IGWEBUIKE AND THE UNITY OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

In the development of African philosophy from its rudimentary stages, when African thinkers dinned with logic and became intoxicated with the wine of formal reasoning and the abstract beauty of its laws, to the present time, reveals that there were ideas that remained constant in the midst of the changes in thought and in the plurality of ideas. This is the primary stuff and the underlying principle of African philosophy. It is the key to the understanding and interpretation of the African philosophical experience. This study engages in the search for this principle as it is necessary for the understanding of African philosophy. This study would begin by attending to the thought of two African philosophers who have engaged in the search for the understanding of the key to comprehending African philosophy. Their perspectives would be weighed and if found wanting, a new path would have to be created.

1. Introduction

A glance at the historical evolution of philosophy generally, reveals that philosophy is an enterprise that searches for the unity of reality. Although philosophers sometimes take different paths in this search, it does not in any way change the fact of what is sought. Some of their efforts or perspectives have been challenged and criticized. However, in criticizing them, their effort is not undermined and their greatness is not forgotten. In the contention of Gilson (1999) "No one can fall a victim to his own genius unless he is a genius" (p. 6). The various contributions of philosophers, in their wisdom or 'seeming absence of it', contributed to the building of this ladder towards the empire of the unity of reality. This is about a journey that expresses itself in thesis and antithesis and synthesis, which generates another thesis. For if there is no thesis, who can talk of an antithesis, for only when an antithesis exists can we look forward to a synthesis and then a new thesis. The search for the underlining principle of reality began with the Ionian Fathers of philosophy. They were interested in knowing that which remained constant in the midst of change, that is, that which

continued or persisted through change. They were interested in that which remained a basic unity in the midst of plurality.

In the development of African philosophy from its rudimentary stages, when African thinkers dinned with logic and became intoxicated with the wine of formal reasoning and the abstract beauty of its laws, to the present time, reveals that there were ideas that remained constant in the midst of the changes in thought and in the plurality of ideas. This is the primary stuff and the underlying principle of African philosophy. It is the key to the understanding and interpretation of the African philosophical experience. This study engages in the search for this principle as it is necessary for the understanding of African philosophy. This study would begin by attending to the thought of two African philosophers who have engaged in the search for the understanding of the key to comprehending African philosophy. Their perspectives would be weighed and if found wanting, a new path would have to be created.

2. John Mbiti's Model of Unity

Mbiti (1970) sees African ontology as a religious ontology, which is heavily anthropocentric. In this ontology are God, the spirits, animals and plants, phenomena and objects without biological life; however, at the centre is the human person. If this ontology must be understand, there is the need to penetrate its unity. Mbiti argues that the African concept of time is the key to understanding the basic religious and philosophical concepts of this ontology. He writes:

> The concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation, whether of political, economic, educational or church life. (p. 16).

He further writes that:

> This time orientation, governed as it is by this two main dimensions of present and past, dominates African understanding of the individual, the community and the universe which constitutes the five ontological categories mentioned above. (p. 17).

His idea of the African concept of time is built around his research on the Kikamba and Gikuyu languages, in which he analyzed three verbs that speak of the past and when of the future, it covers only a period of six months and not

beyond two years at most. He defined the African concept of time as "a composition of events which have occurred, those that are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur" (p. 17). This would mean that Africans set their minds on things that have passed rather than on the future. He described the African concept of time as concrete and epochal and not mathematical. This would mean that when Africans are sitting down idle, they are not wasting time but waiting for time or in the process of producing time. The time that covers the now period, with a sense of immediacy, nowness and nearness, Mbiti calls *Sasa*. There is also the *Zamani*, which Mbiti refers to as the Macro-Time: the final store house of time. All these point to the past and the immediate future.

Mbiti's African concept of time does not offer a philosophical explanation or key for the understanding of African philosophy or the entirety of the African universe. According to Gbadegesin (1991), his perspective on time is only a communal world-view report which was never evaluated. While Gdadegesin strikes a point, the relational character of the African worldview raises questions regarding the certainty of his conclusion. Gyekye (1975), Kagame (1976) and Izu (2010) see Mbiti's African time as insulting and false as it does not represent the general concept of time among Africans. However, while this perspective sounds insulting, the reality on ground in Africa in relation to duty and planning for the future gives support to Mbiti. Gyekye has argued that contrary to Mbiti's African concept of time that the Akan people of Ghana have a future time. From the foregoing, it can be argued that Mbiti's African concept of time is not a consistent principle in African philosophy, and as such cannot be regarded as the unity or the key to understanding African philosophy. What can be regarded as the key to understanding African philosophy should be a principle that is consistently present.

3. **Kipng'eno Koech's Model of Unity**

Koech (1977) speaks of African myths as a key to understanding African religion and metaphysics. For him:

> Myth expresses the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself. The myth portrays the wishes and the fears of the African man as he gropes to understand the unknown by dissecting and remolding it to fit his frame of reference. In the myth, the African's metaphysics are created and his beliefs constructed. (p. 118).

According to Koech, African myths speak not just of the living or the dead, or the living and the dead, but it speaks of the interaction between the living and the dead. The shuttle between living and death is established in the African philosophy of reincarnation, which speaks of the possibility of the dead to come back to life, the intertwining of living and dying in a matrix of human fellowship. He observes further that myths offer explanation for the human concern of death, creation, evolution of living things, man's relationship to man, man's relationship to other living creatures and natural phenomenon like day and night. Koech, thus concludes that:

> The myth is the essence of the African himself in history. The modern African, if he is to find his real identity and to grasp the remnant of his culture, must look for it in myth... The African myth tarried to preserve the last drop of African-ness. It is the encyclopedia engraved in the chambers of the African mind to be passed from generation to generation. (p. 139).

Although myths articulate and preserve the outcome of investigations on the origin of the world, the national god, the origin of humanity, its place in creation, the deity that governs the land, the temple, the cult etc., it cannot be understood as the key to understanding African metaphysics. There is a wide gap between philosophy and mythology. In fact, ancient philosophy is said to have emerged after the age of religion and mythology. Earlier before the 6th C, people offered answers to fundamental questions through religion and mythology, but with the advent of philosophy, a new approach to seeking answers to questions that bugged the human mind emerged. The mythological approach differs from the philosophical approach. While it might be considered a key to understanding African religion, it cannot be a key to understanding African philosophy or metaphysics. What then is the unity of African philosophy?

4. Igwebuike and the Interpretation of African Philosophy

This work proposes *Igwebuike* as the key to understanding African philosophy. While being in Igbo philosophy is *idi*, that is, to be, *Igwebuike* is the modality of being. It is an Igbo word, which is a combination of three words. 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'. It was employed by Igbo traditional philosophers as a theory based on an illustrative statement to teach that when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force, and more so, to express their world of relationship, harmony, continuality and complementarity. At this level, no task is beyond collective capability. This provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations. As an ideology, *Igwebuike* 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. This is based on the African sense of community, which is the underlying principle and unity of African philosophy.

Igwebuike is anchored on the African worldview, which Iroegbu (1995) 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 destiny. The communal-individuality of the African is expressed in the Igbo-African proverb: *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man); *ntugwa bu uto ndu* (variety is the spice of life); *otu asisi anaghi eme ohia* (a tree does not make a forest); *gidigidi bu ugwu eze* (the dignity of a king is the number of his followers); *mmetuko ahu bu uto ndu* (the beauty of life is in mixing up with others). Mbiti (1970) has classically proverbializes the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). This would mean that the confidence of being is because others are in being. The existence of others assures me of their solidarity and complementarity without which I cannot be. Achebe (1958) brings the essential nature of the Igbo-African communal relationship to a higher and more fundamental focus when he wrote:

> A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so (p. 133).

With the style of existential expression, he writes further:

> We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more

kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him (p. 132).

The idea of a human person asking a fellow human person to scratch the back speaks of the fundamental complementary role which a fellow being plays in the life of another. While the above analysis focuses on the world of human beings, *Igwebuike* goes beyond the human world to speak of the modality of the being of the entirety of reality, including the inanimate and spiritual worlds.

5. Ontological Foundation of *Igwebuike*

Igwebuike is based on the nature of the African cosmology. Cosmology, etymologically, is from two Greek words: *cosmos* and *logos*, meaning 'universe' and 'science' respectively. Put together, it is the 'science of the universe'. Scholars like Wambutda (1986), Ejizu (1986), Achebe (1986), Onuoha (1987), Metuh (1987), Quarcoopome (1987), Arinze (1970), Madu (2004) and Kanu (2012). The African cosmology is simply the way Africans perceive, conceive and contemplate their universe; the lens through which they see reality, which affects their value systems and attitudinal orientations. It is the African's search for the meaning of life, and an unconscious but natural tendency to arrive at a unifying base that constitutes a frame of meaning often viewed as *terminus a quo* (origin) and *terminus ad quem* (end) of reality. African cosmology is essentially the underlying thought link that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theologies.

The Igbo-African cosmos, according to Edeh (1983), Abanuka (2004) and Unah (2009), has the physical and spiritual dimensions, the worlds of Chukwu (Supreme Being) and the Ancestors constituting the spiritual world and the world of human beings and animate and inanimate objects constituting the physical world. At the spirit realm, Ijiomah (2005) and Ijiomah (2005) aver that God represents the Chief Being, and seats at the apex of power. In the physical world, man dominates, occupying the central position in the scheme of God's creation.

The departmentalization of these worlds does not in any way mean that the Igbo-African world is bifurcated. The spiritual and physical dimensions overlap and harmoniously interact. In this interaction, man communes with God, the divinities, the ancestors and vice versa. While the ancestors do for human beings what they cannot do for themselves, human beings do for the ancestors what

they cannot achieve by themselves. This interactive capacity of the Igbo-African universe has instilled a strong sense of community among Africans, with an intricate web of relationship between the living, the dead and the yet to be born. This intricate web of relationship is the ontological foundation of *Igwebuike*.

6. *Igwebuike* as the Intricate Web of African Philosophy

Igwebuike as a relational and complementary principle has remained constant in the midst of the changes in the history of African philosophy, and has continued to persist through changes. This sense of harmony, community, complementarity and solidarity among the African community of being has been expressed right from the philosophy of Tempels (1959). He argues that in Bantu Ontology:

> 'Beings forces' of the universe are not a multiple of independent forces placed in juxtaposition from being to being. All creatures are found in relationship according to the law of hierarchy... Nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. The world of forces is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network. (p. 29).

This expresses the strong harmony and interaction among the community of beings. Kagame (1951), in his extensive work on Bantu philosophy tried to establish the harmonious character of reality. He agrees with Tempels that reality is force. It is not a force independent of the other, but forces that are in a relationship. He categorized reality into *Muntu* (human beings), *Kintu* (things), *Hantu* (place and time), *and Kuntu* (modality). These categories of being relate with each other. He argues that the relationship is seen when we remove the determinative, after which there remains a stem NTU which is the same in all. He describes NTU thus, "Ntu is being itself, the cosmic universal force... that force in which being and beings coalesce" (p. 101). According to Jahn (1958), "NTU expresses, not the effect of these forces, but their being. But the forces act continually, and are constantly effective. Only if one could call a halt to the whole universe, if life suddenly stood still, would NTU be revealed" (p. 101). NTU, therefore, becomes the rallying point of being, outside which no being can exist.

The nationalistic movements of the 20th century in Africa, now grouped into National Ideological school of African philosophy, was linked by their emphasis on belongingness, familyhood, which was the basis for their socialisms. An instance is the social negritude of Senghor (1964 and 1975) which places the family at the centre of the social structure. Thus, man as a person realizes his

being in the family structure, and the society has meaning from what the family is. The idea of family according to Senghor (1959), embraces "the sum of all persons living and dead, who acknowledge a common ancestor... the ancestral lineage continue to God" (p. 2). It was on this same principle of complementarity and solidarity that Nyerere (1968a and 1968b) bases his principle of Ujamaa, familyhood. The choice of socialism over capitalism by Awolowo (1969 and 1979) and the promotion of Pan-Africanism by Nkrumah (1963) were based on the distinctive complementary character of African ontology.

Mbiti (1970) in his work on African religion and philosophy speaks of African ontology as an anthropocentric ontology because of the centrality of man among other ontological elements, like God, spirits, animals, plants and objects without biological life. These elements, he argues exist in unity and solidarity. He writes:

> The anthropocentric ontology is a complete unity or solidarity which nothing can break up or destroy. To destroy or remove one of these categories is to destroy the whole existence including the destruction of the creator, which is impossible. One mode of existence presupposes all the others, and a balance must be maintained so that these modes neither drift too far apart from one another nor get too close to one another. (p. 16).

The emphasis here, while being on the unity of reality, does not ignore the distinctiveness of things. Oguejiofor (2010) maintains the perspective of Mbiti about the unity of reality when he writes on the resilience of the Igbo worldview:

> Among the Igbo of Nigeria, man's life is circumscribed within the world, uwa, which is made up of the abode of humans and the abode of spirits. But these are not divided or separated by a chasm. There is interconnectedness between the two enabling contact between the deities and spirits, and human beings. This unitary conception of reality pervades Igbo world view in a very remarkable way. One factor that makes for this unity is that the Igbo view of reality is anthropocentric. (p. 21).

Edeh (1983) in his work on Igbo Metaphysics furthers the perspective of Mbiti:

> Accordingly the Igbo way of life emphasizes 'closeness' but not closed-ness'. There is a closeness in living because each person 'belongs to' others and in turn, 'is belonged to' by others. By adopting this life of 'closeness' or 'belongingness', an Igbo becomes immersed in the culture's spiritual substance, love; and by love, he acquires a fulfillment as a person beyond mere individuality. (p. 105).

He established a very strong connection between the African culture and the African community: "A traditional culture cannot exist without a community. My concept of community here must be characterized as a life community, that is, a social set-up in which there is an intimate face-face interaction" (p. 56). Gyekye (1987) in his work on Akan philosophy avers that the individual depends on the community:

> The individual's life depends on identifying oneself with the group. This identification is the basis of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the group. It is also the ground of the overriding emphasis on the individual's obligation to the members of the group; it enjoins upon him or her the obligation to think and act in terms of the survival of the group as a whole. In fact one's personal sense of responsibility is measured in terms of responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group. (p. 156).

Writing further, he emphasizes the place of the individual: "It is of course well known that the social order of any African community is communal. But I think, it would be more correct to describe the African social order as amphibious, for it manifests features of both communality and individuality". (p. 154). Even when Hountondji (1995) criticizes ethno-philosophy as a myth because of its collective character, he was not denying the harmonious or communal character of the African ontology but rather was calling for an internal rationality in African philosophy.

Iroegbu (1995) describes being in African ontology as belongingness. In response to the questions, 'what makes being, being?', 'what does it mean to be in the Uwa?' Iroegbu argues that it is belongingness, thus *Being* is *Belongingness*. What then is belongingness? He defines belongingness as 'the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness' (p. 374). In this case, the recipient-subject of belonging is involved: something belongs and it belongs to something. Belongingness is a special noun from the verb 'to belong'. It means to be part of, Daisein-with or to be a member of a group. This act of belongingness gives me rights and privileges that others who do not belong do not have. There is also a possessive nuance of the verb 'to belong'. I can say that the soap belongs to me. In the first nuance, to belong creates a situation of participation and in the second, it creates a situation of possession. There is an ontological nuance of belongingness, which specifies that a thing is because it belongs. *To be* is *to belong* and *to belong* is *to be*. It is in this regard that Nkemnkia (1999) writes that in African ontology the self is the other:

> The meaning of an individual's life is found in and through his relationship with the Other or Others. In fact it is meaningless to ask oneself "who am I" without having a complete knowledge of the Other, from whom, in the final analysis, one expects the answer. When we say 'I', in reality one means 'You', that is, the Other. By saying 'We' one is essentially saying 'man'. If this is how things stand, then each 'I', is always mediated by 'the Other', who is none other than 'oneself'. In this dialectic each one of us contains exclusively the Other. (pp. 111-112).

The sense of belongingness in Iroegbu expresses itself in African traditional democracy and spirit of consensus, which Wirendu (1995) discusses as characterizing political decision-making in Africa.

Very recently, Asouzu (2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2011 and 2013) developes the notion of being within the new ontological horizon of *ibuanyidanda.* Ogbonnaya (2013) avers that *Ibuanyidanda* is an approach to ontology in a way that bridges the artificial chasm, and which aims at overcoming all forms of bifurcation which the human mind imposes on the relationship between substance and accidents. According to Asouzu (2011), the philosophy of *Ibuanyidanda* "explores a method and principles for coalescing the real and the ideal, the essential and the accidental into system of mutual complementing units" (p. 101). It is, therefore, not surprising that Asouzu would define being as "that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality" (p. 103). Thus, being is located within the context of mutual Complementarity of all possible relations in the sense of an existent reality.

7. Conclusion

In the foregoing, the perspectives of different African philosophers have been visited to see how their various ideas are linked by *Igwebuike,* the philosophy of complementarity and solidarity. It is on the basis of the presence of this principle in the thoughts of these African philosophers, from its rudimentary stages to the present, be they of the Ethno-philosophy school or Professional trend or Ecclectic school or Literary school or Hermeneutic trend or of Sage philosophy, that this work argues that *Igwebuike* is the key to understanding African philosophy or the unity of African philosophy. The idea of communality or complementarity, is a point where African philosophers, not minding their differences, come to an agreement: that the African world is an interactive and complementary ontology. If it, therefore, is an intricate web of the African philosophical experience, it

wouldn't be wrong to refer to it as the unity of the African philosophical experience.

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