

## IGWEBUIKE AND BEING IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

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### Abstract

*Metaphysics, as a branch of the discipline of philosophy, concerns itself with the determination of the nature of being- the meaning, structure and principles of whatever is insofar as it is. Being, therefore, remains a fundamental question within the parameters of enquiry in metaphysics right from the Pre-Socratic period to the Contemporary Era. The study of the categories of being in African metaphysics has occupied the desks of African philosophers, as they have tried in various capacities to move away from the abstract perspectives of being dominant in western philosophy to a substantive and concrete idea of being. This piece is a contribution to the ongoing being-project in African metaphysics. It studied the different dimensions of the categories of being with particular attention to the modality of being as a category of being, since it is the centre of discussion. Having discussed Igwebuiké as the unity of the African philosophical experience, this study discovered that the centrality of Igwebuiké profoundly relates to its place as the modality of being. To be from the perspective of Igwebuiké is to be with the other and in the company of the other. To be outside of this is alienation.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuiké, Modality, Being, Igbo, Ontology, African.

### Introduction

A cursory glance at the development of African metaphysics reveals an attempt by African thinkers to redefine being, moving away from the elusive and unsubstantive concepts employed by their Western counterparts. In this process, they have employed categories common to the experience of the African. In his work, *La Philosophie Bantou* Published in 1945, Placide Tempels set out to help European missionaries understand the thought pattern or worldview of the Bantu people. This he thought, according to Imbo (1998), would make the work of evangelization easier for the European missionaries, and also help them to avoid misunderstanding the people and their culture. In the process of his research, Tempels arrives at a fundamental and underlining factor in Bantu philosophy, which he calls force. While for the Westerner it could be considered as an attribute of being, for the Bantu, it is identical with being. Tempels (1945) wrote:

I believe that we should most faithfully render the Bantu thought in European language by saying that the Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of being; force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force. (p. 431).

Having described being as force, Tempels, goes ahead to differentiate the degree of forces in the hierarchy of being. God, Spirits of ancestors, Human Beings, Animals, Plants and inanimate objects. God, therefore, has a greater force, followed by the Spirit of the Ancestors, then human beings. Thus, the created universe of the Bantu people is centred on the human force, for everything in the universe is understood only in relation to man. From this perspective, we gather that in Bantu ontology, as in other African worldviews, the cosmos is anthropocentric.

Alexis Kagame, in his work *Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de L'Etre*, tried to develop further Tempel's philosophy of force. He worked among the people of Rwanda who were called Kinyarwanda and tried to develop their thought through a linguistic ethno-philosophy. According to Njoku (2010), he discovered that *Ntu* is the category of being or the generic meaning of something. This he classified into four: *Umuntu* (human beings); *Ikintu* (non-human beings); *Ahantu* (place and time); *Ukuntu* (Aristotelian category of quantity). *Ntu* is the unifying notion among all these, even though God does not belong to it. There is an interaction between all these forces: *Umuntu* being a being with intelligence has the consciousness that allows it to use other objects that do not have the same capacity. Thus, *Ikuntu* is at the disposal of *Umuntu* for self-actualization. The absence of a place for God in Kagame's project of being reveals the limitation of the philosophy.

Emmanuel Edeh was one of the earliest Nigerian thinkers from the Igbo speaking area who tried to articulate Igbo metaphysics: *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*. He defined being, using Igbo categories. Edeh posits a notion of being that is derived from a dual *loci*: from the Igbo language and the Igbo concept of the human person. He says that it is born from the fact that human beings are the principal focus of the Igbo physical world, comprising the human and non-human. He first employed the concept of *onye* in Igbo language to test-denote the concept of being. But he discovered that *onye* hypothesis is basically applicable to human beings. Having understood the limitations of *onye*, Edeh (1985) in his indefatigable spirit moves on to make further investigations on a more appropriate concept of being. In his investigation, he arrives at *ife*. According to Edeh, "the Igbo word *ife* primarily means thing, anything material

or immaterial. It is used to refer to a happening, an event or an occurrence. *Ife* can also be affixed to any adjective to mean specific things" (p. 95). For instance, *ife obuna* (anything), *ife ebube* (thing of wonder), *ife ojoo* (bad thing), *ife oma* (good thing). After a wide and profound investigation, he realized that there is no word in Igbo language outside *ife* that approximates the Igbo concept of being. Having arrived at the *ife* hypothesis, Edeh further realised that *ife* as a concept does not bring out all that being means. To find a solution to this problem, Edeh (1985) combines *ife* and *idi* to get *ife-idi*. *Idi* is the Igbo verb *to be*. It can be used as an adjective and can also be suffixed to anything to show that it exists. For example, *okwute di* (the stone that exists), *Nkita di* (the dog that exists), *Kanu di* (Kanu who exists).

Iroegbu (1995), a Nigerian Igbo Philosopher, in *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy* avers that *to be* is *to belong*. Thus *being* is *Belongingness*. He defines belongingness as 'the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness' (p. 374). Iroegbu believes that the Igbo world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world. This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs. The Igbo worldview is community oriented.

Okere (1983), Abanuka (2003) and Njoku (2010), have proposed *chi* as an alternative concept for being. The idea of *chi* has created more problems than it set out to address. Njoku's argument is that *chi* is preferable because everything in Igbo, whether animate or inanimate has a *chi*. He seems to forget that the emphasis is not in a name for a thing that is contained in everything in the Igbo world. *Chi* would better serve as an underlying principle in Igbo metaphysics than as a name for being. The idea of *chi* takes us back to the arguments of the Ionian Philosophers who spoke of water, air and fire as the underlying principle in every reality. There isn't enough ground to conclude from here that reality is water or air or fire. It is difficult to conclude that because a thing, say 'A', possesses another thing inside of itself, say 'B', that 'B' is now 'A'. For instance, as human beings possess blood in their veins, it is not a sufficient reason to conclude that because every human being has blood therefore every human being is blood. *Chi* cannot stand as a concept for being. That 'all things possess *Chi*' does not easily translate into 'all things are *chi*'.

While these positions introduce us to the problem of being in African philosophy, the primary preoccupation of this piece is the study of the category of being, and the place that *Igwebuike* occupies in the categorization of being. While this remains central to the discourse at hand, it is worthwhile and sequentially logical to give an understanding of being which would guide the categorization of the same subject; for who can categorize a subject unknown to him or her?

### **Being in Igbo Ontology**

The appropriate concept for being in Igbo-African metaphysics is *idi*. The operative word in *Idi* (to be) is *di* (be) and it comes from the word *odi* (it is) which is the third person of the singular *idi* which means 'to exist' or 'to be'. It is an adjective and can be suffixed to anything to show that it exists. For instance, *Okwute di* (stone exists), *Nkita di* (dog exists), *Kanu di* (Kanu exists), *Uwa di* (the world exists). As a concept, it goes beyond the limitations of the notions of being already analysed, and in fact, it is the missing link of the different conceptions of being already analysed.

More so, everything that is, is because it has *ike-ndu*, that is 'force' and the quality and quantity of this force determine the nature of a being. At this point Tempels (1959) mixes up the concept of being with force: "Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force" (p. 24). Everything that the Igbo-African does is towards the preservation of this force: when he prays to Chukwu or the ancestors, when he offers sacrifices to gods, spirits, ancestors etc. when he pours libation, rites and rituals are all for the preservation of this force, which is life. Ogugua (2003) writes:

Little wonder, the Igbo people work towards acquiring life, strengthening this life even if it entails doing too difficult things 'iga agu asaa, igwue mmiri asaa' - passing through seven thick forests invested with danger and swimming seven deep and deadly oceans. (p. 60).

Force therefore is necessarily and essentially an attribute of being in Igbo-African ontology. The appreciation of this reality of being, according to Ogugua (2006), is the springboard of the Igbo-African belief in the intimate relatedness, connectedness and interwovenness of reality. Thus, Tempels (1959) writes, "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 net-work" (p. 60). The existence-in-relation to the other or being-with-the other creates constancy in interaction and influence.

## **The Categorization of Being**

Although every reality has a force, not all realities have the same amount of force. The variety of the degree of forces is at the base of the categorization of being. In the hierarchy of forces, those with a greater force come first, with God at the apex as the source of all forces. In Igbo-African ontology, reality will be subsumed into the following categories:

**Muo (Spirit):** *Muo* as a force has categories of forces. It includes God, the divinities and spirits. God is at the apex of the *Muo* category as the source of all forces, Tempels (1959) wrote, "Above all force is God... It is he who has force, power, in himself. He gives existence, power of survival and of increase, to other forces. In relation to other forces, he is he who increases force" (p. 29). He wrote further, "He knows all forces, their orderings, their dependence, their potential and their mutual interactions" (p. 34). His existential cause is within himself and sustains resultant forces. The subsistence and annihilation of other forces are within his power alone. While other creatures can paralyse, diminish or stop the operation of another being's vital force, they cannot stop it to exist entirely, only God can.

After the Supreme Being are divinities. They are intermediaries and share aspects of the divine status. They are responsible to God for whatever act they perform in their relationship with human beings. They are functionaries in the theocratic governance of God, sometimes referred to as his messengers and at other times as his sons. Awolalu and Dopamu (1978) refer to them as the executive heads of various divine departments in the Supreme Being's monarchical government. They are a lesser force compared to the Supreme Being, but generally, they are a great force.

There are also myriads of spirits that occupy the African universe. After death, two groups of spirits emerge: the benevolent spirits, known as the ancestors. They are a greater force than human beings. They bind men to God and exercise influence on the living, Tempels (1959) wrote that "The strengthening of life, the preservation and respect for life, are by the very nature of creation the business of the ancestors" (p. 57). He further wrote:

They must not be injured or scorned, nor must they be threatened with a breaking off of relationships, for this would mean simply death for the living. When a disaster falls upon the clan, there must be no question of reproaching the ancestors, but simply of testifying from out of mourning

to be re-established filial attachment to secure a new alignment with the vital influence of the forebears. (p. 69).

Apart from the ancestors, there are malevolent spirits, known as bad spirits.

**Mmadu (Human Being):** The human person (*Muntu*) is a vital force endowed with intelligence and will. Although God is the source of vital force, man is the sovereign vital force in the world, ruling the land and all that abides in it, however, "his fullness of being consist in his participation to a greater or lesser extent in the force of God" (p. 47) who possesses the supreme force. He also shares an ontological relationship with his patrimony, relations and land. He has a will to choose between good and evil, which might be life giving or life destroying. Man is the centre of the universe, including the world of the dead. Tempels wrote that "man is the supreme force, the most powerful among created beings" (p. 46). He can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures. He wrote further, "Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man" (p. 22).

In the category of human beings, there are the elders, who bind the ancestors with their descendants. Thus, Tempels (1959) avers that, "Ontologically and juridically, the elders who hold the ascendancy are the only ones to know fully, in the last resort. Their wisdom exceeds that of other men" (p. 35). They are said to be closer to the ancestors. This explains why they serve as priests in their communities and clans, especially when it comes to the offering of sacrifices to the ancestors.

**Anu (Animal, tame and wild):** This category of being comprises forces not endowed with reason. They are ruled by instincts. They are all under the force of man and exist for man. According to Tempels, "In fact even inferior beings, such as inanimate beings and minerals, are forces which by reason of their nature have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces, or of men's vital forces" (p. 31). In another text, he wrote, "These lower beings exist, by Divine decree, only for the assistance of the higher created being" (p. 46). They are used to feed human beings and also for offering sacrifices to God, divinities and the ancestors.

**Ife (things):** Edeh (1985) avers that "the Igbo word *ife* primarily means thing, anything material or immaterial. It is used to refer to a happening, an event, an occurrence. *Ife* can also be affixed to any adjective to mean specific things" (p. 95). For instance, *ife obuna* (anything), *ife ebube* (thing of wonder), *ife ojoo* (bad thing),

*ife oma* (good thing). Ife as a force cannot act for itself, and thus can only become active when a greater force like God, divinities, spirits and man act on them. They have no will of their own and thus depend on the will of a greater force.

**Ebe (Space):** Space talks about place. It is the relation of distance between any two bodies or points. It responds to the question of where. For instance, where did you see Emeka? Where did you pick-up Nnamdi? Where was the sacrifice offered? According to Ijiomah (2005) space in Igbo ontology consists of three levels: they are the sky, the earth and the underworld: “the sky is where God *Chukwu* or *Chineke* and angels reside; the earth where man, animals, natural resources, some devils and some physical observable realities abide; and the underworld where ancestors and some bad spirits live” (p. 84). Ekwealor (1990), corroborated Ijiomah’s perspective when he categorized the Igbo-African universe into three spheres: *Elu-Igwe* or sky, *Alammadu* or the world of the living and *Alammuo* or the land of the spirits. The idea of space is known through sight, touch and supra-sensory insight.

**Oge (Time):** Time responds to questions such as: when did you see Emeka? When did you pick-up Nnamdi? When was the sacrifice offered? Mbiti (1970) defined the African concept of time as “the composition of events which have occurred, those that are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur” (p. 17). Thus, the African concept of time is concrete and substantive. It is epochal, as it is wrapped around events and activities. Iroegbu (1995) avers that it is in time the Africans perform or fails to perform, and that his future and destiny are based on his use of time.

### **Igwebuiké as the Uzo (Modality) of *Idi* (Being)**

Apart from the already mentioned categories of being above, there remains another: Igwebuiké- that is the mode of being, *Uzo Idi*. The *Uzo* of being talks about the manner, modality or style of being. And in Igbo-African ontology, *Igwebuiké* is the manner of being, that is, being in relation to otherness. Everything is in relation to the other: existence-in-relation to the other or being-with-the other. As subjects in the horizon of perception and realization of their existential ends, beings depend on each other for their temporal flourishing. The dependence here, which I call ‘contemporary completion’ is a positive dialectics resulting from their physical and spiritual limitations. Because human beings are not ontologically creators of themselves, they are essentially limited. Because their existence and action, in the midst of communication, are limited by time,

place, perception and knowledge, their being is existentially complimentary. Hence they are naturally candidates for company and co-operations.

Therefore, every being is by belonging. This is expressed in various Igbo-African proverbs, such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs. Mbiti has classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). The community, according to Iroegbu (1995), therefore gives the individual his existence and education. Tempels (1959) explains that "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 net-work" (p. 60). The existence-in-relation to the other or being-with-the other creates constancy in interaction and influence. The modality of being is therefore tied to the modality of the African universe.

Igwebuike as a modality of being is strongly related to the widely held view that African societies are communalistic: in other words, the community is the centre of gravity. The gravitational force largely pulls individuals to the communal centre. Consequently, individuals are like spokes organized around the hub – the community. A disruption in any part of circular structure creates a malfunction in the whole set-up. It is said that, if a rung of the societal ladder is removed, the line of the societal life-force is jeopardized. The emphasis on the collectivity as determining the 'person' of the individual prides itself as an ontological unity whose creed is 'I am because others are, or I am because we are.' This is a merit to the view that the community gives individuals their 'being.' To be 'maintained' in 'being,' one must conform to community's injunctions and ways. The 'other' is understood here as the *altrui* – the other (person) or the natural environment of God. The hallmark in the 'we-identity' has been used to explain the social being of the African as a positive value. While this may peculiarly concern the human society, it relatively affirms the ontological constitution of other dimensions of being.

If 'we are because I am', then, one can say that the community dies or survives with the co-operation of others. In the collectivistic community of meaning, what claims one has do not derive from one's ontological constitution as an irreplaceable and incommunicable being but from the label placed on one as constituting a part in the whole. Evidently, the community in the African sense

presents itself as the greatest infallible judge and distributor of resources for social living. Thus, Johannes Messner observes that “the social theory of all collective systems . . . begins with the social entity as the absolute primary value, but never reaches the full reality of the human person with its supra-social ends and its value ranking above that of the society.” (p.4)

### **Conclusion**

In this piece, the different dimensions of the categories of being have been explored with particular attention on the modality of being as a category of being. While other categories were studied briefly, the modality of being was studied as comprehensively as possible, since it is the centre of discussion. Having discussed *Igwebuike* as the unity of the African philosophical experience, this study has discovered that the centrality of *Igwebuike* strongly relates to its place as the modality of being. Beyond the inanimate and lower animate levels, the idea of being with the other has been at the heart of the philosophical enterprises of individual and collective philosophies and philosophers. A recurrent idea is the claim that African societies are communalistic; this has been put forward by many African thinkers to maintain that the African is ontologically predisposed to care for the other or that individuals have an attitude of care towards each other. Kwame Nkrumah branded the attitude of care as ‘egalitarian’ and Julius Nyerere articulated it as an ‘ujamaa.’ In the world of cultural encounter with Europe and America, Leopold Sedar Senghor captured the lively Africa spirit with the concept of Negritude – the predisposition for a care on the African as a posting of the self in a free and symbolic embrace with the other. Innocent Asouzu, Pantaleon Iroegbu and Francis Njoku captured it in their Igbo philosophies as *ibuanyidanda*, *Uwantology* and *Chi* respectively. It is the same idea, however, with some uniqueness that runs across *Igwebuike*, the science of the modality of being for the realization of being.

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