A REVIEW OF EMMANUEL EDEH'S "TOWARDS AN IGBO METAPHYSICS"

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At a time when there was much talk about the reality of African philosophy, as is evident in Paulin J. Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality*, as to whether it does exist or not, and if it does exist, how can it be articulated? Even though Placid Tempels, the Belgian Catholic missionary, in the 50's had written about Bantu philosophy, Edeh believes that a philosophy written by an African about a particular African people as a context would advance African philosophy. He wrote,

> The idea of African philosophy will remain a figment of the imagination until it is formally presented by a people of Africa just as western philosophy was presented by the Greeks. The aim of this study is to attempt a presentation of African philosophy by a people of Africa (the Igbos). My effort will consist of a presentation of Igbo metaphysical thought patterns (p. 1).

In another piece he wrote,

> But Africa's contribution cannot be given a fair chance without serious efforts on the part of the African elites. These elites are born into and live African culture. It behoves them, therefore, to engage in the actual doing of African philosophy. That is, to articulate and present in a coherent manner the specific ways in which African peoples have conceived existence, beings and being. With this aim I have undertaken to present African philosophy as articulated in the metaphysics of the Igbos of Nigeria in West Africa (p. ix).

As a background to his study, he discussed the geographical and historical roots of the Igbo people of Nigeria, West Africa. This he believed would help the reader understand the Igbo people's philosophical mentality in general and their grasp of the metaphysical question in particular. In terms of methodology, Edeh employed the empirical pedagogy of enquiry, basically interviews and questionnaires from among the Nkanu elders of Enugu, Nigeria. The materials gathered through interviews and questionnaires were articulated through analysis and interpretation. Like Placid Tempels and Kagame, Edeh believes that

the avenue to a people's thought content is their language and culture, he wrote, "It is through language and culture that Igbo metaphysics, or any African philosophy for that matter, is preserved and transmitted" (p. 45). The use of both language and culture is because one leads to the other. According to Edeh, "Our brief consideration of the Igbo language leads us into the culture of the people since it is obvious that language cannot be divorced from the culture which it expresses" (56). In this analysis, Igbo proverbs, folklores, and other dimensions of Igbo culture, such as community, tradition, social group structure etc, were the object of analysis.

Origin and nature of the universe

He began his description of Igbo metaphysics with an attempt to understand the origin of the universe, which does not seem to pose a problem to the Igbo person. The Igbo has a proverb which says that "Ife welu mbido g'enwe njedebe" (whatever that has beginning will have an end). The origin of things are usually described in myths, tracing them back to the land of the unseen (noge gboo gboo, noge uwa n'adiro obu so ndi mmuo di). Thus Edeh wrote that "Visible objects are to be understood as gifts from the head of the inhabitants of the unseen" (p. 72). The idea of the visible and invisible brings out the Igbo duality, which recognizes the existence of two worlds: uwa (world) and ani muo (land of the unseen). The belief in the existence of these two worlds is expressed the Igbo way of life. For example in the way the traditional Igbo man begins his day by calling all the members of his household (the living dead) during *igo ofo* (morning prayer). The belief in reincarnation also evidences the duality of the world, for "If human beings after passing away from this visible world can come back after a certain period has elapsed and be born again, there must have been a place where they remained within that period" (p. 75). That place where they stay until their return is the invisible world. The Igbo concept of death as transition also points to the existence of another world to which they make their transit. The idea of two worlds also speaks of two dimensions of the human person, the body and soul. In a spiritual sense, the soul is distinct from the body, but metaphysically, the soul is in the body and is united to the body, thus inseparable entities. This duality is not common only to human beings, there is an invisible element of everything. Edeh writes that "In the minds of the Igbos the invisible element in any material object is equally as real as the visible aspect of the same object. If we judge from the degree of attention paid to the visible element, it would not be wrong to conclude that the unseen element is much more esteemed than the visible" (p. 78). The duality of the universe in Igbo ontology does not in any way exclude the unity of the world. According to Edeh,

"Regardless of the fact that they believe in the existence of two worlds, the Igbos, like other Africans, have an extraordinarily harmonious view of the universe" (p. 114).

Being

Edeh further discussed the nature of being, a fundamental issue in metaphysics. He posits a notion of being that is derived from a dual *loci:* from the Igbo language and the Igbo concept of the human person Edeh says that it is born from the fact that human beings are the principal focus of the Igbo physical world, basically comprising the human and non-human. This is expressed in Igbo names and proverbs: *madu-ka* (Human beings are the greatest) *madu-bisi* (Human life is the first). From the foregoing, one becomes aware of *what is* through an awareness of the human person as a visible concrete instance of what exists. But this would not be the area of concern in this piece. The researcher is primarily concerned with Edeh's derivation of being from the Igbo language.

From Igbo language
Edeh's presentation of being in Igbo metaphysics reveals a deep search by a pioneer African thinker of an African concept that would equal the concept of being employed by his Western contemporaries. And since the Igbo language has no exact equivalence of being in English as he argues "The Igbo language has no word that exactly translates the English word" (Edeh 1985, p.93), he draws out two hypothesis that approximates this notion: the *onye* and *ife* hypothesis.

The 'onye' hypothesis
He employs the concept of *onye* in Igbo language to test-denote the concept of being. But he discovers that *onye* hypothesis is basically applicable to human beings only. What then becomes of non-human existence that cannot be described as *onye*? According to Edeh (1985), the concept of *onye* has three applications:

1. *Onye* **as a pronominal clause:** as a pronominal clause it means 'who', as in "Jonathan who is the president of Nigeria" (Jonathan *Onye bu* president Nigeria).
2. *Onye* **as an interrogative adjective:** as an interrogative adjective, *Onye* is used to introduce interrogative statements. '*Onye?*' For instance, if someone knocks at your door, you can ask, *onye?* That is 'who?' Then the person responds, *obu Kanu* (It is Kanu). One can also speak of '*onye ma echi?*' (who knows tomorrow?)
3. *Onye* **as a noun:** 'In this category, its nearest but not exact English equivalent is person' (Edeh 1985, p.94). *Onye* in this sense refers to all

living entities, both human and superhuman. However, each time it is employed, it is always precedes an adjective or another noun. For example, *onye okike* (creator), *onye uko (*Intermediary*), onye nzuzu* (fool), *onye mmuta* (scholar).

Although most of his informants prefer the use of *onye* to speak of being in Igbo language, especially since it conveys the idea of human beings and designates spiritual beings, Edeh (1985) realizes that it cannot be employed to adequately designate the Igbo notion of being. This is based on the principal defect that *onye* cannot include inanimate objects, vegetation or nonhuman animate entities. Things like stone, wood, house, book, pen etc cannot be referred to as *onye.* If for instance a piece of stone falls on my roof or a vulture lands on my roof, I cannot use *onye* to make enquiries. The limitedness of the *onye* hypothesis makes Edeh to seek an alternative concept for the designation of being in Igbo ontology.

From 'onye' to 'ife' hypothesis
Having understood the limitations of *onye,* Edeh (1985) in his indefatigable spirit moves on to make further investigations on a more appropriate concept for being. In his investigation, he arrives at *ife.* According to Edeh, "the Igbo word *ife* primarily means thing, anything material or immaterial. It is used to refer to a happening, an event, an occurrence. *Ife* can also be affixed to any adjective to mean specific things" (Edeh 1985, p.95). For instance, *ife obuna* (anything), *ife ebube* (thing of wonder), *ife ojoo* (bad thing), *ife oma* (good thing). After a wide and profound investigation, he realizes that there is no word in Igbo language outside *ife* that approximates the Igbo concept of being.

And thus, he subscribes to the *ife* hypothesis for the following metaphysical reasons: the Igbo notion of being embraces all categories of being. The *onye* hypothesis on the one hand, already fails in covering all dimensions of being since it only concerns human and spiritual beings, leaving out inanimate, vegetative and non-human animate beings. *Ife* on the other hand, although it primarily refers to inanimate things, by expansion can include human and suprahuman beings (Kanu, 2012c). For instance, Edeh (1985) says that if an elder asks the question: *kedu ife kelu madu?* (what thing created human beings), any person conversant with the language knows that *ife* in this context refers to *Chineke,* the Igbo name for the highest of the suprasensible being, the unmade maker of all things.

From 'ife' to 'ife-di'

Having arrived at the *ife* hypothesis, Edeh (1985) realised that *ife* as a concept does not bring out all that being means.

> However, we must note that *ife* does not bring out completely all that being means. *Ife* does not emphasize the important aspect of being, namely, the fact of existence. *Ife* standing on its own can be used to refer to both existent and non-existent entities. Hence we have to search for a way of using *ife* to highlight the fact of existence and exclude the possibility of nonexistence (Edeh 1985, p.96).

To find a solution to this problem, Edeh (1985) combines *ife* and *idi* to get *ife-idi*. *Idi* is the Igbo verb *to be.* It can be used as an adjective and can also be suffixed to anything to show that it exists. For example, *okwute di* (the stone that exists), *Nkita di* (the dog that exists), *Kanu di* (Kanu who exists). He does not end here, but goes further to bring out the categories of *ife-di* that corresponds to different kinds of being.

1. The suprasensory category: in the suprasensory category are beings like *Chineke* and *Ndi muo* (spirits)*.
2. The human category: the human category is subdivided into *Ndi din du* (the living) and *Ndi Nwuru* (the dead).
3. The thing category: the thing category is divided into three major groupings: *anu* (which means animals), *ife nkiti* (this covers all inanimate entities), and *ogu* (beings that have no existence of their own).

Edeh's work titled *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics* is a courageous and purposeful attempt of not only to articulate the Igbo people's theory of being, but also to name and defend it as a veritable metaphysics. The work as a pioneer thought, provides a good starting point for further reflections on African metaphysics in general and Igbo metaphysics in particular.

Problem of evil

Like other people, the Igbos are also concerned with the perennial problem of moral and physical evil. They have three groupings of evil: physical evil in the universe, physical evil in man and moral evil in man. However, the Igbo ontological position that all things are good because they are created by an absolute good God, who causes goodness in what he creates, raises a question as regards how and why there is evil in the world. Thus Edeh writes that "The problem of evil involves not only the question whether God is really all-good, but even that regarding divine omnipotence" (p. 102). To explain this, the Igbo

believes that the proximate cause of evil are evil spirits or elemental forces. But again, these elemental forces are created by the good God. Edeh argued that the Igbo way of reconciling this problem which puts into question God's goodness is that God does not cause evil proximately; however, indirectly he causes evil since he originally created the proximate causes of evil not as evil but as good. Edeh further argues that evil has a community dimension. When an individual commits evil, it is the concern of the community, not only the individual, he wrote "From the Igbo idea of community, founded on love and brotherhood, it is easy to discern that for the Igbos any evil, physical or moral, even though personal, has a community dimension" (p. 106). Both the effect and remedy concerns the community, thus he further writes, "...the whole community comes out to eradicate the evil" (p. 106), so as to "... safeguard the integrity and well-being of the whole" (p. 109). It is considered a community affair "because it fractures the ultimate whole of life; it causes a break in an existential unity" (p. 106). An Igbo proverb says, "A kinsman who strays into evil must first be saved from it by all, then, afterwards be questioned on why and how he dared stray into it to start with".

In his analysis of causality, Edeh reflects profoundly on the Igbo concept of God as the source of all things, thus the cause of all things, including elemental forces. In the Igbo world, there is a functional unity, everything is connected to and caused by one thing or the other, and this, through reason and faith unveils God as the ultimate source. And here, though the question of God's existence could arise, it is not a problem to the Igbo man whose religious atmosphere constantly remind him of God's presence. According to Edeh, "... the Igbo normally does not bother about a proof of God's existence. God is so near to man, so involved in man's existence, that one does not question Chukwu's existence" (p. 118). However, the existence of God could be arrived at through the contemplation of the things of nature that wouldn't exist if not for his existence; though Igbo nomenclature, such as *Chukwudi, Chukwuno*, etc.; through the Igbo concept of *chi* which is a participation in *Chukwu*. Since Chi s a part, it then means that Chukwu the whole does exist; through the Igbo idea of life and death, for the phenomenon of being and not being is controlled by an infinite being. This infinite being according to Edeh can be viewed in seven ways: Onye-okike (a being who creates), Okasi-okasi (the highest highest), Amama-amasi (known but never fully known), Ife-anyi (for whom nothing is impossible), Eze-pgholigho-anya (ing of knowledge who knows all), Chi-gboo (Chi for ever), Eke-ji-mma (creator who holds goodness). Furthermore, because of the practical nature of the Igbo rather than speculative, his concept of God is practical as evidenced in the basic and commonly used Igbo names for God: Osebuluwa and Chineke. The

ideas of God as Osebuluwa (as the one carrying, supporting and providing for the world) and Chineke (one who is creating) places God at the apex of causality "as the ultimate cause of being" (p. 147).

Evaluation

Iroegbu (1995) criticized the method employed by Edeh in doing metaphysics. Edeh himself says that he would employ the empirical method, but Iroegbu objects that the empirical method as employed in the natural sciences which deals with concrete physical beings and elements of the universe cannot be employed in metaphysics which deals with the rationale behind being as being. He further pointed out that Edeh confused the word 'field work' with empirical method. But even so, Iroegbu asserts that philosophy begins not during the field work and as such cannot be considered a method for doign philosophy. Field work is about gathering materials for doing philosophy. Thus he maintains that Edeh began with a false start. He uses the analogy of cooking, separating the gathering of the food ingredients from what he called the 'actual cooking'. But again when Iroegbu talks about actual cooking, it means that the preparation is cooking, even though not actual, and he seems to forget that the manner of the preparation of the ingredients and what is collected together cannot be separated from the quality and quantity of the cooking. When one understands the separation Edeh makes between the empirical method and the method of articulation employed in his research, one might begin to suspect that Iroegbu's criticism on method is only a play on words.

He further criticizes Edeh for developing a collective thought or worldview of a people and calling it philosophy. One cannot but see how he relies heavily on Hountondji to makes his point. One would also imagine that he would not call a collective worldview a philosophy. But i doubt if he would escape that too.

Over the years, many African thinkers have made attempts to criticize Edeh's work on metaphysics and his concept of being in particular. Critiques like Iroegbu (1995) argue that the designation of Edeh's philosophical reflection as Igbo Metaphysics is wrong, that it should rather be called Edeh's Metaphysics. He sees Edeh as a man who was not courageous enough to own his metaphysics, as such, feels more comfortable designating it to a people. Contrary to this opinion, the researcher sees Edeh's step as a courageous one, because it is easier to own a thing to oneself than to attribute it to a whole people. Moreover, the fact that it was Edeh who wrote the metaphysics does not mean it has to be called Edeh's metaphysics. Edeh is not saying that he is not aware that he wrote it by

himself. All he is saying is that it represents the philosophy of the Igbo people. We read different works by different philosophers from the West and we call them Western philosophy. What problem do we have calling Edeh's articulation Igbo Metaphysics? In the same way that Gyekye's work is called Akan philosophy, is Edeh's work also called Igbo metaphysics. If Iroegbu has no problem calling Gyekye's work Akan philosophy, why should he have a problem calling Edeh's thought Igbo metaphysics?

These notwithstanding, Edeh's work titled *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics* is a courageous and purposeful attempt of not only to articulate the Igbo people's theory of being, but also to name and defend it as a veritable metaphysics. The work as a pioneer thought, provides a good starting point for further reflections on African metaphysics in general and Igbo metaphysics in particular. And if there ar loopholes in his thought, they are only loopholes that are associated with the courageous act of pioneering.

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