been criticized on the grounds of collectivism and unanimism as regards the self in relation to the other. It is argued that while Western philosophy is the record of the philosophies of individual persons, for instance, we have Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Hegel, Russell, Whitehead, Rawls, Rorty and the likes in African philosophy, it is different. Afolayan (2006) writes that “Instead of the gallery of individual philosophers who symbolize the cultures confrontation with its experiences ... there is an attempt to summarize the philosophical enterprise in Africa into a

collective, communal framework" (p. 22).

Appiah (1992) puts the blame of unanimism on oral tradition. He writes: "Oral tradition has a habit of only transmitting consensus" (p.92). Based on the collective character of African philosophy, Hountondji (1976) describes African philosophy as simply a myth, the myth of unanimity and consensus. It is not surprising that he rejects concepts such as Igbo philosophy, Akan philosophy, Bantou philosophy or Dogon philosophy. Reacting to Hountondji's perspective, Gyekye (1987) accuses him of denigrating, if not ignoring:

...the relevance and impact of the culture on the reflections of the individual thinker. Believing, as they do, that philosophizing is a wholly individualistic affair, they fail to recognize that the thinker perforce operates on the diffuse and inchoate ideas of the cultural milieu. We obviously cannot divorce the philosophy of an individual thinker from the ideas current among the people, for the philosophy of the individual thinker is rooted in the beliefs and assumptions of the culture. (p. 25).

While it is accepted as true that African philosophy, in the past, is collective, it is also good to mention that its collective character does not mean that it ceases to be philosophy or critical. Gyekye (1987) argues that, "In Africa's historical past, there has been an absence of ... known and identifiable individual thinkers who stand out and can claim to have originated specific philosophical doctrines and to whom we can trace such doctrines" (p. 24). But this is not to say that there were no individual thinkers, the fact that they are not known does not mean that they did not exist. He goes on to write that:

But surely, it was individual wise men who created African 'collective' philosophy. A particular thought or idea is, as regards its genesis, the product of an individual mind. And although it is logically possible for two or more individuals to think the same thought or to have the same idea at the same time, nevertheless, the production of the thought as such is the work of the mind of each of the individuals concerned. It is always an individual's idea or thought or proposition that is accepted and gains currency among other people; at this stage, however, it is erroneously assumed to be the collective thought of the people. (p. 24).

Although African philosophy is regarded as a collective philosophy, they were borne from individual minds, and although we regard the philosophy of the West as composed of individual thinkers, they were furnished with the ideas, beliefs and thoughts of their society. This explains why they are referred to as Oriental philosophy, speaking of the Oriental mind; British philosophy, speaking of the British Mind; European philosophy, speaking of the European mind; German philosophy, speaking of the German mind and the likes.

The Self and the Conceptualization of Individuality

In the Igbo expression of a person, we discover that a person is an identity. In reference to a person, it is said *onye mmadu*. More so, the use of pronouns by the Igbo, like *Mmu* (I), *Ngị* (You), *Nginwa* (Yourself), *Nmunwa* (Myself), *Nyanwa* (Himself, Herself), shows that a person is conceived with an identity, a primary statement of reality and not mixed up with others without an identity. The attachment *nwa*, is a demonstrative which means “this here”. Thus, *mmunwa* would literally mean “Myself here” and *Nginwa* “Yourself here”. It is an emphatic pronoun. The word which the Igbo uses to speak of the self is *onwe*, and so the Igbo can talk of *onwe gi* “yourself”, *onwe ha* “Themselves”, *onwe m*, “Myself”, *onwe ya* “Himself or herself”. The original root of the word *onwe* can be traced back to *nwe* that means “to own”. Thus, *onwe gi* would mean he that owns himself, *onwe ya* would mean he or she that owns himself or herself. The idea of ownership over the self introduces the idea of independence from the other. The *onwe*, therefore, becomes the source of identity of the individual. According to Okere (2015), the *onwe*:

is not describable and has no name and function except as the ultimate author of all the functions of the individual, the carrier of all experience. It is the link between the experiences of yesterday and today, the basis of that proprietorship by which these fleeting multitudes of experience are one and are mine. (pp. 163-164).

The *onwe* is, therefore, at the centre of human action and engagements. No one can speak of the *onwe* in a way that denotes distance or as a part of him or her. For the *onwe* is not a part of the person as one can speak of the hands or legs or ears. The *onwe* is yourself in its totality. While the *onwe* conveys the reality of identity and alterity, “I” different from the “Other”, it is also a basic indication of personal autonomy. Personal autonomy brings in the idea of freedom, for he who is autonomous is free. Thus, the Igbo-African is free because he is autonomous. If the *onwe* is autonomous in the community of the others, it is obvious that the Igbo-African has an individuality even in the midst of communality.

Personal Names/Pronouns and Individuality

Personal names in African ontology recognizes personal identity. It is in fact the first mark of personal identity in African communities. Once a child is born, he is given an identity such as *Chukwuma*, *Chukwuka*, *Onyema*, *Adaku*, *Ikechukwu*, *Adaora*, *uchenna*, *Emeka*, *Chiugo*, and *Nnennia*. The peculiarity of the circumstances leading to the birth of persons affects to a great extent the kind of name that is given to the person. Even when people are born under the same circumstance and given the same name, their names are particular to them and do not have the same meaning- as it is unique to them. Tempels (1959) avers that

“the first criterion is the name. The name expresses the individual character of the being. The name is not a simple external courtesy; it is the very reality of the individual” (p. 106). Similarly, Bujo (1998) notes that:

For many African people, the name is not a mere ritual which defends and protects the person, but is the bearer of an action and a message. In a specific manner, it contains a whole programme for life, which everybody has to realize individually (p. 147).

Names carry the history and prehistory of individuals, families and communities. Thus, a name(s) for the Igbo is very important for his identity, and that is why he says *afamefuna*- “let my name not demise”. This is because the demise of his name is the demise of his identity. This is why every Igbo-African works hard to achieve something in the community so that his name does not die. This makes a strong connection between the name and the person. Mbiti (1970) posits that the name is the person, and many names are often descriptive of the individual, particularly names acquired as the person grows. The reference to personal names points to the fact that in Africa people were viewed as persons and not just in the collective as a community. If people were viewed collectively then there would be no need for a name.

The Body as an Indication of Individuality

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. When a child is born, his *ahu* helps people around him to identify him. When a person has polio, the sight of him and the nature of his *ahu* helps a person to identify him. 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 a case of an ancestor who lost his five fingers while he lived, and when a child is born after his death the child is born without five fingers, even before divination, it is believed that the child 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. 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.

Personal *Chi* as an Indication of Individuality

The Igbo believes in the existence of a personal guardian, protector or divine double conceived as a part of God in man or the divine part of man appointed by God to watch over the individual person as he or she fulfils his or her personal destiny. It is called a divine double because while it is resident in the individual person, it deputizes for *Chineke* or *Chukwu*. As a divine force, agent or power, it is unique to the individual person, and part and constitutive of the individual person. There can not be one same *Chi* for two persons. The *Chi* is not the self, neither is it the soul or the spirit of a person, this explains why the self cannot pray to it, for that would mean the self praying to or honouring the self. Beyond the fact that it is a principle for explaining historical and religious experiences, the *Chi*, according to Okere (2015):

Is also part of the individual's identity and is seen as the prime moving force and principle of individualism in Igbo culture. As such, it is strictly personal, indivisible, not shared or sharable with others as the Igbo says: *(out)? nne namu mana owughi otu chi neke*: same mother but different *Chi*, that is, a person has the same mother as his sibling but his *Chi* is strictly his. (p. 167).

From the foregoing, *Chi* becomes an instrument of individuation and a characteristic attribute of individual persons. It is the principle of destiny- and just as everyone has his own destiny, everyone also has his own *Chi*.

The Problem of Individuality and Community: An Igwebuike Response

Having established the uniqueness and individuality of each person, Igwebuike philosophy understands individuality not as the antithesis of community but as a basis for relationship in the community. Therefore, the oneness and personness in a person is what makes him or her to relate to the other. If all realities were one reality, then there would be no relationship, but the fact that the African world is one that is complementary and relational indicates that there are individual persons that relate. Ezekwonna (2005) posits that: "The community recognizes this personhood and knows that 'I' cannot be 'you' and that 'you' can only relate to 'I' in other for them to achieve their goals and those of the community" (p. 64). Despite the community influence, each person maintains his or her identity, however, it is through relationship in the community that a person's personhood becomes clearer and developed: through constant contact with the other person, your personality learns and is influenced. The African individual person is a social being and not a solitary being. Nzomiwu (1999) expresses this thus:

For personality, having its root in spirit rather than in matter expresses itself primarily in love, which involves the power to give oneself and to receive the gift of another. Personality emphasizes community for it is dynamic out-going passes properly to a trait of an African person. (p. 19).

How does a person's personality develop through interaction with other persons? As an individual person, no one is self-sufficient. The goods in us are developed when we interact with other people. The entire cultural life is imparted through relationship with the other. Thus, in African ontology, the conceptualization of a person includes the person's dialogical relationship with his environment. There is no individual person without a world, and this world is the sociality and materiality that defines his personhood. For it is in the process of asserting himself in the community that the intelligibility of a person's autonomous choices of goals and plans for his life becomes crystal clear. To disassociate oneself from the community is to weaken the personhood of a person and, therefore, the being of the community.

From the foregoing, Igwebuiké is not a philosophy of collectivism. It recognizes the particular which complements the other and its recognition of the particular is closely linked to its respect for individuality. It is, therefore, neither collectivism nor individualism. Igwebuiké thus contradicts the Cartesian conceptualization of the individual in terms of which the individual can be conceived without necessarily conceiving the other person. Manda (2015) avers that in the Cartesian self, the individual exists prior to, or separately or independently of the other or others in the community of people. Therefore, the remaining part of the society outside of the self is conceived as a nothing but an added extra to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being. This perspective exaggerates the solitary aspect of the person or individual to the detriment of the community. In Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* we find an individualism that is not the opposite of Igwebuiké, but rather the opposite of collectivism, which is different in nuance from Igwebuiké. Thus, the opponent of individualism becomes collectivism. Below is an attempt to present in a diagram the relationship between the self and the other in Igwebuiké philosophy:

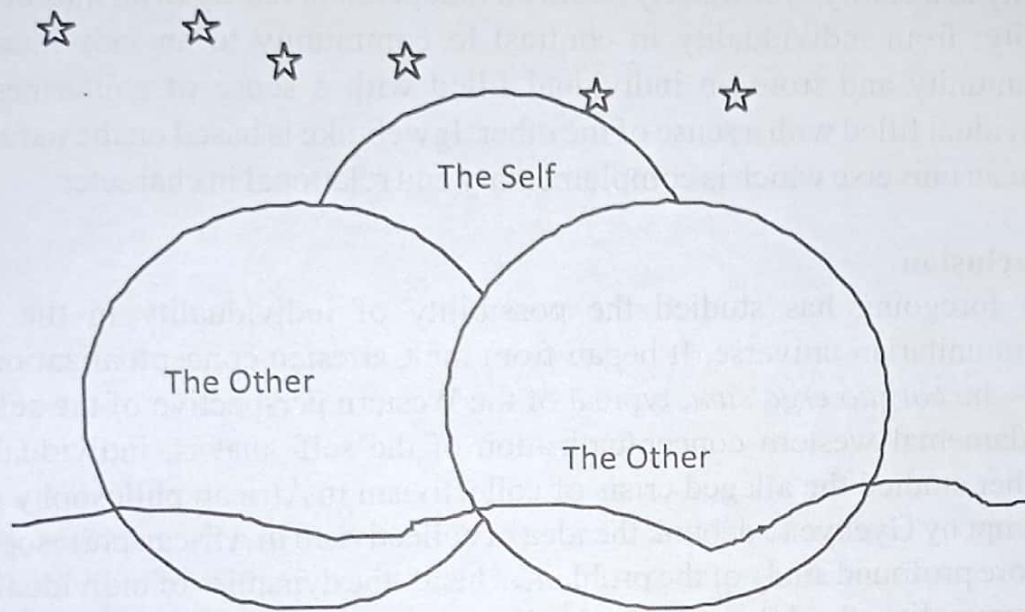


FIGURE 2: The Self in Relation to the other in Igwebuiké Conceptualization Scheme

Igwebuiké is distanced from collectivism because in collectivism, the individual vanishes in the community without any relevance. This was the impression that Gyekye wanted to correct when he responded to the interpretation of African thought by Hountondji. Gyekye (1987) understands the idea of collective thought as employed by Hountondji as a misnomer. He states that:

There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as collective thought, if this means that ideas result from the intellectual production of a whole collectivity. What has come to be described a collective thought is nothing but the ideas of individual wise people; individual ideas that, due to lack of doxographic tradition in Africa, became part of the pool of communal thought, resulting in the obliteration of differences among these ideas, and in the impression that traditional thought was a monolithic system that does not allow for divergent ideas. (p. 24).

Igwebuiké understands persons as individuals, however, in a community, and in terms of their relationship with others. Although persons are first individuals, in African ontology they conceptualize themselves only in relation to the other. In this case, individuals only exist in terms of their relationship with other people or individuals. The individual is a person who corresponds to the multiplicity of relationships in the community. This pushes the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* into a more complex reality, from an understanding of the individual as a solitary

reality to a reality in solidarity; from an independent reality to an interdependent reality; from individuality in contrast to community to an individual in the community and from an individual filled with a sense of solitariness to an individual filled with a sense of the other. Igwebuiké is based on the nature of the African universe which is complementary and relational in character.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the possibility of individuality in the African communitarian universe. It began from the Cartesian conceptualization of the self- the *cogito ergo sum*, typical of the Western perspective of the self as the fundamental western conceptualization of the self- that is, individualism. It further studied the alleged crisis of collectivism in African philosophy and the attempt by Gyekye to debunk the idea of collectivism in African philosophy. For a more profound study of the problem at hand- the dynamics of individuality and communality, the Igbo-African background is relied upon, since Igwebuiké philosophy is itself an Igbo philosophy. And to prove that there is still individuality even in the presence of communality, the concept of the self in Igbo ontology is studied to see how in differentiating the self from the other in Igbo ontology, individuality and identity is emphasized. It further studied the use of names in Igbo ontology to reveal how the Igbo express the individuality of each individual. The Igbo philosophy of the body is also employed as an instrument of personal identity to show how, through names, the Igbo-African differentiates individual persons from others in the community. Finally, the concept *Chi*, which is an Igbo principle of individuation for the interpretation of personal historical and religious experiences was studied to see how the individual ontologically is not mixed up with the other.

As a study in Igwebuiké philosophy, this piece has shown that, although in African philosophy there is communality of people, the communality of people has not degenerated into communalism. Every sense of communality perceived in the African universe is a product of individuality, for unless there are individuals, there cannot be a community. The beauty of the African universe is the presence of an individuality that relates freely and without losing their individuality in a community.

References

- Afolayan, A. (2006). Some Methodological Issues in the History of African Philosophy. In O. Oladipo (Ed.), *Core Issues in African Philosophy* (pp. 21-40). Ibadan: Hope.
- Appiah, K. A. (1992). *In my Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bujo, B. (1998). *The Ethical Dimension of Community*. Nairobi: Paulines.
- Descartes, R. (1983). *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*. Trans. John Vietch. London: Penguin Classics.
- Edeh, E. (1983). *Towards Igbo Metaphysics* Chicago: Loyola University Press.
- Ezekwonna, F. C. (2005). *African Communitarian Ethic: The Basis for the Moral Conscience and Autonomy of the Individual. Igbo Culture as a Case Study*. Peter Lang: Germany.
- Gyekye, K. (1987). *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hountondji, P. J. (1976). *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Kanu, I. A. (2015). *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, theology and philosophy*. Augustinian: Nigeria.
- Kanu, I. A. (2016). *Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Response to the Problem of Personal Identity and Alterity*. A paper presented at the 14th Annual Conference of the Igbo Studies Association, held at the Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois, USA, from May 12th to 14th.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). *African Philosophy, Globalisation and the Priority of Otherness*. A paper presented at the 2017 Philosophy Week of Saint Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary, Makurdi, Benue State Chapter of the Nigerian Major Seminaries Association of Philosophy Students. On 13th May.
- Manda, D. S. (2015). *Ubuntu Philosophy as an African Philosophy for Peace*. Retrieved on 0/6/17 from www.africanfiles.org/article.asp?ID=20361
- Mbiti, J. S. (1970). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Nzomiwu, J. P. (1999). *The Concept of Justice Among the Traditional Igbo: An Ethical Inquiry*. Awka: Fab.
- Okere, T. (2015). *The Hermeneutics of Philosophy, Religion and Culture*. J. O. Oguejiofor (Ed.), A. C. Onuorah (Comp.). Colour-Print Group: USA.
- Okon, J. A. (2010). Rethinking the idea of Human Personhood. In M. F. Asiegbu and J. C. Chukwuokolo (Eds.). *Personhood and Personal Identity: A Philosophical Study*. Enugu: SNAAP.
- Tempels, P. (1959). *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine.