

IGWEBUIKE PHILOSOPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CLEANSING IN NIGERIA

Chukwunonso Egbedike

Abstract

Misguided statements from those in authority and citizens of the Nigerian state have promoted the idea of the possibility of ethnic and religious cleaning in Nigeria. The result has been ethnic and religious violence on various fronts of the nation. This piece raises questions as to the way forward. It, therefore, employs Igwebuiké philosophy as an instrument for the restoration of solidarity, unity and dialogue between the adherents of Christianity and Islam. Igwebuiké is an Igbo-African philosophy of intersubjectivity and complementarity. It has the capacity of generating a relational balance between the adherents of the Christian and Islamic religions. During the course of the research, the Igwebuiké indigenous method of inquiry would be employed- propelled by the perspective that there is a relationship between Islam and Christianity, and this common ground would be patronized for the advancement of peace and unity. A basic principle of Igwebuiké philosophy is dialogue. This work asserts that there is simply no alternative to dialogue between the adherents of both religions even though the Nigerian Muslims may seem not to be **sincere** in their practice of dialogue. More than ever today, we need conversion of heart, perspective and diverse voices. This change of heart must be based on a philosophy that increases our knowledge of one another and thus dispel the darkness of prejudice and anger.

Keywords: Igwebuiké, Philosophy, Ethnic Cleansing, Nigeria, Christians, Muslims

Introduction

Today, religion is seriously under attack from within and from without. This calls for internal cleansing of religion whereby the religious leaders should see it as an obligation to call to order, their followers who preach and promote violence. Nigeria the most populated country in Africa has experienced violence and other versions of crisis in recent times due to multitude of diverse, sometimes competing ethno-religious groups.

This paper shall take a cursory look into the presence of ethnic and religious cleansing in Nigeria, and shall conclude with the possibility of Christians and Muslims getting along. It would employ Igwebuiké, an Igbo-African philosophy of intersubjectivity and complementarity to look into the possibility of generating a relational balance between the adherents of the

Christian and Islamic religions. During the course of the research, the Igwebuike indigenous method of inquiry would be employed- propelled by the perspective that there is a relationship between Islam and Christianity, and this common ground would be patronized for the advancement of peace and unity. The basic result anticipated is dialogue between the adherents of both religions; dialogue in an atmosphere that is non-discriminatory, non-dominant and non-derogatory; a dialogue that is sincerely driven.

Meaning of Ethnic Cleansing

The phrase “ethnic cleansing” came into wide usage in the 1990’s, to describe the treatment suffered by particular ethnic groups during conflicts that erupted after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Thus, in 1993 a UN High Commission described the term in the context of Yugoslavia as “rendering an area ethnically homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area.”¹

The term “ethnic cleansing” refers to the removal, through violence and intimidation, of an ethnic group defined from a given territory. The process of ethnic cleansing may be achieved through several mechanisms. Deportation most commonly refers to action by state authorities to force an individual to leave country, but deportation may also describe the internal exile of an individual or a group.²

The Country Called Nigeria

Modern Nigeria emerged through the merging of two British colonial territories in 1914. The amalgamation was an act of colonial convenience. It occurred mainly because British colonizers desired a contiguous colonial territory stretching from the arid Sahel to the Atlantic Coast, and because Northern Nigeria, one of the merging units, was not paying its way while Southern Nigeria, the other British colony, generated revenue in excess of its administrative expenses. It made practical administrative sense to have one coherent British colony rather than two. It also made sense to merge a

¹ Benjamin Lieberman, *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p. xiii-xiv.

² Philip Ther and Ana Siljak ed., *A Century of Forced Migration: The Origins and Consequences of ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ in Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948* (Maryland: Lanham, 2001), p. 13.

revenue-challenged colonial territory with a prosperous colonial neighbor, so the latter can subsidize the former.

The amalgamation made little sense to the colonial masters and has often been invoked by Nigerians as the foundation of the rancorous relationship between the two regions of Nigeria. Northern Nigeria, now broken into several states and three geopolitical blocs, is largely Muslim. It was the center of a pre-colonial Islamic empire called the Sokoto Caliphate, and its Muslim populations, especially those whose ancestors had been part of the caliphate, generally look to the Middle East and the wider Muslim world for solidarity and sociopolitical example. The South, an ethnically diverse region containing many states and three geopolitical units, is largely Christian. The major sociopolitical influences there are Western and traditional African.³

These differences have been a source of political disagreements and suspicions between the two regions and religions since colonial times. To add to this cauldron, each of the two regions, also, contains ethnic and religious minorities who harbor grievances against ethnic and religious majorities they see as hegemonic oppressors. These grievances are sometimes expressed through bitter political complaints, through sectarian crises stoked by political elites and incendiary media rhetoric, and through violent insurgencies.

Between 1947 and 1959 Nigerian nationalist leaders from different regional, ethnic, and religious communities came together in a series of conferences and parliaments to negotiate the transition to self-rule and to map out a common future. During these interactions and in the first few years after independence in 1960, the jarring effects of arbitrary colonial unification manifested as seemingly irreconcilable differences of aspirations, priorities, and visions.⁴ So deep were these religious and ethnic antagonisms that one Northern Nigerian Muslim nationalist leader declared Nigeria “the mistake of 1914” while a prominent Southern Nigerian Christian nationalist figure called Nigeria “a mere geographic expression.”

³ <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-03-10/roots-nigerias-religious-and-ethnic-conflict>

⁴ Cornelius Omonkhua, *Dialogue in Context: A Nigerian Experience* (Kaduna: Virtua Insignia, 2014), p. 127-8.

In Nigeria's national politics, Christian anxieties about Muslim domination of the national political space and the accompanying fear that politically dominant Muslims would use their privileged perch to Islamize national institutions is currently on the move and the imposition of the Islamic *Sharia* law on non-Muslims date back to colonial times. Muslims, especially those from Northern Nigeria, for their part, have sought to fend off what they regard as unbridled Westernization and have sporadically sought refuge in parochial religious reforms.⁵

On the other hand, it is good to recognize that the mismanagement of national resources and misrule by multi-ethnic and multi-religious coalitions of successive rulers since independence have impoverished and denied opportunities to the majority of Nigerians. The desperate advancement of religious solutions to socioeconomic and political problems has deepened social fissures and spawned extremist and violent insurgencies such as the ongoing *Boko Haram* Islamist terrorist campaign, which has killed and maimed Christians and Muslims alike. The adoption of the *Sharia* criminal legal system by a slew of Northern Nigerian Muslim-majority states between 2000 and 2002 was the highpoint of this new politicization of religion. Once *Sharia* was introduced, it only added to the fear of Christians that they would be persecuted and their freedoms, guaranteed in the Nigerian constitution, curtailed.⁶

Subsequently, religion became a major topic of national political debates, with each religious community pushing increasingly adversarial agendas. In this charged environment where religion functions as the primary idiom of political identity, conflicts over resources have often taken on a religious coloration, with Muslims pitted against Christians. Christians have been drawn into these religious conflicts with their members in Northern Nigerian cities frequently targeted by Muslim mobs. Muslims, also, have been targeted in revenge killings in Southern Nigeria.⁷ Here, the possibility of getting along has been damaged and thwarted by religious bigotry.

⁵ Moses Ochonu, *Colonialism: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Lagos: Macmillan Publication, 2014), p.156.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178-9.

⁷ <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-03-10/roots-nigerias-religious-and-ethnic-conflict>

I think, unhealthy colonization caused this primordial conditions and identities that have generated tensions and conflicts between Christians and Muslims, but it made them worse. Since colonization established the basis for using identity politics as a means of accessing political and economic resources, religious differences have exacerbated political crises and have been implicated in major national conflicts such as the Nigerian civil war (1967-70), in which the Biafra separatist movement initiated by the predominantly Southern Christian Igbos was crushed by the then Federal government which used pogroms, blockades, and starvation to exact victory. Religious animosities only grew from that tragic episode of Nigerian history.

Since independence, corrupt and incompetent leadership have added another wrinkle, preventing the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities and making the politics of religion and ethnicity exclusively more appealing. The use of religious and ethnic appeals as tools of political mobilization will diminish if there is an equal climate of justice, equitable resource distribution, and opportunities for all.

Ethnic-Religious Cleansing In Nigeria

The testimonies of victims provide additional clues to the causes of ethnic cleansing. They have described crimes by secret police and death squads, but many have also reported something even more disturbing: arson, assaults, and murders carried out by their own neighbors. Many Muslims decided that they truly wished to drive out their neighbors. Many incidents of neighbors attacking neighbors have been seen as evidence of massive popular support for religious cleansing since the opponents are Christians.⁸ It is good to avoid being too dogmatic in identifying the reasons why people have attacked their neighbors. A Nigerian Christian woman who was severely injured and lost her husband and two sons in the crisis in 2015 says: "I still find it hard to understand that one of the boys who played on my son's soccer team died with a knife in his hand, fighting...for Islam that would mean the extermination of many of his high school friends.

Ethnic cleansing has often occurred under weak states. It is even more obvious that ethnic cleansing typically has included looting, because of the high rate of poverty in the state. Also, some persons saw ethnic cleansing as something good in itself. Individuals, accustomed to hearing stories of

⁸ Benjamin Lieberman, *op.cit.*, p. xii.

atrocities and historic betrayal, came to see neighbors from different ethnic and religious groups not as people with a shared past in work, school, and community life but as members of an inherently evil enemy nation who deserved punishment and removal.

Nigeria a complex state with the introduction of *Sharia* law into her Constitution made it explicit that there are possible ethnic-religious cleansing. Once *Sharia* was introduced, it only added to the fear of Christians that they would be persecuted and their freedoms curtailed. The adoption of the *Sharia* criminal legal system was the starting point of religious cleansing. In Northern Nigeria, clashes between Muslim groups – mainly ethnic Hausa and Fulani – and Christian communities have become a weekly affair, with devastating consequences in which thousands of people are killed, property destroyed, and hundreds of thousands displaced.⁹ Christians, who make up close to half of the population in the country, have been targeted by major terror groups, such as *Boko Haram* and the Muslim Fulani herdsmen. Christians in the north of the county are especially in danger of being killed as *Boko Haram* has been seeking to take down the Nigerian government and force Christians to flee the north and the country.

Possible Reasons for Ethnic-Religious Cleansing In Nigeria

Nigeria has never been at ease with itself: social unrest has been one of the trademarks of the country. *Resource distribution* and power allocation among regions and ethnic groups have consistently created havocs that cannot be forgotten. The Biafra War (July 1967 – January 1970), caused by an ethnic and political conflict, left the African continent with a vivid memory of how delicate are the boundaries created by the colonial powers, where the North are mainly occupied by Muslims and the South by the Christians. The country was also under successive alleged and actual military coups till 1999.¹⁰ Corruption, lack of good governance and absence of the rule of law have been the underlying causes of the problems Nigeria has been facing. The current situation in the country, however, is graver than the previous problems.

The advent of *Boko Haram* and its subsequent degenerating into the Fulani herdsmen have created cause to reflect and ponder on a complex Nigeria.

⁹ Moses Ochon, op.cit., 188.

¹⁰ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/news/3570472/3904431/3924576>

The conflict that involves *Boko Haram*, and other radical Islamic groups, has a religious dimension, which makes it more complicated to deal with. The leaders of *Boko Haram* have repeatedly reiterated that they want to establish a caliphate of their own in order to establish the *Sharia* law and court, to Islamize the north and in general Nigeria. The master plan of *Boko Haram* and Muslims are to remove Christians from the region. This can be shown by the fact that attackers are being settled in those areas where they removed Christians. These crimes are, at least, ethnic-religious cleansing.

The quest for power and natural resources are another possible reasons for ethnic-religious cleansing in Nigeria. The government is doing everything possible to remove Christians from power and Islamize every sector of the government. The Nigeria Muslims believed they were born to rule and live in the corridor of power. Thus, Islamist domination through traditional institutions, political control and the promotion of Islam by the furthering of the Dan Fodio (an early 19th cent. Islamic teacher) jihad is a hinder dream.

Igwebuike Philosophy and the Quest for a Relational Balance

The word *Igwebuike* is an Igbo word. It is a composite word made up of three dimensions. Therefore, it can be employed as a word or used as a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, 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*. 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 force¹¹.

¹¹Kanu, A. I. (2017). *Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Ethic of Reciprocity*. IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. 3. 2. 153-160; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike and the logic of African philosophy." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike and the question of superiority in the scientific community of knowledge." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as a Complementary Approach to the Issue of Girl-Child Education." *Nightingale International Journal of Contemporary Education and Research*. Vol. 3. No. 6.

Igwebuike is a principle that is at the heart of African thought, and in fact, the modality of being in African ontology. As an ideology, *Igwebuike* rests on the principles of solidarity and complementarity. Thus, 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. This is based on the African sense of community, which is the underlying principle in African philosophy and religion, and as such, the unity of African philosophy. In this case, to be with the other becomes the modality of being in African ontology. This is anchored on the African cosmology which Iroegbu describes as being characterized by a common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny¹².

In the contention of Kanu, *Igwebuike* is an ordered relationship, even though the idea of *Igwe* (large number of people or group) may give the impression of a mob or disordered relationship. *Igwebuike* is a relationship guided by the Igbo-African principle: *egbe bere ugo bere* (Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch). Iroegbu writing on being as belongingness avers that: "*Isiokwu bu EBUB egbe bere ugo bere*). *Nihi na o weghi onye e kere kan nani ya biri n'uwa*) the central thing is live and let live. For none is created to live alone in this world"¹³. The idea of *Egbe* (kite) and *Ugo* (eagle) speaks of a variety of positions, personality, creed, culture, etc., and in fact, differences in life, which is found in the world, and yet must coexist together. When the *Egbe* settles in the *uwa* (the world) and imagines that the *Ugo* has no right of existence and then begins to castigate *Ugo* and to push it out of being, at that point, the *Egbe* alienates the being of the *Ugo*. When *Egbe* castigates and condemns the *Ugo*, it thinks that it is making progress; it is rather alienating itself because the being of the *Ugo* has an existential and fundamental contribution to make to the being of the *Egbe*. It is such that when *Egbe* kills the *Ugo*, the *Egbe* also kills itself.

¹² Kanu, I. A. (2014). *Igwebuikology* as an Igbo-African philosophy for Catholic-Pentecostal relations. *Jos Studies*. 22. 87-98; Kanu, I. A. (2016) "Igwebuike as an Expressive Modality of Being in African ontology." *Journal of Environmental and Construction Management*. 6. 3.

¹³ Iroegbu Iroegbu, P. (1994). *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*. Owerri: International Universities Press. p.378

To be in the world, Kanu avers that the *Egbe* and the *Ugo* must dialogue. The world is such that differences would always exist and to try to destroy the other as a result of difference is to waste one's time; to end the variation of reality is to end reality itself for reality is by its nature variegated. *Egbe beru Ugo beru* (Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch). This implies they live face to face with each other, and, therefore, must have a relationship. They have the options of either relating and being happy or being in perpetual discord which alienates their being in the *Uwa*. When the *Egbe* and *Ugo* harness their energies towards a common project, need and desire, they can constitute an insurmountable force in pursuing their collective vision. Only then can they overcome their collective difficulties. In the same way, only when Muslims and Christians come together in existential solidarity, which is a correlative and complementary solidarity, a 'we' relationship, can they fulfill their divine mandates. Both religions have something to learn from each other, and to avoid or alienate the other is to deny oneself of knowledge and growth, and, thus, expanding the capacity of ignorance. When both religions slight each other, look down on each other, segregate each other and reject the contribution of each other, they are committing the ontological evil of alienation.

The realization of who we are in relation to the other is the beginning of dialogue. We, Muslims and Christians are beings in relation to the other. Both religious groups need to make a more sincere effort to establish ongoing dialogues. The result would be an understanding of each other through detailed knowledge of how each other's community interprets its sacred texts and traditions.

Igwebuike promotes the search for common denominators for the strengthening of unity and solidarity. Thus, the discovery of common religious beliefs (God as One and Creator, Day of Judgment, Resurrection of the dead, Mary, Value Moral life and worship God through prayer, almsgiving and fasting etc) can serve as soft ground for getting along through prayers and mutual support for each other, thereby combating religious prejudice and biases that have struck deep into the society. Also, overcoming the widespread misunderstanding of Islam as a religion of violence and terrorism, Christian leaders must educate and correct this misunderstanding to aid proper religious relationship between peoples particularly in areas such as moral values and basic human dignity. In 1998, Saint Pope John Paul II reminded Muslim leaders in Nigeria that "both

Christianity and Islam stress the dignity of every human person as having been created by God for a special purpose. This leads us to uphold the value of human life at all its stages, and to give support to family as the essential unit of society."¹⁴ Thus, Christians and Muslims can get along if there is a profound respect for one another's religious beliefs and respect for human dignity as a creature of the merciful Creator. Recalling their common spiritual father, Abraham (Ibrahim), Christians and Muslims can overcome their religious diversity and witness to the one God (Allah) who calls all people to build a community founded on love.

The Vatican Document: "*Nostra Aetate*: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," encourage love, unity and peace among people of diverse religion. The document encourage this getting along between Christian and Muslims: "The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these people. The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems..."¹⁵ Hence, getting along between Christians and Muslims in a complex Nigeria will entails an equal climate of justice, equitable resource distribution, and opportunities for all.

Evaluation and Conclusion

From the above discourse, with the current disheartening speech of the Buhari's led government which points strongly to an Islamic agenda of dominance and Islamization, I wish to assert my opinion without reservation that it is obvious that there is ethnic and religious cleansing currently going on in Nigeria and the possibility of getting along in a complex ethno-religious society like Nigeria would be futuristic in that the mediate situation calls for a review and reevaluation of the process of dialogue that have taken place in the past. Also, in addressing the possibility of getting along, Muslims and Christians should always recall that religions have been co-opted into motivating acts of violence through decades. Thus,

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, Address at Meeting with Muslim Leaders (March 22, 1998), no.2, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_22031998_nigeria-muslim_en.html.

¹⁵ Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Document (New Delhi: Rekha printers Pvt. Ltd), p.654.

today, the voice of hope for getting along in Nigeria should acknowledge that there is simply no alternative to dialogue among religions even though the Nigerian Muslims may seem not to be **sincere** in their practice of dialogue.

However, since Muslims and Christians will always live together in Nigeria for now, it is good to recall and uphold the words of Pope Benedict XVI when he addressed Muslim representatives in Cologne in 2005: "Interreligious and intercultural dialogue...is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends."¹⁶ More than ever today, we need conversion of heart, perspective and diverse voices. This change of heart must be based on a philosophy that increases our knowledge of one another and thus dispel the darkness of prejudice and anger.

Chukwunonso Egbedike, OSA

Seton Hall University

Faculty of Arts

South Orange, New Jersey

chinosoaustin@yahoo.com

Bibliography

- Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Document* (New Delhi: Rekha printers Pvt. Ltd), p.654.
- Benjamin Lieberman, *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p. xiii-xiv.
- Cornelius Omonkhua, *Dialogue in Context: A Nigerian Experience* (Kaduna: Virtua Insignia, 2014), p. 127-8.
- Iroegbu, P. (1994). *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*. Owerri: International Universities Press.
- Kanu, A. I. (2017). *Igwebuiké as an Igbo-African Ethic of Reciprocity*. IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. 3. 2. 153-160.
- Kanu, I. A. (2014). *Igwebuikology as an Igbo-African philosophy for Catholic-Pentecostal relations*. *Jos Studies*. 22. 87-98.

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Address at meeting with Representatives of Some Muslims Communities (Twentieth World Youth Day, August 20, 2005), www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_meeting_muslims_en.html.

- Kanu, I. A. (2016) "Igwebuike as an Expressive Modality of Being in African ontology." *Journal of Environmental and Construction Management*. 6. 3.
- Kanu, I. A. (2016). "Igwebuike as the consummate foundation of African bioethical principles." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 2. 2.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike and the logic of African philosophy." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike and the question of superiority in the scientific community of knowledge." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as a Complementary Approach to the Issue of Girl-Child Education." *Nightingale International Journal of Contemporary Education and Research*. Vol. 3. No. 6.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy for the Protection of the Environment". *Nightingale International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 3. No. 4.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African wholistic response to the problem of evil and human suffering." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 2.
- Moses Ochonu, *Colonialism: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Lagos: Macmillan Publication, 2014), p.156.
- Philip Ther and Ana Siljak ed., *A Century of Forced Migration: The Origins and Consequences of 'Ethnic Cleansing' in Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948* (Maryland: Lanham, 2001), p. 13.
- Pope Benedict XVI, Address at meeting with Representatives of Some Muslims Communities (Twentieth World Youth Day, August 20, 2005),
www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_meeting_muslims_en.html.
- Pope John Paul II, Address at Meeting with Muslim Leaders (March 22, 1998), no.2, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_22031998_nigeria-muslim_en.html.