

## IGWEBUIKE AS AN IGBO-AFRICAN ETHIC OF RECIPROCITY

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### **Abstract**

*For the purpose of a more particular study in African thought in relation to the ethic of reciprocity, this piece focuses on IGWEBUIKE, which is an Igbo-African philosophy of complementarity to explain how the ethic of reciprocity is at the heart of African philosophy and religion. The Hermeneutic method of inquiry has been adopted for the purpose of this study.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuiké, Igbo, African, Philosophy, Reciprocity

### **Introduction**

The 'ethic of reciprocity' is across-religiocultural ethical principle that is found in virtually every religious and cultural background. It simply states: "Do to others what you would like done to you". It is also called 'The Golden Rule' and provides a ready precept for the handling of conflicts and promotion of harmony among peoples (Kanu 2009). It is derived from human feelings and behaviour; it is also relatively simple to articulate and understand, and yet, addresses an enormous range of human behaviour. Thus, "the ethic of reciprocity stands alone as a legion in its own right and in the form of a general rule" (Matthew Black 1967). Although the most common reference to the ethic of reciprocity is the Gospel of Matthew (7:12), a cursory glance at African traditional values, and in fact, its worldview reveals that the ethic of reciprocity is at the heart of African philosophy or thought. One can hear the breath of the ethic of reciprocity so strongly in the following selected Yoruba and Akan proverbs:

1. *One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts (Yoruba).*
2. *When one fells a tree in the forest, one should apply the matter to oneself (Yoruba).*
3. *Whenever one does something to another, one should put oneself in that person's shoes (Yoruba).*
4. *If one sees the corpse of a wicked person on the ground and one kicks it, there are then two wicked people (Yoruba).*

5. *As the young of birds hurt, so the young of humans hurt (Yoruba).*
6. *What you do not find acceptable if it were done to you by another, do not do to him or her (Yoruba).*
7. *If you do not allow your neighbor to reach nine you will never reach ten (Akan).*
8. *Somebody's troubles have arrived; those of another are on the way (Akan).*
9. *It is a fool that says, "My neighbor is the butt of the attack not me" (Akan).*
10. *The stick that was used to beat Takyi is the same that will be used to beat Nyankomago (Akan).*
11. *One person's path will intersect with another's before too long (Akan).*

While these proverbs are of Akan and Yoruba origin, they are employed in the stead of African proverbs that communicate the same complementary spirit. This goes to show that the ethic of reciprocity is a fundamental African precept for conflict resolution and the promotion of peace among African peoples. However, for the purpose of a more particular study in African thought in relation to the ethic of reciprocity, this piece focuses on IGWEBUIKE, which is an Igbo-African philosophy of complementarity to explain how the ethic of reciprocity is at the heart of African philosophy and religion. But, before a study of this ethic within the context of Igwebuiké, it would be worthwhile to understand in a more detailed way the meaning of the ethic of reciprocity.

### **The Ethic of Reciprocity and Its Cross-Religiocultural Character**

As already indicated, the ethics of reciprocity holds that "we do unto others as we would like done unto us". We are not just to love our neighbour but that we must bear the same affection to them as we do to ourselves. It is from this perspective that Henry (2007) believes that the meaning of the ethic of reciprocity lies in three fundamental dimensions:

1. We must do that to our neighbour which we ourselves acknowledge to be fit and reasonable: the appeal is made to our own judgment, and the discovery of our judgment is referred to that which is our own will and expectation, when it is our own case.
2. We must put other people at the same level with ourselves, and reckon that we are as much obliged to them as they are to us. We are as much bound to the duty of justice as they, and they are as much entitled to the benefit of it as we.
3. We must, in our dealings with others, suppose ourselves in the same particular case and circumstances with those we have to do with, and deal

accordingly. For instance, if I were making a bargain for someone else, labouring under the same infirmity and affliction, how should i desire and expect to be treated? This is a just supposition because we do not know how soon their case or situation may turn out to be ours. At least, we may fear, lest God by his judgment should do to us as we have done to others, if we have not done as we would have loved done to us (Henry 2007).

Beyond the Christian Scripture, particularly the Gospel of Matthew, the ethic of reciprocity can be traced to some other passages of scripture and also some literatures in Judaism and Ancient Eastern Religions. The best known in Judaism is probably that of Rabbi Hillel or Hillel the Elder (Leske 2004), who in giving an answer to a question from a proselyte who demanded a precise and good understanding of the law and the prophets: "That which displeases you do not do to another. This is the whole law, the rest is commentary" (Mckenzie 1999). In Brahmanism it is expressed thus: "This is the sum of Dharma: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you" (Mahabharata, 5:1517). In Buddhism: "...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" (Samyutta Nikaya v. 353) In Confucianism: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Analects 15:23). In Ancient Egyptian Religion: "Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do." (The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant, 109 - 110) In Hinduism: "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you" (Mahabharata 5:1517). In Taoism: "The sage has no interest of his own, but takes the interests of the people as his own. He is kind to the kind; he is also kind to the unkind: for Virtue is kind. He is faithful to the faithful; he is also faithful to the unfaithful: for Virtue is faithful." (Tao Teh Ching, Chapter 49) Similar text is also found in the Old Testament in the book of Tobit 4:5: "Never do to anyone else anything that you would not want someone else to do to you".

Having understood the ethic of reciprocity and its cross-religiocultural contexts, it would be appropriate to study Igwebuiké philosophy and the relevance of 'the other' to Igwebuiké. It is in the idea of 'the other' in relation to 'the self' that the idea of the ethic of reciprocity occupies a fundamental place in Igwebuiké philosophy.

### **Igwebuiké in Igbo-African Philosophy**

*Igwebuiké* is the heart of African thought, and in fact, the modality of being in African philosophy. It is taken from the Igbo language, which is a composite

word made up of three dimensions. 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', that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force (Kanu, 2016a). Its English equivalent is 'complementarity'. At this level, no task is beyond their collective capability. It is a concept that was employed by African traditional philosophers of the complementary school of thought to discuss the nature of the observed African reality (Kanu, 2016b).

### **The Igbo Concept of the Other as a Basis for Igwebuike Philosophy of Reciprocity**

*Igwebuike* is anchored on the African worldview, which, according to Iroegbu (1995) is characterized by a common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. It is a complementary philosophy which understands life as a shared reality. Life is a life of *sharedness*; one in which another is part thereof. It is a relationship, though of separate and separated entities or individuals but with a joining of the same whole (Kanu 2015c). It is a relationship in which case the two or more coming together makes each of them a complete whole; it is a diversity of being one with each other. Thus, Mbiti (1970) classically proverbializes the community determining role of the individual when he writes, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108).

Reflecting on the African idea of life as a shared reality, and in which complementarity is observed, Kanu (2015d) avers that it presupposes a tailor-made-cloth, measured, cut and sewn to fit into the curves, contours, shape and size, peculiarities and particularities of a being. Thus, every being has a missing part and is at the same time, a missing part. Ewulu (2010), therefore, writes that:

If the other is my part or a piece of me, it means that I need him for me to be complete, for me to be what I really am. The other completes rather than diminishes me. His language and culture make my own stand out and at the same time, they enrich and complement my own. In the

presence of his language and culture, the riches and poverty of my language and culture become clear and I see that his own and my own when put together form a richer whole when compared to any of them in isolation.

Ekwulu (2010) further opines that the self is not only completed in relating with the other, but that it attains self-realization in the other:

I realize myself in the other because it is in the 'Thou-ness' of the Thou that my 'Is-ness' is realized. I am 'I' because you are 'You'. Without Thou there is no I. We are 'We' because they are 'They', and without 'They', there is no 'We'. (p. 189).

In the contention of Asouzu (2007): "It is within this ontological context (of life as sharedness) that all questions of meaning can be handled adequately and fully within the context of mutual complementarity of all possible relations." (p. 252-253). The foregoing, explains why the Igbo would refer to the 'Other' as *Ibe*, which means 'a piece of' or 'a part of', as in *ibe anu* (a piece of meat) or *ibe ede* (a piece of cocoyam). The Igbo would, therefore, refer to the 'other person' as *ibe m* which means 'my piece' or *mmadu ibe m* (my fellow human being). This is the concept also employed in reference to relationships and reciprocity: love one another (*hunu ibe unu n'anya*), help one another (*nyere nu ibe unu aka*), respect one another (*sopuru nu ibe unu*), etc. Since the 'other' refers to my own piece, it would, therefore, mean that to love the other is to love oneself, to help the other is to help oneself and to respect the other is to respect oneself. Put the other way round, to hate the other is to hate oneself, to refuse help to the other is to refuse help to oneself and to disrespect the other is to disrespect oneself.

### **Igwebuiké and the Ethic of Reciprocity**

The point of connection between Igwebuiké and the ethic of reciprocity is very easily noticeable. While the ethic of reciprocity teaches that you do unto others as you would want done unto you, and the philosophy of Igwebuiké provides a philosophical foundation for such a perspective- in relation to a fellow human person, more fundamentally, the other is perceived as a part of the self. If the other is a part of the self, one with this understanding would treat the other as one would like to be treated. The philosophy of Igwebuiké is not just a philosophical foundation for the ethic of reciprocity, but it is the ethic of reciprocity. It presents the ethic of reciprocity not just as a moral principle, but as

a duty that one owns to himself or herself- everyone owns himself or herself of treating the other in a way that one would like to be treated. This is because Igwebuiké sees a very strong relationship between every reality- an intricate web. To treat the other- that which is different from the self in a way that accords with honour is to treat oneself in a way that is honourable. However, to treat the other in a way that is dishonourable to dishonour oneself, because everything we do to the other has a way of getting back at us. Thus, in Igwebuiké, the ethic of reciprocity is not just a moral principle, but a moral obligation one must have towards the other. In fact, from the above understanding, it is not just a moral obligation one owes the other, but an obligation to oneself.

## **Conclusion**

The ethic of reciprocity, generally, is imperfect just as there is hardly a perfect moral law. It has been criticized because it makes the assumption that everyone has the same tastes and opinions and wants to be treated the same way in every situation, and seems to be an injunction to impose one's own way on the other. However, the ethic of reciprocity is a general moral principle, not a hard and fast rule to be applied to every facet of life. Treating other people as we would wish to be treated ourselves does not mean making the assumption that others feel exactly as we do about everything. The treatment we all want is the recognition that we are individuals, each with our own opinions and feelings and for these opinions and feelings to be accorded respect and consideration. This work is not concerned with the shortcomings of the ethic of reciprocity but has argued that at the heart of Igwebuiké as an ethic of reciprocity, is not the idea of treating everyone uniformly; it is rather a recognition that everyone, independent of human differences deserves to be treated with respect and love.

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