

ONTOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF T. UZODINMA NWALA'S POLITICAL THEORY OF UNANIMITY

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Abstract

This paper is an ontological evaluation of T. Uzodinma Nwala's political theory of unanimity. Its concern is the general loss of political and moral orientation characteristic of traditional Igbo communities arising from the interference of the Western political and moral values which contemporary Igbo people accepted uncritically. Based on the hermeneutic – phenomenological method, the paper posits that the principle of political unanimity is the panacea to the overarching problems of individualism and subjectivism that have burdened the West. The paper compares political unanimity with certain currents of political and ethical thoughts and argues that Igbos' belief in community spirit is the answer to the problems of individual responsibility characteristic of liberal democracy that has become a concern to global peace. The paper concludes that traditional Igbo thought of brotherhood characteristic of interest harmonisation, reconciliation and consensus provide the answer to the question of human uniqueness, personal authenticity and identity.

Keywords: brotherhood, consensus, individualism, politics, unanimity.

Introduction

Professor Timothy Uzodinma Nwala, born on 20 March 1942, is a living colossus of Philosophy. He was born in Mbaise of present day Imo State in South East Nigeria. Nwala observed a general loss of orientation and identity among the young generation of contemporary Igbo people who accepted uncritically the Western political and moral systems and values. For Nwala, this disruption in the original life pattern of the traditional Igbo people before the interference of the colonialists is the foundation of the political and ethical crises in Igbo land because Western systems and values imposed upon them are inadequate to cater for the original life pattern of the typical Igbo and their collectivists' structure. He believes that a return to the indigenous Igbo political mode of life will be helpful in answering most contemporary Igbo political and moral questions and identity which are fast eroding away. This indigenous political life pattern he describes as unanimity.

Nwala has shown the deficiencies of the Western democracy and its cursory decision-making by majority opinions which deprive the minority of the right to have their opinions reflected in a given political decision. This deprivation, for Nwala, could mean a violation of their human rights and could lead to disinterest and disharmonies in politics. For Nwala, political systems in Igboland follows rigorous processes and compromises that lead to it where all efforts are made to contain the wishes of the majority as well as those of the minority. For Nwala also, “the processes are designed to arrive at what may be abstractly called the general will of the people or community” (p.168). Nwala's concern is that Western practice of formal representation in council is alien to the traditional Igbo orientation and does not reflect the cohesion and consensus characteristic of the spirit of brotherhood native to Igbo people.

It is this underlying concern of the breach of the traditional Igbo political pattern and its ontological foundation that this paper intends to evaluate.

Meaning of Politics

Politics connotes the activities associated with the governance of a state. It is the public engagement of the people on matters that concern them to protect and promote their well being. For Blackburn, (2005, 282) “politics is about human community and government and relations between the collective and the individual”. It is the art or science of governance which characterises power attributes and power relations. From the ancient Greece, politics bother on relations in community (*Polis* – City State) affairs meant to protect the rights of the citizens in an agreed pattern of governance. Plato (1997, pp. 332 - 336) in the *Republic* conceived politics as harmonising conflicting interests to ensure rational and virtuous ordering of human affairs. For him, this virtuous and rational ordering will result to justice and ultimately to happiness as the end of human life in the state.

However, it was Aristotle who introduced empirical interpretation to politics as things concerning the *polis* to represent the organisation of community affairs aimed at the highest good (*Sommmum bonum*) for the community which exists for the sake of the good life or happiness of the state (pp. 29 - 30). Aristotle compares the City State in his ideas of the *hylemorphic* analysis of matter and form to his ideas of the material cause (community of people), formal cause (the constitution crafted by the law giver), operated by a craftman (efficient cause) which altogether determines the aim and end of the community (final cause) (p.17). In other words for Aristotle, the craftman or the lawgiver should not impose a form on materials for which it is unsuited nor the lawgiver lay down or change laws which are contrary to the nature of the citizens.

Though a disciple of Aristotle, Thomas of Aquinas refuted Aristotle's conception of politics as natural. Thomas follows Seneca to characterise politics as a sense of leadership voluntarily accepted by the governed. He associated politics with divine law and natural law as giving direction to the (human) common good, which belongs to the people (1-2,q 95, a.4, 1-2.90.a). Indeed for Thomas and all schoolmen, politics is an interplay of providence and human social acts to determine and structure human society and governance.

Modern and contemporary thought introduce a little paradigm to the earlier scholastic ideas. The difference lies in the inseparability of politics and economy and how both influence state apparatus and control over public affairs. In this direction, David Easton (1981, p.13) conceives politics as “authoritative allocation of values” relating to resources and status. Easton's definition indicates the processes through which citizens or communities' needs are skillfully addressed by carefully and strategically allocating benefits, rewards and penalties as well as the influences that warrant the allocations. For Harold Laswell, (2001, p.12) politics is “who gets what (why), when and how”. Laswell underscores the power to exercise authority on the allocation of scarce resources as well as determining control on the content and context of production and distribution of goods and services within the structure of the state.

Common denominator between Easton and Laswell implicates the attribution of order, power and justice in politics and governance as well as underscores the relations between politics and economy in terms of production and equitable distribution of goods and services and the ideological leanings that determine the politics and the mode of production and distribution. In this sense, Nwala (1985, p.163) defines politics to be “the continuous process by which a people organise their social life – relationships in production, exchange, distribution, exercise of authority, recognition, etc such that there is a recognised system of rules and procedures for generating further rules, to regulate their social life. According to him, it is the way a people organise their social life with respect to the system of rules and procedures for regulating their mode of social relationship (p.164). Accordingly for Nwala;

The system of rules are held to emanate from, promote and enforced by a recognised system of authority. The apparent aim of such rules is to ensure order and promote the welfare of all the people bound in such a social relationship. This body of rules, the manner in which the authority is exercised and further rules created, gives the way in which the welfare of the people is pursued through a mode of economic activity, gives rise to a political system. (1985, p.164)

In summary, politics is the science and art of governance defined in terms of decision making and decision enforcement by a recognised authority. It is not mere activism, but the awareness that keeps one informed about the structure of his/her society and his/her place in the society to realise the laudable aim to harmonise the society for the ultimate happiness and common good of the citizens. Politics is about power: power relations and power attributes.

Nwala's Political Theory of Unanimity

Unanimity connotes common agreement of opinions. It designates a state of being in harmony in a society based on common agreements among members of the society. It describes elements of consensus and interest reconciliations among members that share similar values, norms, principles, etc in order to ensure social political stability. For Nwala, unanimity does not exclude arguments or controversies as opinions may vary. It, instead, hinges on consensus, interest reconciliation and harmonisation of divergent views. It stems from a natural sympathy for one's kind given that they consider themselves as *Umunna* (descendants of one ancestor) and related by blood in one ancestral father. The interest is to find a compromise which is agreeable or at least not unbearable because their target is to protect or uphold the *omenala*, the social and cosmological order handed down by the ancestral fathers. Nwala notes that although the interest is to protect or uphold the social, divine and cosmic order (*Omenala*), agreements are never allowed to militate absolutely and fatalistically against the collective interest and welfare of the community (p.170). This way, agreements must be within the reach and serve the interest of the people because the Igbo respect principles and ideals. But principles and ideals according to Nwala must be subjected to (as a last resort) to the practical realities of the human situation (p.170). For Nwala also, even when they introduce the most far-reaching changes, they believe they are merely upholding or restoring the good old ways ordained by the all knowing ancestors. Indeed, all agreements (or changes where they occur) are intended to keep the possibility of harmony. Thus, unanimity is a matter of compromise and consensus where aggrieved members may adjust their interests to the common necessity for the *Umunna* or the larger kinsmen lineage, the community. This means therefore, that political unanimity does not contradict divergence of interests. Instead, it emphasises reconciliation and harmonisation of divergent interests in order to secure a stable, cohesive and ordered community.

Unanimity as a Political Principle

Nwala's notion of unanimity as a political principle portrays the true life setting of a typical (pre-colonial) traditional Igbo. It emphasises consensus and interest harmonisation of divergent opinions to allow common political pursuit. For Nwala, it takes rigorous processes and compromises (*Igba Izu* - period of consultation) that lead to it and all efforts made to contain the wishes of the majority as well as those of the minority. In short, they are designed to arrive at what may be abstractly called the “general will” of the people or community”. Unanimity becomes desirable since the Igbo conceive of politics and government not as the means where by the stronger or the majority impose their will on the rest of the people but as the process of regulating normal life among brothers (p.168). Here Kwasi Wiredu (1996, p.41) supports Nwala on the idea of rigorous processes and compromises when he (Wiredu) affirms that “harmonisation of different interests arrived at after a long deliberation during which a process of persuasion and in some cases motivation are employed to secure the well being of the entire

clan. Wiredu continues to think that harmonisation and interest reconciliation follows what he describes as “sympathy instincts among people that are related by blood or have common ancestral root” (p.41).

Nwala describes this period of *Igba Izu* (consultations) as the democratic spirit which he says puts in check the apparent or possible excesses of seniority, status and achievement among the people. Nwala situates his idea of political unanimity on what he describes as the “Igbo principle of equality and equivalence”. He founded this principle of equality and equivalence on two related concepts of ontological common species, and brotherhood. According to him, “all who are morally worthy, are basically equal, difference in wealth notwithstanding”(p.168). He continues to explain that “all segments at the same level of the social organism are considered equal and equivalent irrespective of territorial spread and population size, work and food have to be shared equally amongst all participants and each must take its share in order of seniority” (p.168). Nwala maintains that if all men are equal and all segments equivalent and each must have his fair share of work and reward, then, all must be allowed to participate in the process of decision-making (p.168). To ensure effective political system, Nwala explains that although power and authority belongs to all, but by virtue of their seniority and ontological status, knowledge, moral, spiritual, intellectual qualities and economic status, some individuals are known to exercise greater power and influence than the others (p.168).

Besides the principle of equality and equivalence and brotherhood, Nwala identified the spirit of republicanism as another element of unanimity in Igbo politics. Republicanism, according to Blackburn (2005, p.318), emphasises the role of the active, participating citizens in governance and aims at checks and balances to prevent the emergence of faction and majority tyranny, but also to the town - hall politics whereby decision making has bottom - up rather than a top - down structure. Igbo republicanism depicts the popular Igbo *enwe eze*. It describes the average Igbo cultural orientation of distrust and resistance to subservience and domination of one over another. Nwala adduced two fundamental reasons for this cultural distrust and resistance to domination and subservience. The first is the self - dependence and the achievement consciousness inherent in the Igbo spirit. The second is the (individual) survival instinct and competitive spirit greatly valued in typical Igbo culture. In fact for Nwala, the Igbo man must accomplish something in his name to deserve an honourable place in his kinship group. For him also, competition is important in Igbo traditional, social and communal life because a great premium is placed on achievement (p.173). The emphasis on achievement “ensures that everyone answers his name in the affairs of his community” (Dingba, 2024, p.188). Indeed for Nwala, competition keeps everybody and every group up and doing to retain their rightful place in the Igbo scheme of things (p.173). Nwala cites Chinua Achebe's dictum that “no man however great is greater than his people and no man ever won judgement against his clan” to further express the Igbo principle of equality and equivalence and the republican spirit that make them distrustful of authority and personal rule over them. Accordingly for him;

...the people defend their right to be part of the decision - making process ... the Igbo actually resist too much governing on the part of the rulers. They may not complain very much against the decision of the *Amala council* but personal decisions of the rulers are not always kindly welcomed because it strikes against this premordial republican spirit. They can easily understand a rule which emanates from the community as a whole because they believe that they are part of the system. (Nwala, 1985, p.171)

Indeed, the independence spirit in the Igbo makes him to think adequate and proud of himself and so resists being alienated on important decisions about himself and his kinsmen.

Unanimity in Traditional Igbo Community

In a typical, traditional Igbo society, the political units are the *ezi* (family), the *Umunna* (kindred)

and the clan (village). The political system is organised along a web of kinship relations with the kinship head who is usually the oldest man as the leader. Usually, the kindred heads are responsible to and represent the interests of their *Umunna* at the *Amala* Assembly or Council during deliberations. When there are issues of importance, the *Amala* Council Assembly is assembled through a town crier in the village square. Normally, issues discussed are always very fundamental and of common interest to the clan or village. Usually, divergent opinions and interests are harmonised and reconciled to ensure common political pursuit.

However, and depending on the nature of the issue at hand, some issues that are not agreed upon are postponed to another date. This is usually followed by a period of consultations (*Igba-Izu*) during which families or kindreds that are affected may reach out to the other families or kindreds for sympathy and compromise. Normally, there is the common attitude to give up rights and conveniences in order to accommodate themselves and thus strengthen their common *Umunna* heritage or kinship ties. F. N. Ndubuisi (2002, p.67), captures this dominant attitude of sharing burdens and compromising comforts as the spirit of give and take which he said is at the root of the community's life because everybody is his brother's keeper. Whatever happens to one will affect the entire community (kindred) because when one finger touches oil, it stains the rest of the fingers (Ozumba, 2002, p.58).

Nwala reveals that such compromises in some cases may result to certain social or peace treaties or alliances that were often celebrated in formal ritual of blood pact (*Igba ndu*) (p.166). Thus, every family or *Umunna* is carried along and differences are harmonised and agreed upon by the various family or kindred heads. The final decisions are generalised and made obligatory for every member of the community. To further ensure compliance, and as a check on deviants, certain invocations or incantations are made by the oldest man believed to be the living representative of the ancestors and the custodian of the customs and the traditions (*Omenala*) of the people with the *Ofo* (the mystic symbol of uprightness, forthrightness and powers of the community) in his (right) hand as a seal and legitimacy of the decisions. Usually, the decisions are backed up with sanctions of various sorts and weights. For Nwala, this is possible because of the organic nature of the Igbo community which is sustained by several forces including common land and communal economic ties, blood relationship and a web of kinship ties. "All who belong to the same community are the *Umunna*. There is also the mythical charter (*Omenala*) which embodies the history and ideology of the political community. The charter stresses their decent from a founding father and the inevitable role of the gods of the community in its founding and protection" (p.167).

Nwala also cites the communalistic spirit of the traditional system as another factor in interest harmonisation and reconciliation. According to him;

since the family or extended family was the basic unit of economic, social and political organisation, and since this unit occupied a given territory with which it economically and spiritually identified . . . and since every member was organically and socially linked to the rest through blood relationship, stability and justice were easily realisable within the system. (p.173)

Nwala continues to think that;

a lot of social and political values follow easily from this state of affairs. Such contemporary modern social problems as exploitation, alienation, victimisation, nepotism and discrimination, poverty in the midst of plenty, etc, were either non-existent or where they existed, were inconsequential in affecting the basic democratic character of the society. (pp.173 - 174)

On a similar notion, Wiredu (1996, p.41), affirms that willingness to live in harmony with each

other is characterised by a natural instinct for sympathy for their kind. Thus, for Wiredu, consensus on the basis of agreement of every interested person makes it impossible that a minority might be excluded in the process of decision making as it obtains in Western practice of democracy (p.185).

Indeed, for Nwala, the charter is given practical symbolisation and strengthened by ritual activities many of which are designed to involve the dead members, the gods and the supernatural forces in the daily and seasonal affairs of the community. The rituals are designed "... to give life to what is an abstract idea. They are essential ingredients in social control; a web of customs and traditions and supernatural sanctions" (p.167). Nwala continues to inform us that decisions and actions of the community had to be justified and given legitimacy. The justification was based on the welfare of the community and the individuals. Usually, the *Ofo*, the legal seal and symbol of authority of the *Amala* must be present during the deliberations of the *Amala* council and used to give legitimacy and sanction to the rules, decisions and laws.

Every major decision, whether of a legislative or judicial nature has to be reinforced by invoking *Ndi Ichie* (the ancestors), *Ala* (the Earth goddess) and the gods believed to have interest in the weal and woe of the unit in question. Only the ritually pure, the right minded and those of transparent character could expect and received obedience. (p.169)

Thus, Nwala tells us that ritual devices are built up around the political offices of the community in the bid to secure both effectiveness and legitimacy. For Nwala, rituals are effective weapons on the traditional imagination. Not only do they inspire respect, they inspire fears as well, and individuals very easily obey them. Nwala cites Ikenna Nzimiro on the roles of ritualisation in Igbo political system thus:

Ritualisation of political offices and laws of the state gives substantive forms to otherwise abstract ideas, endows them with an aura and respectability through their mystical force, celebrates their coming into being and their departure; and gives them human basis (even though the man celebrating the ritual may be an agent of the mystical powers). Thus, it at the same time puts the offices and the laws beyond human corruption by placing them over and above human being. (p.169)

Nwala explains that as an aid to the effectiveness of the rituals in securing obedience and social control, sanctions which embodies both supernatural or ritualistic and human are also employed. He further explains that an interesting application of this transcendental notion of politics and government is the conception and attitude of the Igbo towards new rules. He cites Prof. Afigbo as saying that "government and politics are not seen as a means of making new rules or creating new conditions for the life of the community, but merely as a process of making the good old rules function" (p.170). The reason according to Nwala is because Igbos believe that the ancestors, with the help of the tutelary gods have worked out and ordained at the beginning rules and regulations called the *Omenala* to guide human everyday intersubjective relations. The *Omenala* is the Igbo conception of divine, cosmic and social order for social and political control. It is believed to be handed down by the ancestors and dictates and guides all forms of human intersubjective relations with fellow men, the ancestors and the gods. However, it is never allowed to militate absolutely and fatalistically against the interest and welfare of the community otherwise it will be adjusted or changed following certain divinely prescribed procedures and rituals by the community elders and priests.

Ontological Evaluation of Unanimity as a Political Principle

Nwala's political theory of unanimity is very classical and impressive. His ideals of political unanimity is a true reflection of the (political) affinity and fraternity characteristic of traditional Igbo people of Nigeria. It is important to note that the everyday life of the typical, traditional Igboman is pervaded in his sense of morality or religiosity. This way, his everyday actions,

including political actions, are guided by the desire to keep faith with the entire cosmic existence (ontological structure) as well as create or allow equilibrium among and between all cosmic entities to interplay among themselves so as to create an ontological balance among all existents. Indeed for the Igbo, all existents belong together and inter relate. In this sense, G. O. Ozumba writes that:

All existents are bound up into one by a pervading cord that maintains the balance and keeps things in their proper places. For instance, all human beings, spirits and the entire cosmos are seen as being intricately interwoven in a mesh that is called reality. The concomitant of this view is that there are no disparate units - all entities are knitted together in a determinate manner. Any upsetting of the position of one entity immediately affects the positioning of other entities. (pp.52 -53)

Here, Ozumba agrees with Nwala that the Igbo political community includes both the living and the dead thus showing that the Igbo practice of politics helps in maintaining the ontological balance of the community. The operational mode according to Nwala is that every decisions and actions of the community had to be justified and legitimised based on the welfare of the community and individuals through invoking the mythical charter (*omelala*) binding the community into one organic whole (p.169). Thus, unanimity is a natural trait in Igbo politics given that no one is left behind both in decision making and distribution of values. Every interest is duly considered and included in council representations and agreements.

It is in the above sense of (political) inclusivity and collectivism that the ideals of equality and equivalence and brotherhood as the foundation of the Igbo politics of unanimity re - echoes the Igbo aphorism of *onye aghala nwanne ya* (everybody is his brother's keeper). As both a moral and political principle, *onye aghala nwanne ya* designates the ideals of communal traits, mutual support and interdependence characteristic of the typical, traditional Igbo that strengthens the assurances of responsibility of welfare and support for one another. The principle negates any form of superiority complex among the *Umunna* (the kindred) so that more than anything else, everybody is his brother's keeper. As Ozumba echoes, “he knows that while protecting his brother, he is as well protecting himself. What happens to one happens to all and this makes morality a unanimous affair” (p.56).

However, crucial questions still arise from the principle of equality and equivalence and brotherhood that underpins the Igbo politics of unanimity. Equality and equivalence encourages the Igbo consciousness of republicanism, competition and achievement with their inherent challenges of self dependence and pride which ultimately result in individualism, egoism and selfishness in human nature. Competition and achievement create (different) political and economic classes such that there were the *ogaranya* (the wealthy), the *ogbenye* (the poor), and of course the middle class each having different wavering influences in the political community. Given the Igbo seated respect for wealth and achievement, differences and disagreements are not entirely absent because they share the same human nature of egoism, selfishness and pride. As C. B. Okolo observes, “man is by nature acquisitive. Hobbes pessimism depicts man as selfish and egoistic. This anti – social tendencies are in the Igbo as in everybody else and have been made worse by the inherited capitalistic values” (p.46).

At any rate, Nwala's concept of unanimity underscores the true political orientation of the traditional Igbo. His notion of compromises and common agreements based on common heritage of kinship ties is an eloquent testimony of Igbo humanism.

Unanimity and some other Political/Ethical Theories

a. Unanimity and Western Democracy

Political unanimity and Western democracy move in parallel lines. Western democracy

is anchored on the multi-party system and the tyranny of the majority in decision making (Omoregbe , 2007, p.40). The minority is constrained to consent to the tyranny of the majority. One obvious problem of Western democracy is the overarching burden of individualism and subjectivism that is threatening global humanism. In unanimity, agreements are reached on the basis of compromise and interest harmonisations based on kinship ties. Efforts are made to contain the wishes of the majority as well as those of the minority in the process of regulating normal life among brothers (Nwala, p. 168).

b. Unanimity and Kwasi Wiredu's Consensus theory

The principle of consensus enunciated by Kwasi Wiredu is based on natural instinct for sympathy for one's kind and sympathetic impartiality. This means for Wiredu, the willingness to allow other opinions even at some possible costs for one's kind on kinship or blood ties. Wiredu explains that consensus does not suggest absence of divergent opinions. Its emphasis, instead, is the harmonisation of such divergent views after a long period of deliberations in order to arrive at a common agreement (Wiredu, p.41).

Political unanimity and consensus agree both in principle and practice as both emphasise compromise and interest harmonisations and reconciliations based on kinship ties. Both principles supposes a kind of *Ubuntu*, which expresses support and solidarity for one's kind in the pursuit of their common fate and common ancestral bonding.

Conclusion

The typical, traditional Igbo is communalistic in orientation. His attachment to his *Umunna* depicts a strong tendency for social bonding and mutual interdependence that underpins his sense of brotherhood and belongingness. This sense of brotherhood makes room for their collectivist disposition that compels mutual support and compromises for common political pursuits. It is this willingness for compromise and consensus even at a possible cost for community welfare that Nwala captured as political unanimity. That is the true Igbo spirit of *Onye aghala nwanne ya* because “everyone must be carried along and no one must be left behind” (Dimgba, 2023, p.168). Thus, the Igbo conceive themselves as one people with one destiny in (one) common ancestral root which everybody is answerable to, that is, the *Umunna* - the common umbilical that holds everyone responsive and responsible to the common course of the kindred. Indeed, among the Igbos, everyone belongs to everyone and no one is alienated, and certainly, no one ever behaves himself bigger or superior to his *Umunna* because the *Umunna* as a bulwark fights the course of everybody. This, is the Igbo sense of humanism where everyone is his brother's keeper because when one finger touches oil, all the other fingers are stained.

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