

IGWEBUIKE PHILOSOPHY AND THE DREAD OF DIVERSITY

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Abstract

A cursory glance at the different epochs in the history of mankind will reveal the idea that human history has always been saturated with an obvious dread for diversity. One would normally think that we often stick together with others like us, and exclude others whose difference provokes antipathy towards them. However, if you look at some of the fiercest and bloodiest rivalries in history, what is sticking is not how different the opposing groups are, but how similar. Sure, they often hold different beliefs, but they live as neighbours, share ancestry, and hold similar customs. Indeed, what many fail to acknowledge is that, consciously, we exclude others who are different, but unconsciously, we hate sameness, and avoid it by creating delusional differences. Over the years, Nigeria as a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse society, has witnessed several conflicts arising from this same ethnic and cultural diversity. Ideally, one would expect that since Nigeria is a society where the ideals of federalism and constitutionalism are still in transition, it should override all ethnic, tribal or religious clashes. But it seems rather, that these factors have become dominant in weakening and dividing our country. How did we get to this point? I will argue that our diversity is failing because we have entrenched among us, the various dominating ideas of sameness. I will insist that antipathy is more rooted in sameness than in difference, and I will also employ the idea of a more complementary approach that brings together the ideas of sameness and difference, and integrates them into a unified diversity.

Keywords: Sameness, difference, diversity, conflict, ethnicity, complementarity.

Introduction

Anyone who has come across Lois Lowry's book, *The Giver* (1993), will appreciate the depth at which she showed how the government, in the bid to achieve total control over everyone and everything, eliminated every bit of difference and enforced a particular lifestyle on everyone. They made the people believe that the idea of 'Climate Control' was the best possible means to achieve this - and so they made away with snow, weather, hills, trucks, buses, etc. - because the reality of it made life difficult. Meanwhile, the interesting thing about this fictional experience is how it translates to Nigeria's pluralistic societal challenges.

Unfortunately, ours have been an overrated struggle with managing diversity, especially when you consider the many ethnic and religious conflicts that are weakening the integrity of our nation. At least 62 identity-based conflicts have taken place within the last decade, with 22 incidents recorded in 2004 alone. In some Northern states, we see the realities of the 'indigene-settler' disputes with replicated cases in some parts of Plateau, Kano, Bauchi, and Adamawa states; as reported through various judicial commissions of inquiry set up between 1994 and 2014 (Emelonye 2017). Not to mention the heinous scourge of terrorism in the North generally (especially the North-Eastern states) and the recent killings by the Fulani herd's men militia.

While, I may likely use Nigeria as my point of reference in discussing the menaces of ethnic clashes, it is important to note that this is not exclusively 'Nigerian' but a human struggle with its identity. From the global context, we see many cases of entrenched tribal hostility between neighbours: in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea; between the Nuer and Dinka in the Sudan; between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda; in the Holocaust, which aimed to expunge all European Jews, including those who were German (Figlio 2000). There is also that which exist between the English and the Scots; the Serbs and the Croats; the Sunnis and the Shiites.

All of these cases, when properly examined, are often measures to replicate the idea of sameness; the idea of dominance, to be in total control. However, while it is important to understand why these cases of sameness exist within our society, my primary concern is to show how the various manifestations of sameness is quite responsible for our present crisis, and the possible ways it can be corrected.

The Sameness-Difference Bias

The concepts of sameness and difference have been with man from time immemorial, and it has often been used to identify two kinds of reality: The quality of being alike and that quality that distinguishes or separates a being from another. In a broader sense, the idea of sameness could refer to having total control over everything in order to make it the 'same. According to Uwaezuoke Charles (2017), it could also be described as any reality that promotes itself at the expense of other realities. Like the promotion of one's language, tribe, politics, religion, culture, etc. over and above the rest.

However, what is fascinating about the sameness-difference bias is that its reality has been with us since the ancient Greeks. According to Hope A. Olson (2006),

Before Plato and Aristotle, Parmenides proposed the notion that any given thing either is or is not. It exists or does not exist. Aristotle, then, applied the notion of being or not being as something being or not being part of a category. So something either belongs to category *X* because it is in some way the same as other things in category *X*, or it does not belong because it is different. Thus, sameness becomes the privileged factor in this pair since *X* defines sameness, while difference is defined negatively as *not-X* (115).

If you understand the analysis, you would understand why we often prefer to stick together with those like us, and exclude others whose differences provoke resentment. Thereby, associating the idea of difference with a negative connotation, and consciously holding to the notion that the idea of being different is bad, threatening and unhealthy for harmonious coexistence. And so instead of being accepted, the idea of difference is often dreaded; that is, *whatever is not like us is against us* (Uwaezuoke 2017).

Sameness as Response

Already, it is an established reality that our nation has been plagued with a lot of crisis over religious and cultural diversity, but the Civil war was a unique experience. The Civil war broke out as a result of poor and selfish leadership, and the implication was that for the first time in our national history, the reality of sameness was created. In responding to this, Uwaezuoke (2017) argues that:

This reality of sameness was seen in the tussle for dominance among our regional leaders and in the Biafran secession (which, according to him, was not much of a choice). However, the Biafran secession is quite significant to the idea of *sameness as response*, because it was essentially a response to guard against the ill-actions of a compromised leadership. And this is why I make relation to the Civil war because the realities that led to the war are foundational to our current crisis.

Therefore, this is basically what we learn from the civil war - and other related cases of insurgency and uprising - that sameness is often conceived

out of a response or reaction to the inability of leadership to manage diversity or differences, with the intent for self-preservation. Even though, they are some whose intents are for exploitative purposes. Fundamentally, however, we need to commit to equity if we are really serious about managing diversity. For it is only in the absence of this, can the idea of sameness become the most appealing option. Let us not take this for granted, or we might be forced to believe that, “to be with our kind is safer; and since we cannot dwell peacefully together, then we better seek separate paths” (Uwaezuoke 2017).

Sameness as Dominance

Apart from the idea of sameness as response, the idea of sameness could also be manifested as a means for dominance. In his 1930 essay, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud commented on this reality, noting that it is frequently “communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other.” Elsewhere, he notes that the phenomenon is not limited to ethnic or religious peoples either: “Every time two families become connected by marriage, each of them thinks itself superior to or of better birth than the other. Of two neighbouring towns, each is the other’s most jealous rival; every little canton looks down upon the others with contempt.”

So what accounts for the peculiar hostility between groups of people that are in many ways quite alike? According to Brett and Kate McKay (2015), Freud chalked it up to the innate human proclivity for aggression and the desire for distinct identity. To see one’s neighbours reflect and mirror oneself too much threatens a person’s unique sense of self, and superiority. It is consequent on this idea, that Freud called this phenomenon “the narcissism of minor differences.”

Back home, when our leaders engage in power tussles in order to be in total control, the reality of sameness as dominance is expressed, and this has been very much responsible for the various agitations for secessionism, tribalism, denominationalism, racism, etc. Like the government in Lois Lowry’s novel, we often choose sameness because we believe that if everything is the same for everyone; same church, same religion, same tribe and same livelihood, that evil will be eliminated and a perfect world will be achieved. And then, when we cannot get people to be of the same religion or the same tribe with us, we quietly do away with such people.

Reinterpreting Diversity through Igwebuike Philosophy of Complementarity

The truth about sameness, however, is that it is an idea that is quite tricky. This is because the more we pursue sameness; the more we discover how different we are. Quite recently, I got engaged in a discussion with a friend. And while we spoke, my friend made a very striking comment. He said that even in the midst of the so called tribalism or ethnicity, Nigeria is even more divided now than before. According to him, we are divided even to 'clannish' and 'township' levels - where it is possible within a particular tribe to find people who still want to identify with their states, local government areas, towns, villages and even families - in order to dominate and segregate those who are not of their origin. Thus, this is an indication that even when we seek to enforce the idea of sameness at the level of tribalism, we may not truly have the perfect world we had envisioned. And so, what is the way out of this menace?

According to Innocent I. Asouzu (2011), this challenge subsists in the fact that "the tendency to see the world in a polarised, exclusivist, non-conciliatory mode is something deeply entrenched in our being and consciousness" (28). Fundamentally, human beings tend to secure their interests first, to which they then tend to negate the interests of others, due to the instinct for self-preservation, which is inherent in us as human beings. Thus, this explains the 'ambivalent' or 'tension-laden' nature of man, and as to why he would prefer the maxim, 'the nearer the better and the safer' (Asouzu 2011).

Kanu (2016), in his complementary philosophy of *Igwebuike* as the modality of being in African philosophy, opines that *Igwebuike* is the path towards resolving the problem of sameness. *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 could be written thus *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. Let us try to understand 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 (Kanu 2017a,b&c).

Igwebuike philosophy rests on the African principles of solidarity and complementarity. As an ideology, it understands the world immanent

realities to be related to one another in the most natural, mutual, harmonious and compatible ways possible (Kanu 2015a&b). It provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations. It also 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 (Kanu 2016). Thus, just like the Nigeria situation, sameness will thrive when we negate the 'Igwebuiké' idea of solidarity and complementarity, and instead, pursue interests that are selfishly motivated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the idea of sameness is like a coin with two sides, which will also lead us on the path to extinction. Since the more we pursue sameness, the more likely we are to eliminate every bit of difference, and by extension, the whole of humanity. But this whole attractiveness towards sameness can be properly managed and brought under control. Hence, the solution to resolving the sameness-difference problem will be by living with our differences; complementing and completing each another.

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