IGWEBUIKE AND AFRICAN ETHICS

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Abstract

Igwebuike, because of its centrality can be understood as the key to the interpretation and understanding of African ethics. The centrality of Igwebuike makes African ethics to be founded on the impressive pillar of humanism- as the welfare of the human person and the community is the fundamental thrust of African ethics. Thus, the human person is at the centre of African ethics– the human person is not defined according to his or her colour, nation, religion, creed, political leanings, material contribution or any matter, but rather seen as a brotherhood or sisterhood. It, therefore, emphasizes the dignity of the human person, the equality of brothers and sisters, and the equality of opportunities for all - an egalitarian society--that is, a society in which there is equal opportunity for self-development for all, working together. Igwebuike is, therefore, the active underlying principle of African ethics.

1. **Introduction**

An examination of the African society reveals that from the traditional times to the contemporary period, African society has always developed values, principles and rules that would help in the organization of human relationships. Here were times when the need for this code of conduct was borne out of the search for orderliness, peaceful co-existence and security. This thought in the minds of African forebears gave rise to socio-religious sanctions, developed over time as the situations presented themselves and required solution. Some behaviours or acts were forbidden, principally, for the maintenance of law and order. Some of these acts or behaviours were articulated and integrated into the social and religious value systems of the community by the foremost religious and philosophical thinkers of the time. However, like African philosophy and many other areas of African studies, Gyekye (2013) avers that African ethics has not received elaborate investigation and clarification. This, therefore, makes it an area of study that requires an in-depth analysis and interpretation. Although in the past few decades, African thinkers have sustained a reflective attention to African ethics, this entry on African ethics adopts the use of the concept *Igwebuike*

to affirm and enhance the idea that indigenous peoples have worldviews and means of relating to the world. *Igwebuike* places communalism at the core of African ethics, making African ethics a morality that is understood in relation to the other.

2. African Ethics

Ethics is a branch of philosophy which deals with the morality of human actions or the norms of human behaviour. Ethics is commonly used interchangeably with morality to mean the subject matter of this study. Omoregbe (1993) defines it as "the systematic study of the fundamental principles of the moral law; or as the normative science of human conduct" (p. 4). According to Thiroux (1998), it deals with the right and wrong of human behaviour and conduct. It deals with the question of what constitutes the right or wrong, good or bad in a person's action? What theories are right or wrong in evaluating human action? This establishes the relationship between ethics and epistemology. Gonsalves (1972) traces its beginnings to life situations. In describing the purpose or task of ethics, the analytic school of philosophy reduced the task of ethics to analyzing and clarifying moral concepts. Hare (1970), in the representation of the analytic school of philosophy, posits that ethics is the logical analysis of moral language. Ayer (1971) also imposes on the entire system of philosophy the task of analysis concepts. Contrary to their opinions, Lewis (1963) argues that ethics is much more than the analysis and clarification of language, even though the analysis of language is useful. These perspectives, notwithstanding, the purpose of studying ethics is to ensure that human behaviour conforms to the norms of behaviour. These moral principles should be able to guide human actions. It was within this context that ethics was understood and developed by great moral philosophers, like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, St Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham among others.

From the foregoing, African ethics would, therefore, refer to the salient features or ideas of the African moral life and thought generally as reflected in, or generated by, African moral language and social structure and life. It is an ethics that is embedded in the ideas and beliefs of the African people as regards what is right or wrong, what is good or bad character. It is strongly tied to the conceptions of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by Africans to bring about social harmony, cooperative living, justice and fairness. The qualification of an ethics "African" speaks of its distinction from other ethical systems, that is, as it emphasizes the salient features of African worldview. 'African' provides the locus, and thus, the methodology for doing such an ethics. It is based on this

difference that some Western ethnologists, sociologists, anthropologists and even missionaries argue that Africans do not have a sense of morality. For instance, in the Western moral theory, the social order is mere conformity with conventionalized behaviour; however, for the African, morality and moral laws are based on belief and unshakable principles that are tied to ontology and held from conviction. The African like all peoples have a sense of good and evil, which is not left in the air but taken from philosophical concepts and the knowledge of God.

3. *Igwebuike* as an Ethics of a Shared Humanity

Igwebuike, as an ideology, emphasizes the African sense of community rooted within the African indigenous epistemology, culture and tradition. It conveys the understanding that we are all related- each aspect relates with the whole. The dynamics of the African realty revealed in *Igwebuike,* is based on the relationships and experiences of interrelationships and interconnections. It is wholistic in the sense that it encompasses the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical elements of being. Relating the foregoing perspective to African ethics, *Igwebuike* expresses the capacity to be compassionate in relation to the other. It encompasses reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community. Unlike Western ethics that emphasizes individual rights, and sometimes to the point of promoting selfish interests at the expense of the interests of the other, *Igwebuike* goes beyond the self, to feel the pain of the other as though it were my pain, the redemption of the other as though it were my redemption. It speaks more of our interconnectedness and interrelatedness and the responsibility we have towards each other. It presents my humanity as being inextricably bound in your humanity. The consequence, therefore, becomes that I am diminished when others are humiliated and oppressed.

Igwebuike, therefore, reflects a community-based morality. Thus, a person in African ontology is said to be ethical only in relation to his or her relationship with the other. This explains why the concept of ethics in African ontology refers to character- how a person relates. If someone behaves in such a way that he or she advances the being and happiness of the other person, such a person is said to be ethical. Thus, it is not surprising that if a person shows love and understanding and compassion, he or she is regarded as having a good character. However, when there is a moral failure, it is seen as the absence of good character. Among the Akan of Ghana, when a person wants to say, "You are unethical", he would rather say, "You have no character" (*onni suban*). Among the Ewe, the word is *nonome mele* (he has no character); among the

Yoruba, Shona and Igbo the words used for morality are *Iwa, hunhu* and *agwa* respectively, which means character. This makes character very central to African ethics, because its quality is the basis of relation. Added to this, is the idea that character is learnt: it is learnt and taught in the community. It is the society that raises a child and teaches the child good character. Everyone is involved in the training of a child.

Furthermore, *Igwebuike* emphasizes the strong connection between moral rules and the type of communal kinship relationships that exist among African societies. Kanu (2015a) observes that a crime committed by a person, say stealing, has implications not only for the thief but also for the kinship relations; for what is stolen is first of all considered to be a thing of the member of the kinship, perhaps of one related to the thief in one way or the other. The offence not only affects the victim of the theft but the whole community, and the shame as well goes to the whole community. In some quarters, the punishment not only affects the thief but also the close relatives, as in the case where a person is asked to leave the village with his entire family.

The community has a responsibility in rooting out evil, and more so, the responsibility in helping the person concerned. There is an African proverb that says: *A kinsman who strays into evil must first be saved from it by all, then, afterwards be questioned on why and how he dared stray into it to start with.* According to Edeh (1985):

> The most important point here is that an evil, be it committed by an individual or group, is the concern of the whole community… the community does not leave the delinquent in isolation. He is always recognized as an indispensable part of the whole. Yet the evil is not condoned, and the culprit is not hidden away or helped to escape. Rather, the whole community comes out to eradicate the evil. (p. 106).

In Africa ontology, taboos also have a strong community dimension. Douglas (2009) avers that "Taboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity" (p. xii). If the community keeps the taboos, then she has a chance of survival, but if she fails, her collapse is nearby. This explains why everyone in the community is fully involved in trying to see that taboos are not violated. Kanu (2015b) avers that to break a taboo is like fighting against the survival of the community and, thus, it is taken seriously by all the members of the community. Even if humans were united in breaking the taboo, it was strongly believed that physical nature, comprising the sea, the earth etc., would avenge the broken taboo. This explains

why sacrifices are offered when a taboo is broken for the purpose of appeasing the gods.

4. Igwebuike and the Essence of Being Human

The philosophy of *Igwebuike* is based on the values of humanness, caring, respect for others, compassion, mutual helpfulness, collective responsibility, reciprocal obligations, interdependence etc. It recognizes three attributes of being human: human dignity, human equality and universal brotherhood/sisterhood.
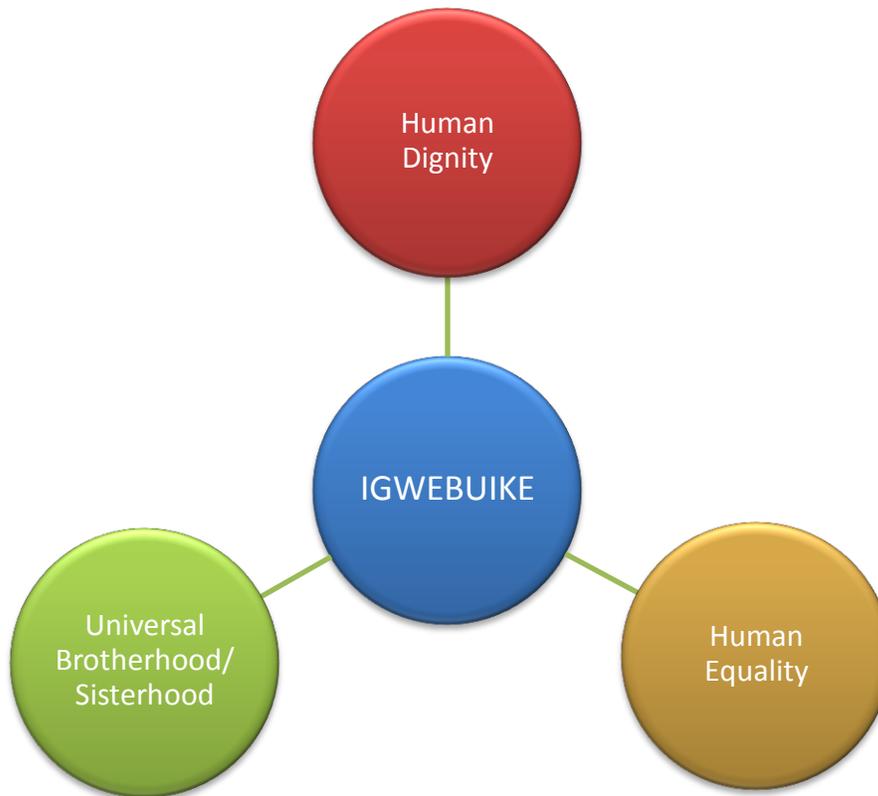
A diagram showing Igwebuike's recognition of the attributes of being human

a. **Human dignity:** The dignity of the human life, for the Igbo, is linked to its relationship with the divine. Life is understood as coming from God. This makes the human person a theomorphic being, and explains why the Igbo say, *ndu sina chi* (life is from God). When a child is born it is taken to be a gift from God. The life of children is not attributed to mere biological fact of conception because every child has existed in an antecedent world of a divine master. It is thus not surprising that the Igbo-African would name their child: *Chi-nyere ndu:* God gave life; *Nke-chi-yere:* the one God has given; *Chi-n'eye ndu:* God gives life; *Chi-di-ogo:* God is generous; *Chi-nwe-*

ndu: God owns life; *Chi-ekwe:* God has agreed; *Chi-ji-ndu:* God owns life. In this relationship with the divine, we discover that *Igwebuike* does not just emphasize relationships among human beings, but a kind of relationship that is metaphysical. The dignity of the human person, who must be treated by the other with respect, and the moral responsibility expected from him or her is fundamentally bound to his or her divine relationship.

b. **Human Equality:** The African idea of human equality is directly linked to her concept of God as the father of all. God, according to Dozie-Okafor (1992) is perceived as a common root. However, Anaulogho (1997) avers that he is also perceived as having a very strong sense of justice. This conception of God, leads to the idea of equality, justice and fairness among Africans. This is in spite of the emphasis on the concept of hierarchy. In African ontology, the idea of hierarchy does not conflict with the idea equality; for equality in African ontology is not placing everyone on the same level but giving everyone his due place: thus, children must respect their parents because of the precedency that age and experience gives to them. This sense of equality, accompanied by love, cooperation and solidarity is experienced and inculcated first in the family.

c. **Universal Brotherhood/Sisterhood:** the concept 'brotherhood/sisterhood' refers to an association of men or women with common interests and goals. However, it is a moral concept that points to the relationship between human persons. And once human persons, there is a brotherhood or sisterhood: it has no boundary, for once a human person you are either a brother or a sister. The idea of universal brotherhood and sisterhood is based on the African worldview which understands human persons as having a common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour, habits, feelings, hopes, desires, values, common historical experience and a common destiny. This perception of the human person as being related to the other makes the one to see the other as his or her brother or sister. By brother or sister, it is meant that the other is part of me. If the other is part of me, he or she is treated with respect and love, for to treat the other otherwise is to diminish myself. This concept of brotherhood or sisterhood explains why in African ontology, there is no word for race, but rather words for people, human beings and persons. Therefore, the African would rather speak of 'black people' than the 'black race'. The African sees human persons as a universal family of humankind. The practical translation of this idea of brotherhood or

sisterhood is expressed in virtues like hospitality, generosity, empathy, sympathy, compassion etc.

5. Conclusion

Igwebuike, because of its centrality can be understood as the key to the interpretation and understanding of African ethics. The centrality of *Igwebuike* makes African ethics to be founded on the impressive pillar of humanism- as Ozumba (1986 and 1995) avers, the welfare of the human person and the community is the fundamental thrust of African ethics. Thus, the human person is at the centre of African ethics– the human person is not defined according to his or her colour, nation, religion, creed, political leanings, material contribution or any matter, but rather seen as a brotherhood or sisterhood. It, therefore, emphasizes the dignity of the human person, the equality of brothers and sisters, and the equality of opportunities for all - an egalitarian society--that is, a society in which there is equal opportunity for self-development for all, working together. *Igwebuike* is, therefore, the active underlying principle of African ethics.

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