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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE IGBO COSMOLOGIC-ONTOLOGICAL CONCEPTION AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

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#### Abstract

Practically speaking, the way people understand reality (ontology) cuts across the nexus of their thought pattern, belief system and consequently their general attitude to life. Hence, ontology and cosmology are at the basis of Igbo conception of reality and also the spiritual and physical operations of the human world. It is an established fact that a traditional Igbo would like to hold tenaciously to the already established concepts by the Igbo forebears. Hence, any attempt at a critical analysis of these accepted concepts are quickly waved off with such statements as: it has been so and has to remain so. For the Igbo, it is morally wrong to question the wisdom of the ancestors. The wisdom of the ancestors is to be cherished, preserved and propagated to the future generations and not to be questioned or criticized. But materiality is part of reality. As such, neither the created beings nor the universe in general are static but rather dynamic. Dynamism is the natural condition of existence in the world of the moving and sensible reality. Hence, people's concepts of reality should be necessarily subjected to constant evaluation and re-evaluation in order to ascertain their validity. Thus, the main purpose of this research is to challenge and encourage Igbo-African scholars to delve into many traditional concepts as to critically evaluate them either to discover the truth hidden in them or to make possible the attainment of certainty. However, the research adopts primarily the method of philosophical appraisal to reach to the goal of the research.

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#### Introduction:-

##### General Introduction

Due to the increasing obscurities surrounding many traditional concepts and given the notable controversies and contradictions around them, philosophers have gone a long way in attempting to investigate more about some of the traditional assumptions and beliefs. The effect or the influence of Cosmology and Ontology on the general way Africans perceive reality is not an exception. Nevertheless, this domain has been largely and culpably ignored by many Igbo- African scholars.

Admittedly, in different time and in various ways, God spoke to our fore bearers. Hence, in every age God has a way of speaking to his people. As God was speaking to the Jews through the prophets, he was speaking through the ancient Greek philosophers to the Greeks and then was communicating to the Africans through the sages –

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philosophers in its cradle (Wise men and women). Hence, through the cosmological and ontological structure of the Igbo world, reality unveils itself to them in their own circumstances and situations.

Man is actually, endowed with grace, which will enable him to dominate his immediate surroundings in particular and the entire created universe in general for his own development and betterment. This, he does by investigating his surrounding and giving meaning to life. The discovery of this crystalline truth is actually the propelling force, which arouses the researcher primarily to investigate into the philosophical appraisal of Igbo cosmologic-ontological conception and the structure of the world. This is very important because the Cosmology and Ontology of a people influence the general way the people perceive reality.

### **Igbo Cosmologic-Ontological Conception And The Structure Of The World**

Ndi Igbo ontologically have a unitary concept of reality. Hence, existence is conceived as a unified whole – ‘Uwa di ogbu’ (reality is holistic). Notwithstanding, this unified whole consists of three levels of existence: the spiritual or ontological level; Ancestral level and the Human level. Ogugua meaningfully alluded to this very fact when he writes: For the Igbo people, the world is populated by human beings, inanimate things and spirits, but there is an order of supremacy based on the level of vital force in the being in question (Ogugua; 2003, p.9)

On the ontological level are the transcendental beings – God – ‘Chukwu’ (the Supreme Being); the deities; the alusi and other spirit including the human spirits (ndi mmuo). Meanwhile, the Igbo metaphysicians adamantly hold that,

...the Supreme Being Chukwu is undoubtedly the ultimate in the hierarchy of supernatural forces and spirits....various other lower spirits and forces are at the service of this Supreme spiritual entity (Asouzu; 2004, p.146).

Human level: This level of existence is the level of human beings which must be understood from the view point of families and communities. As well included in this level are animals, trees and minerals.

The remaining is the ancestral realm. It is the level of the living dead, the heroes of the human societies- ndiichie (the saints). On this Metuh writes:

Ancestors are, therefore, people who have made it to the spirit-land and are being venerated by their descendants (Metuh;1991, p.120).

Admittedly, the three levels of existence interact and interrelate with one another. Hence, Ekwunife meaningfully supports the notion of the intermingling, interpenetrating and interpenetrating of the three levels of existence. Hence, he opines that:

...Igbo world is principally a world of two interacting Realities – the spiritual and material, each impinging on the other. It is both the world of spiritual beings and the world of man with other animate and inanimate beings. In this world, the material mirrors the Sacred in different degrees. Though homo-centric (man-centered) in practice, yet it finds its ultimate meaning in Transcendence (Ekwunife; 1990, p.18).

### **Igbo Reality is Controlled by the Spirits**

Thus by application and implication, an Igbo is religious by nature, as he is intrinsically and comfortably tending towards the divine in every aspect. Njaka is very correct on this as he observes:

Religion plays such a central role in Igbo life that it permeates every facet of the society. Neither the culture nor the political system of the Igbo can be understood without reference to the religion (Njaka; 1974, p.28)

Along the same line of thought, Leonard strongly and superlatively affirms that the Igbo;

...are in the strict and natural sense of the word truly and deeply religious people....they are religiously, dress religiously, and sin religiously (Leonard; 1964, p.429)

Hence, Igbo reality is being controlled by the spirits. The spirit is divided into two kinds: the pure spirits (mmuo) which includes the Supreme Being (Chukwu, Chineke or Osebuluwa); the deities and the alusi. The second kind of

spirit include the spirit of the saints which have graduated into full spirits; the forbearers; the ancestors and other spirits (the living dead) as well as the 'akalogoli' (the spirits of the dead that are not qualified as 'ndiichie' - the saints). This group of spirits is generally called ndi-mmuo (spirits that were once human). Metuh in order to explicate this idea succinctly writes:

The universe, as the Igbo know it, is full of spirits. Their world therefore is not limited to the material world of the visible beings, but includes the realm of invisible things. The visible world is the spirit world (Ani Mmuo). Spirits are called Mmuo. There are two types of Mmuo – Ndi Muo – human spirit (the dead) and Mmuo (spirit who were never humans). Spirits can be grouped into four broad categories – Chukwu (the Creator), Mmuo (deities), Alusi (spirit - forces), and Ndi Mmuo (the living dead). Generally, the world of human experience is seen as one fluid coherent unit in which spirits, men, animals, plants and the elements are engaged in continuous interaction (Metuh; 1991, p.38).

More so, the Igbo codes (law of the land) are formulated in the alliance with the demands of the gods and they are enshrined in the Omenani(tradition). The ancestors are the custodians of Omenani and Odinani (moral values) for,

Though still living no longer in physical communion with the dead, there is no doubt that the living-dead are connected and in constant touch with the living. This is the reason behind the prayers, libations, sacrifices, supplications made to them every morning by the head of the traditional Igbo family (Ogugua; 2003, p.24).

The ancestors as well act as a link between the living and the gods. They are not merely the 'nze na ozos'(titled men) as some have mistakenly and triumphantly postulated. Ancestors are those who have lived good moral life during their earthly sojourn as well as have reached a ripe old age, died a good death and having been accorded with final funeral rites. The second funeral rites enables one to reach 'ala ndiichie'(ancestral realm). Moreover, reaching 'ala ndiichie' in turn qualifies one for reincarnation. The ancestors benevolently assist the living and the living pays back through offerings, sacrifices, and libations. Hence, relationships of reciprocity exists between the living and the living dead. Thus, Metuh summarily says,

However, offerings made to the ancestors are called by the Igbo 'inye fa nri' feeding them. Sometimes, this taken literally, and ancestors may be persuaded to grant a request by promises of a generous offering or by a threat of starving them should they fail. On the whole the relationship with the ancestors is governed by the principle of reciprocity (Metuh; 1991, p.120).

Nevertheless, the interactions that exist between the three levels of existence can best be understood from the Igbo ontological understanding of being as force. Hence, man is a life force interacting with other forces in the universe.

Because the Igbo are anthropocentric in their cosmologic conception, man then, is at the centre of the universe. In lieu of this Metuh rightly elucidates that,

Man is the centre of the universe full of spiritual and material forces. God is the first for he is the Creator of all other forces including man (Metuh; 1991, p.113).

In the hierarchical order of beings, Chukwu comes first. He is the Creator and the sustainer of other forces-spiritual as well as material forces. He is immediately followed by deities and alusi (tutelary gods), then come the fore bearers or founding fathers of the various clans. After them, the ancestors and other living – dead followed. They are closely followed by human beings in accordance with their function. Then, below man and subsidiary to man are animals, plants, minerals, and any other physical forces in the physical sensible world. The Igbo value not in a small measure cordial co-existence and peaceful interaction because, for them:

Harmonious interaction leads to the strengthening of beings. While pernicious influences lead to the diminution of beings... Harmonious relationship ensures increase of the life force of man. Much of Igbo religion consists of rituals to maintain or restore this harmony (Metuh; 1991, p.113).

### **Man as a Unity of Body, Soul and Spirit**

Consequently, from anthropological and ontological-metaphysical point of view, man is not subject to departmentalization and disjointedness that characterized Western thought. Thus, it is not the soul that survives death as is the case with Western ontology. Rather, it is the 'Onye' the 'mmadu' (the self) as a unity of 'Obi' (soul), 'ahu' (body) and 'Mmuo' (Spirit) that survives death. It is not the body from the strict sense that distinguishes man from spirits as such, as some would think. After all, there are spiritual bodies as well as material bodies. As a demonstration; when an Igbo suddenly come across someone, the possible exclamation that will come from him or her is 'Onye!!?' (Who!!?). It is a brief manner of asking: are you spirit or a human being? Hence, it is your 'Onyeness' (selfhood) that makes you the 'Onye' (self) you are and not another thing else. Hence, 'onye' in a way can be likened to Aristotle's substance. What makes a thing what it is and not some other thing else. The 'Onye' as already mentioned is the unity of the soul, body and spirit. According to Metuh,

Man is the individual created by God. A living person is called 'Onye mmadu', a dead person is called 'Onye mmuo'. Hence it is the full individual person not a part of him or his Soul which survives after dead (Metuh; 1991, p.110).

Whether living or dead; when human or spirit, the onye (self) is what remains constant.

### **The Physical and the Spiritual**

The Igbo have a very clear differentiation of the body from the flesh (ahu na anuahu). Therefore, what differentiate ordinary man – a human being from the spirit being is 'anuahu' (the flesh) and not 'ahu' (the body). With 'anuahu' (the flesh) man is 'onye mmadu' (human being), but without 'anuahu' man becomes an 'onye mmuo' (human spirit). Concerning this very fact, Metuh cleverly expatiates,

Man is not subject to the body and soul dichotomy as in Western thought. Man can exist in his material body or out of it without being split: When out of the material body, man can be described as a spiritual body. A dead person is always visualized in a bodily form, as a sort of unquantified body, imagined to be like the shadow of a man on a sunny day (Metuh; 1991, p.110).

The concept of full individual person surviving death is founded on the Igbo materialistic conception of the world beyond or the world hereafter. This idea is shadowed in the Igbo saying 'Onye nochaa obodo mmadu, o naba obodo mmuo'- at the end of one's earthly sojourn, one then moves onto spiritual sojourn in the spirit world which is conceived as resembling the earthly life in all aspects. Although we talk of the physical and spiritual worlds, there is no spatial division between them for the Igbo. Or else why talk of 'Anyanwu na afu mmuo' - the eye that sees the spirit. In short, the physical and the spiritual worlds interpenetrate and intermingle with each other (Ogugua; 2003, p.23). The human world and the spirit world are not distant from each other spatially but epistemically or dimensionally distinct from each other.

At this juncture, it is deemed necessary to distinguish in Igbo conceptualization of man; between man and the self. Man as we know is a unique and unified reality. This unified entity is endowed with three life vital forces or principles which are: Obi (breath-soul); the Eke also called Agu in some parts of Igbo land (Ancestral Guardian) and the Chi (Destiny). Chi is what Christian theologians may call 'deus in nobis'- the God in us. Moral theologians may like to call it the conscience. For the Igbo; it is the spark of God in man. Hence Metuh writes,

The Igbo believes that man is endowed with three different principles or selves. Man can operate one or more of these selves in different contexts. These three principles are: Obi, Heart or Breath, Chi, Destiny, and Eke or Agu, Ancestral Guardian. Obi, Heart, is a man's life force, the animating principle which links man with other life-forces in the universe. Chi, is the Destiny-spirit believed to be an emanation of the creator which is in man, and the Eke is the ancestral – guardian which links man with his family and clan (Metuh; 1991, p.111).

Knowledge of these three selves or principles or life forces in man will enable one to understand better what the Igbo meant when they discuss the reality of man.

### **For the Igbo, Life is Cyclical**

The Igbo like every African conceive life as a cyclic process of birth, death and rebirth (Metuh; 1991, p.116). Consequently, what matters for an Igbo man is the eternal now (the hinc et nunc) for time is conceived cyclically and not lineally. Hence, the original meaning of eternity for an Igbo man is within the context of procreation- 'Ndu ebighiebi bu onye a mutara, ya muta ibe ya' (as one was given birth to by another, one should equally be able to give birth to another and so it continues ad infinitum). Admittedly, every child has in him or her, the gene of his/her fore parents. The gene is what the Igbo call 'onuno' or 'agbo'. Hence, 'onuno' or 'agbo' can be called the spark or the emanation of the parents in their offspring. Therefore, through procreation the parents' characters, qualities and likeness are perpetuated or prolonged in and through their children. As regards this Ogugua says,

The 'Agbo' has to do with the interplay of forces between the 'ako' 'uche' or 'ako'na 'uche' of the parents or parents' lineage, and the influence of the 'Chi' and 'eke' of all the concerned. The level of interconnection, goodness and vibrancy of life of the concerned reflects in their offspring as the 'Ume' of God reflects in every creature (Ogugua; 2003, pp. 20-21).

Little wonder, childlessness is considered the worst evil that can befall an Igbo. It means that, that particular 'agbo' is terminated. More so, as the Igbo anthropologically and ontologically conceptualize being as belonging, the phenomenon of child birth is considered the ultimate or a permanent manner of belonging to a particular family and or community. Metuh pointed this when he writes,

Igbo, like most African peoples, tend to define a person in terms of the group to which he belongs. A person is thought of first of all as a member of a particular family, kindred, clan or tribe. Even today in an Igbo village, one is rarely asked; who are you?; but rather whose son are you?; and what lineage or clan do you belong to? (Metuh; 1991, p.113).

Asking a child: "whose son or daughter he or she is?" is an indirect or polite manner of asking a child: whose extension are you? Or whose body are you? Meanwhile, a person's children or grand children or great grand children are equally regarded as the person's body or as the Igbo would put it: 'akpukpa mmadu' – a person's extension. This concept analytically borders on Igbo understanding of being as one. Obviously, man as a being in which the spiritual and the material have same boundary is, therefore, endowed with the capacity of extension like every matter (Onwuatuegwu; 2010, p.39. Mmadu (human being) as a holistic (integral) being (as against dichotomize notion of man) is manifested through 'anuahu' the flesh; in the physical sensible world of reality. Ogugua puts it thus:

As the world is made up of the invisible and visible aspects, the Igbo people believe that man is a spiritual manifestation in a 'Physical' body (Ogugua; 2003, p.10).

### **The Two Aspects of Reality**

The Igbo world is broadly categorized into the spiritual and material or physical. Man as the centre of this world has as well both the spiritual and material dimension. Hence, the physical and the spiritual referred to the known and unknown, the revealed and the unrevealed aspects of one and the same reality – 'ma ndi ahuru anya ma ndi ahughri anya'. Ipso facto, reality for an Igbo has two sides. Hence:

The sacred and the profane are two sides of the order of existence. These two at once transcend and indwell in each other...objects exist in the company of others by mutual accommodation; Pebble, trees, the earth, humans and animals constitute part of the earthly environment that makes up the cosmic indwelling. Mutual accommodation then exists between the created existence and the divine (Njoku; 2002, p.166).

These two sides of reality have but only a dimensional difference. Nevertheless, anuahu – the flesh, is not merely a sign of the body but a symbol of man. Because it is a symbol, it, therefore, participates in the nature of that which it symbolizes.

Nonetheless, man has both the vertical and horizontal relationship in the world. The vertical dimension concerns his relationship with the Supreme Being-Chukwu, deities, alusi, ancestors and other spirits. The horizontal aspect touches or points to his relationship with fellow human beings, animals, trees and minerals.

Man is therefore, in a constant struggle to keep these two aspects of relationship in equilibrium and this gives rise to the ceaseless struggle of man in the world of things for survival – ‘nwoke ezuike’ (uwa bu ndoli ndoli). Ogugua emphasizes this thus,

The Igbo people hold the idea of unity of being and interrelationship which exists among them; it does exclude the idea of interdependences. The structure of relationship can be shattered if the network is disturbed. The actions and inactions of man can affect this relationship, because an order is needed to maintain and ensure continuous equilibrium of the nexus relationships (Ogugua; 2003, p.9).

For the Igbo, therefore, it is the onus of man to maintain the harmony between the physical and the spiritual or metaphysical. Man is both the chief of all created things and the order-er of the universe.

If everything in the world is created by the Unseen, the Owner of life - the Supreme Being; and if man is the centre of the universe and as such the measure of all things in creation; every existing thing, then, is created for the good or well-being of man (Onwuaturgwu; 2011, p.95).

### **Conclusion:-**

Hence, in Igbo cosmology, there is a homocentric and not Dei-centric view of the cosmos. Man is the centre of the world and, therefore, everything including God is meant to serve man's purpose. An Igbo man then tries to manipulate other forces in the universe to his own advantage. Mbiti hence affirms that,

Man is at the very centre of existence and African Peoples See everything else in its relation to the central position of Man...it is as if God exists for the sake of man (Mbiti; 1969, p.92).

Accordingly, the way people understand reality (ontology) cuts across the nexus of their thought pattern, belief system and consequently their general attitude to life. Hence, ontology and cosmology are at the basis of Igbo conceptions.

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