

THE HERMENEUTICS OF *AGBAA NDU*, *EKEKỌTA NDU*: AN IGWEBUIKE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Human beings are generally social incliners, and have natural inclination to be associated with others in the society for their very existence or survival. By this association, man enjoys the fruits of common wealth of the society which provides a favourable condition for the development of human personality. A society refers to the whole and individuals represent only its parts. It is obvious that the individual is both a social factor as well as a social product. A rich and varied social life provides man with immense opportunities to be his best self. Society provides social insurance or security against odds in life and the individual falls back to the society as bedrock of knowledge and experience. Socialist, collectivists, idealists and organismic theorists argued that the society as a collective whole is bigger and greater than the individual. While individual may be egocentric in social justice, ignoring social interest of the greatest number of the people and pursuing self-interest. It is the duty of the society to adjust him to the social norms, and compel him to conform to the pattern of social life and code of conduct acceptable to each society. In Igbo communities for instance, there are norms that guide the living conditions of the people collectively. When life is threatened, there are cultural principles that are invoked to secure it. *Igba ndu* is one of such principles that give a sense of security and unity among inhabitants when life is made insecure by human elements. When one faces those challenges that threaten one's well-being as result to his association with others, *igba ndu* is evoked to secure trust and make peace paramount. This paper therefore presents *Igba ndu* as the Igbo custom of securing and making life meaningful when threatened by distrust and fear. In Igbo land, *agba ndu*, *ekekota ndu*.

Keywords: Igwebuike, Hermeneutic, Agbaa, Ndu, Ekekota, Philosophy, Complementarity

Introduction

To be is to live, and living implies existence, existence therefore is a state of being real, actual rather than imagined, invented or obsolete. The natural inclination for human beings to find security, inner peace and joy is an indissoluble fact of human existence. Every conscious being in so far as it exists fears the danger of insecurity of its being and the protection of its life is paramount to his daily living. Thus human beings are quick to react in defence to anything that threatens its 'being' or mode of that 'being'. Existence is never complete for human beings if their mode of living is not secure and protected; in other words, a sense of security is part of a living condition for the individual being and any environment that suspends this security and peace is call to question and in many instance, efforts are made to remove or avert such threat to life. And because man's nature is influenced by his desires for survival, dominance and control over his environment, this leads to issues of conflict among them. Such conflicts could attain the dangerous dimension of taking of lives, physical and spiritual injuries or material destruction leading to Thomas Hobbes's state of nature in which he repudiated the argument that God gave kings absolute and indivisible power to rule.

Hobbes had argued that human beings make a conscious decision to be led; people voluntarily contracted to create a common governmental power over them. According to Hobbes, total freedom in the state of nature left each man insecure and frightened at the unrestrained power of other individuals, all of whom were driven by insatiable self-interest. Thus, Hobbes argued, government emerged from a rational and prudent act of will. Formerly free men consented to give up their freedom and to be governed, or, as Hobbes put it, to be held in awe by a common sword. The restraint that government imposes on personal freedom is thus justified by the security and order that government provides. *Leviathan* infuriated the royalists by challenging the notion of divine right. Hobbes argued that the consent of the people to be led justifies an all-powerful government. Either a legislature or a monarch may exercise power as long as authority over society is complete. Any challenge to this authority jeopardizes the

peace and security provided by government and is thus both illegitimate and dangerous. In Hobbes's view, disobeying government will return individuals to the chaos and fear of the state of nature, where nothing restrains the appetites of competitive men.

In Igbo traditional setting, there are norms that guide the living conditions of the people collectively. When life is threatened, there are cultural principles that are invoked to secure it. *Igba ndu* is one of such principles that give a sense of security and unity among inhabitants when life is made insecure by human elements. Ordinarily, when one faces what seems to be a serious threat to one's well-being, one may react with the state of immediate alarm, and this is therefore a fact of life. It is an everyday experience which may be said to be adaptive because it helps us thread more cautiously in life. Every one experiences some degree of fear at some time or the other, and in one way or the other. *Igba ndu* therefore is a principle of bond and unity. Where doubt exists that threaten the unity in a place, the people *agbaa ndu* so that doubt can seize and sincerity of purpose is restored. *Igba ndu* gives among the people a sense of unity and trust.

Igwebuike as a Scientific Approach

Igwebuike is an Igbo word, which is a combination of three words. Thus, it can be understood as a word and as a sentence: as a word, it is written thus, *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space (Kanu 2015a&b). *Igwe* is a noun which means number or population, usually a large number or population. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power*. 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 2017a&b). At this level, no task is beyond their collective capability. This provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations. As an ideology, *Igwebuike* rests on the African principles of solidarity and complementarity. It argues that 'to be' is to live in solidarity and complementarity, and to live outside the parameters of solidarity and

complementarity is to suffer alienation. 'To be' is 'to be with the other', in a community of beings (Kanu 2018 a&b). This is based on the African philosophy of community, which is the underlying principle and unity of African Traditional Religious and philosophical experience. As a scientific approach, it emphasizes the whole or the entire structure or makeup of reality. It does not see or treat reality as departmental alone, but as interrelated and complementary, the point where ultimate significance is achieved.

Hermeneutics as an act of interpretation

Hermeneutics broadly speaking means interpretation; it has "*grosso modo*" of finding and getting meaning out of something (OKERE, 1983). In his attempt of enquiry into the possibility and conditions of establishing African philosophy, Theophilus Okere adopts a hermeneutical method which proceeds from the Heideggerian-Gadamerian conception of interpretation as an Ontological event.¹ Hence, hermeneutics is seen as an epistemological tool mediating culture and philosophy since every philosopher is a product of a particular culture, and every material for philosophizing is a cultural material; philosophy therefore is said to be related to culture in a unique way. In other words, Philosophy is in fact a unique cultural form. This fact triggers a lot of questions like; what aspect of culture is philosophy? What is the nature of the relationship between culture and philosophy? Can there be a philosophy outside the cultural setting? These and other likely questions can be answered under the prism of Hermeneutics. Accordingly Hermeneutics is that which can happen to culture that brings forth philosophy. E.g. giving authentic/actual explanation or reasons for an aspect of a people's cultural form such as *Igba ndu* or getting a clear statement out of an observed ancient text like the bible is one responsibility of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics brings light to a hidden meaning, obscurities. The truth is like a tree, we see stems and branches, but the root is hidden, and the root can be the root of the matter and the

¹ B.E. Nwigwe: the philosophy and society written in African Philosophy and the Hermeneutics of Culture. Essays in Honour of Theophilus Okere. Edited by J. Obi Oguejiofor and Godfery Igwebuikem Onah. Reprinted and bind in Nigeria by Victojo productions Uwani Enugu. P.10

mother of the whole tree. Digging for the truth is like and archeological excavation. The truth likes to hide itself and the Greeks call its search *aletheia*, that is laying bear open exposed. ²

The Igbo People

The Igbo are one of the major groups of Nigeria. They are located in the southern part of Nigeria. Experts are not yet certain about the origin of the word 'Igbo'³. It certainly did not originally refer to the whole Igbo tribe as we know it today, for before the arrival of the Europeans over hundred years ago, there was no common name for the tribe, but each town or village-group had its particular name often taken from the ancestor. Thus the word 'Igbo' primarily refer to the language and speaking group.

The Igbo are very religious people with metaphysical rationality and as such make recourse to metaphysical interpretation of phenomenon. With such metaphysical disposition they pass their rich and 'ominous' culture and belief in a symbolic appresentation. Thus they make use of symbols in their everyday communication and religious cult.

Igbo Traditional Religion

Religion plays an important role in the life of an Igbo person. Morality and religion are intermingled. Moral codes are believed to be sanctioned by the gods. According to Arinze, religion is subjectively define as "the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent being(s) and the tendency to worship Him (them)". With that consciousness of dependence on these supernatural beings, the Igbo endeavours to be at peace and communion communication with this spirits, they therefore make the home of the Spirits presence and visible among them, through the Shrines.

² Ibid.

³ F.A. Arinze, *sacrifice in Igbo Religion*, university press, Ibadan,P 1

The object of Igbo belief system is the Supreme spirit being- God, and the Ancestors⁴. And the ultimate purpose of Igbo worship is to preserve and make life better, even here and life after. Igbo worship is denoted with signs and symbols, a symbols according to Cohen (1974) is “objects, acts, concepts or linguistic formations that evoke sentiments and emotions and impel men to action”. Firth (1974) is of the opinion that ‘the essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for another, the relation between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general’ (p.15). These definitions bring out the generating and receiving effects otherwise reserved for the object to which it refers. There are important aspects of symbolism according to Ifesieh (1989) ‘because the effects could go as far as changing the impressed objects in a remarkable and emotional way’ (p.125). He went further to states that symbol has at least dual characteristics, namely, of concealment and revelation.

For Sylvanus Nnoruka therefore, “Symbols help man to give intelligible meaning to the transcendent phenomena from the standpoint of our perceptible world. They are the appresentational relations that pair objects of the everyday world with objects transcending the everyday world.”⁵ Symbols like ritual can be religious and cannot be religious. Zuesse (1979) states that “In terms of awareness, religion is not really the matter of the specific data of consciousness; so much as it is a matter of the value given them” (p.11). What makes the same cognitive content religious for one and not for another is the presence or absence of transcendental internationalities. Ifesieh (1989) defines ritual “as a socio-religious act capable of levels of meaning, which may be portrayed as a symbol of cosmic truth, yet, puts first the transcendental and cosmic level, as this uniquely forms the heart of every ritual action” (p.123). Ifesieh states further that “the sacred is an ontological reality and that man is able to become aware of it if only he wills; but then if he chooses not to recognize the sacred manifesting itself to him, he is equally free, but his conscious and intentional will not to confirm self transcendence

⁴ F.A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion* p 14

⁵ S.I Nnoruka, *African culture and the quest for truth*, p 416

with respect to the object of his sight does not mean the non-existence of that object image" (p.124).

IGBA NDU

In Igbo tradition, *Igba ndu* means to bond life, to unite and unify life's essential elements; to unite both in physical and spiritual sphere of living.

Ndu on the other hand is life, the essence, *kpim* or vital force of every living organism, living organism sizes to be once their lives are cut off. In the earthly hierarchy of creatures, human beings stand at the apex of all other living creatures, and in Igbo tradition, every cosmic thing and actions gear toward securing life for to human beings and the other elements of the world. *Igba ndu* therefore means to tie knot of accenting to live in peace, agreeing to disagree in unity or agreeing to agree both in principles and practise and to keep watch of other's back.

The hermeneutics of *Igba ndu* is better understood as a covenant among human beings, individuals or group people. Since in Igbo tradition, life is the *summa prima* of every event and action. Igbo people do whatever possible to secure and grantee life's longitivity. The continuous socio-economic interaction among the people in terms of their commerce, trade, etc, among themselves and close boarder inhabitants, such interactions breeds mutual respect and peaceful co-existence but not also without mistrust and conflict. Hence the need to institute a principle which can help to sustain such peaceful co-existence and subdue fears and mistrust often arising with such close association among individuals led to the covenant of *Igba ndu*. Therefore, the idea of *Igba ndu* originated not only out of fear of some uncertainties of men or by the basic knowledge that some men are inherently greedy, irreverent, impious, evil and wicked, to check on the wiles of men therefore, the Igbo people had to resign to the practice of *Igba ndu* to protect, and assured one another that communal living and confidence of the parties that have entered into the agreement are restored.

One may also add other reason as to the practice of *Igba ndu* as a result of human's desire to maintain peace, orderliness and harmonious living among themselves, hence where such is existing there is the need to consolidate such harmony among peoples.

The socio-religious implication of this is the belief that there is a supreme deity up there in the sky who oversees the affairs of human beings and can punish anybody who defiles the terms and condition of every *igba ndu*. This deity, *Chukwu abia ama* dispenses justice to defaulters of *igba ndu* once entered. For any *Igba ndu* to be efficient, it is usually tied to particular deities who are mostly invoked during the act. These deities are called upon to bear witness to such covenants. The parties to the covenant while swearing will pronounce punishments which the deities are to excise on the defaulters.

Igba ndu gives a sense of unity among the people and some degree of truth among partakers. Once the oath is taken, life is bound together. Bonds are strengthened and life is shared. Thus, the Igbo saying that *agba ndu, ekekota ndu*: once convent is taken, life is no longer individualized but is communalized; thus a major truck of the Igbo spirit of communalistic livelihood.

Though generally, the purpose of *Igba ndu* is to secure life and restore trust and declare innocence, there are quite some discrepancies in the types of *igba ndu* among individuals or group of people depending on the need or reason for the particular *igba ndu*. Just as we have different types of agreements among individual, one may rightly say that there are different types of *Igba Ndu* and it can take different form, namely; among individuals in a family, among one community or another, between friends, business associated and co-workers in an environment.

There is another aspect to this practice that has nothing to do with a threat to life. Rather it assures one of the others steadfast in a decision taken. For instance, two people who are in love may decide to engage

in *igba ndu* to secure their love, determination and commitment to one another. It is also common for individuals, families or communities sharing the same boundary of land to bind up in *igba ndu* even when there is no foreseen crisis or dispute but they do that to assure one another that none will or may necessarily trespass the other's land with permission.

Agba ndu in a community, the scepticism or doubt of malicious act is gone and life becomes a community life. Though cautions are taken but not in a bid or suspicion of other's evil intension. The eyes of the gods are ever believed to be on defaulters for serve punishment, in most cases, confession and death is the resultant effect for those defaulting rules of *Igba ndu*.

Igba ndu brings unity and peace. It connotes a bound, commitment stand for each other, the determination never to let the other down. It is a sign of strength. In many Igbo communities, during wars, the villagers collectively commit to *igba ndu* never to let, perhaps, previous individual misunderstanding or squabbles come in as they collective go to war against the opponent. The people swear not to harm each other in any way either physically or spiritually. Some of the items needed are kola nut, palm wine, hot drink, of staff, blood, plantain stalk, white chalk, (nzu), palm frond, snail, and yam. The significance of these items is in their symbolism in Igbo tradition and culture. Each of these items has spiritual connotations; the snail for instance, symbolises the gentle and cordial atmosphere in a peaceful environment; but again, its slowness in movement stands for a slow movement in progress or in life in general for defaulters of *Igba ndu*.

Submissions

This paper has shown that the Igbo socio-political setting is centered on the security of life and property of the inhabitants and efforts both spiritually and physically are made within the Igbo community to secure and eliminate anything that may make life insecure and bitter. It has also shown the place of symbols in Igbo traditional religion as a physical object that help man to give intelligible meaning to the transcendent phenomena from the standpoint of our perceptible world.

It goes on to note that *Igba ndu* is one of such Igbo tradition that portrays the people's desire for peace, unity and security of lives and property.

It underlines that *Igba ndu* can be understood from the angle of axiom or practice of socio-spiritual control and a sign of unity; a commitment to stand with one another. *Igba ndu* eliminate deep seated hatred and calm frayed nerves. It ensures that the parties to a dispute settle such disputes amicably without physical or spiritual attacks on each other. It strengthens the unity between the individuals, groups or communities. *Igba ndu* not only plays the task of mediator, negotiation and the final pact of settlement in which parties concerned, it invoke the gods in the process of ensuring peaceful coexistence. Hence when administered it becomes the final process of peaceful resolution as parties concerned have involved the spiritual world to adjudicate on their behalf. It exorcises fear and establishes confidence. It acts as external expression of both inward and outward commitment to be bid together and bridging of gap, the communicative equivalence between man and supernatural forces; it is a symbolic sign and the manifestation of the Igbo saying that *igwebuikie*; strength lies in being together-unity.

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