

A HERMENEUTICAL DISCOURSE OF REALITY IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

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Abstract

It has been the concern of Philosophy as a universal enterprise to ascertain the meaning of reality. This, however, has evoked questions such as: What is philosophy? What is reality? The quest to give solutions to these questions provoked lots of controversies. Hence, philosophers and societies, in their different languages have given different interpretations to this. The interest of this paper, however, borders on interpretation of reality in Igbo ontology. This similarly evokes questions like: What is Igbo? What is it to be an Igbo? What is the meaning of reality in Igbo language? Therefore, applying hermeneutical mechanism in this research, the writer sums up that reality generally means being, life or world as a matrix. This, by implication, means the cosmological and ontological realities knit together. The term Igbo designates an Igbo person, a nation, society, tribe or ethnic group. Being Igbo includes both the living, the dead and the yet to born persons in Igbo Land. Reality in Igbo language means "Uwa". Uwa is being and being is force which will never be static but ever dynamic. Therefore, the reality (Uwa) is holistic in the sense that the corporeal and incorporeal realities causally interact with each other

Keywords: Philosophy, Ontology, Igbo, Hermeneutics of reality.

1.0 Introduction

Philosophy as a problem-solving enterprise is encircled with lots of fundamental problems of reality, of which the interpretation of reality as a whole is its primary concern. The quest to reach univocally the definition of reality, enkindled up controversies amongst philosophers and societies of the world. Our point of discourse here is exuberantly on the conception of reality in Igbo ontology. This, however, gives rise to the question of the meaning of the concepts Igbo and ontology and the interpretation of reality in Igbo language. Delineating the identity of a people, needs penetrating their culture, world-view, religion, political and economic system as well as their social-moral practices. To ascertain the limpidity and good understanding in this paper, it is pertinent to disintegrate to integrate after definition, the phrase Igbo Ontology. By so doing, we will explain briefly the concept of ontology and discuss in details the meaning of Igbo, elaborating piercingly the features which made Igbo person a being in the Igbo world. Following suit is a detailed analysis of reality which interpretatively signifies "Uwa", focusing luxuriantly on its connotations and components as well as how they causally interact with each other. The last discuss will centre on the conclusion.

2.0 An Overview of Literature

This is where we review other people's view as they pertain to our subjects of study.

2.1 Ontology

Being that concepts generally cannot boast of precision in meaning, it is needful to ascertain clarity in the definition of ontology through its etymological conceptualization. Ontology derives its root meaning from the two Greek words;-"Onto"- meaning "being" (existence) and logos – meaning study. Ontology or ontologia (Latin) means, "the state of being or science of being".¹ The concept of ontology is subsumed into metaphysics as the core branch of philosophy. Ontology as Aristotle (1945, p.66 Book iv) defined, "is first philosophy", thus, he further describes it as the science of Being of being (Being oua being).² The concept ontology was invented by Larhardus in the first edition (1sted) of his work called "Ogdos scholastic" in (1606), and became popularized by the German philosopher and rationalist "Christian Wolf in his work Philosophical Priorative Ontologia in (1903). The concept ontology is a science which contrary to biology, sociology, anthropology etc, systematically studies being in its holistic sense, it is an ordered investigation into the inner side of existence. Ontology unravels the most fundamental contents of being and beings. It radically probes existences in so far as these are knowable. Ontology enquires into the prolixity of being and the relationship amongst them. The end of ontological studies hitherto, is not occultic premonstration but simply a discovery of the response to the question of why things are the way they are, not just that they are so or, how they are so what accounts for their being. Ultimately, ontology hitherto, "involves the physical and the spiritual, the empirical and the supra-empirical concerns of each being, all being, and being of all".

2.2 The meaning of "Igbo"?

The concept Igbo has for ages attracted different connotations and descriptions. Igbo could mean ethnic group, tribe, community, land, or society. It could be described as a person – Onye Igbo, plural Igbo persons or people – ndiigbo. It could also be interpreted as language-asusu thus, Igbo language-asusu Igbo. Explaining Igbo as an ethnic group, M. M. Green (1964:6-7) says "they are a population of people inhabiting a particular geographical territory, sharing common culture, belief and migration history."³

2.3 Historical Origin of the Igbo.

The origin of the Igbo is a subject of much speculation; thus, ethnologists are divided on the question of the origin of the Igbo. Tracing the origin of Igbo people has been a difficult task. Thus, scholars like Ford and Floyd Barry expressed the difficulty in tracing the origin of Igbo or the origin of their nomenclature.

The inability of the existing oral tradition of the Igbo to give clue of their origin has added to this complication. Western authors have been Euro-centric (Colonial Masters) defined the Igbo as a people without history. In contradiction to this, an Igbo scholar V. C. Uchendu (1965:1) argued that, "a people with a culture are a people with some form of history. The Igbo have culture, therefore, they have also a history - unwritten, history which it is, the task of a culture historians to piece together."⁴ Given the fact that the Igbo have culture and history, the problem therefore, is whether or not the Igbo

are the aborigines of their land. Thus, the quest to answer this question, evoked the formulation of two hypothesis namely migration-origin hypothesis, and autochthonous hypothesis.

2.4 Migration-Origin Hypothesis.

This hypothesis argues that the traditional Igbo migrated from outside to the present Igbo land. Most of the exponent of this hypothesis often point to the East as the place of Igbo Origin; some authors argued the Igbo came from Jew, backing up their claims that the Igbo share common features with them. Some scholars, more so, said that the Igbo travelled all the way from Egypt to settle in their present abode. Even Igbo-Nigeria scholar, NnamdiAzikiwe, in his book “My Odyssey” claimed the migration origin of the Onitsha people from Benin (Bini) kingdom. Apart from Azikiwe, other scholars claimed that the people of Umuahia, Bende, Abam and Arochukwu migrated from Egypt and Congo to settle in their present abodes. Igbo people are dispersed across the globe. They can be found existing in countries like Eouatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Congo. That is why the Igbo language (asusu Igbo) is linked to the Benue-Congo dialect.

2.5 Ancient-Origin Hypothesis.

This hypothesis maintained that the Igbo did not migrate from outside but rather, developed independently like other indigenous African people. There is a strong probability for this view. This has its backing in the recent archeological findings of Thurstain Shaw of the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria Nsukka and the ethnologist and anthropologist F. ChidozieOgbalu, for example, holds that, “Chineke created and planted them (ndi Igbo) where they are now.”⁵ And, “Hartles” own archeological collections made at Bende, Afikpo, Okigwe, Awka, and Nsukka, have shown that Igbo people, had settled in those area as far back as 205Ad. According -to Chinua Achebe, the Igbo (ndi Igbo) had toiled for about 3000 years and had developed ancient civilization a thousand years ago which is about half a millennium before the emergence of the kingdom of Benin. The onus of this hypothesis however, is that our forebears had existed on their own. This core is what Uchendu termed “the nuclear Igbo.” This implies that the Igbo are the aborigines of the Igbo land. Concurring to this, Uchendu (1961) avers;

the analysis of demographic patterns, traits lists, and other cultural features combined with available local tradition would throw more light on the two interrelated hypothesis of Igbo origin; that there exist a core area which may be called “nuclear” Igbo land (alaigbo); and that waves of immigrant communities from the North and West planted themselves on the border of the nuclear Igboland as early as the fourteenth or the fifteenth century, etc⁵.

2.6 Geographical Location.

Igbo is one of the three major tribes in Nigeria along side Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba. It is also one of the 250 or more ethnic groups in Nigeria of West Africa. Put in terms of geographical and territorial integrity, Igboland is roughly circumscribed between “6 and 8^{1/2}” East longitude and 4^{1/2} and 7^{1/2} North latitude. Igbo cuts across the equatorialforest in the South and Savanna in the North. Its territory covers six out of

the (36) states of Nigeria including Federal Capital (FCT) Territory Abuja, Igbo states are: Anambra, Abia, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi and other major parts of River and Delta States. Laying emphasis on the structure of the Igbo of today, H. Chukwuma (1950:7-8) writes:

The Igbo have their homes in the six of the thirty six states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu and Ebonyi are entirely Igbo, but in the states of Delta and Rivers, the Igbo form only parts of the indigenous population. In Delta state, the Igbo are found in the Western part of the River Niger and they are referred to as Enu-ani, Ukwu-ani and Ndi-Oshinuili, NdiOshinili is completely river bounded and this reflected in their name (river people). Part of the Ukwu-ani and Enu-ani abode the River Niger or its tributaries. These great areas paradoxically form a political and administrative demarcation as well as an integrating force for the Igbo⁶.

Apart from the River Niger, which is the largest river that passes through most of the Igbo land there are considerably other water ways surrounding them, such as: Omambara, Imo, Oji, Urashi, Njaba, Ebonyi, Abia, Adofi Rivers etc. Adofi and Njaba are lowlying except for Awgu, Enugu and Nsukka. Thus, the vegetation survey of the Igbo land shows that, it is surrounded by major belts which run almost through out the communities that constitute Igbo society.

In the issue of territorial demarcation, the Igbo are bounded by the Igala and Idoma of Kogi and the Tivs, Mbembe and Yako of the Benue States of the Northern part of Nigeria. Others include the Ekoi, Ibibio, Anang and in the East, the Ijaw, Ogoni, Kalabari and Okirika in the South and, the Benin, Warri and Isoko in the West etc.

2.7 The Term, “Igbo”, as a Language.

The language Igbo (asusu Igbo), like their neighbour languages, according to Uchenedu, “belong to the Negro race in Africa and speak a language (asusu) belonging to the “Kwa” group of language found in Africa”. Asusu Igbo is one of the varieties of language found in Nigeria, a country located at the Southern Sahara Desert. Clarifying this, F. Arinze (2008:5) says:

The asusu Igbo (Igbo language) belongs to the Sudanic linguistic group of “Kwa” division. The main characteristics, its tonality the monosyllabic root-words and an absence of re-flexional endings.⁷

The origin of Igbo is not clear. As early as 1789, an Igbo ex-slave Eouiano has spoken of the Eboe (Igbo). While W.B. Baïke had described the villages East and West of the Niger between Abo and Anam as Igbo communities occupied by people who speak same language. Because of the pejorative use of the term Igbo to refer to slaves from the interior by the European and slave traders, some sections of the Igbo speak of the rest as “ndi Igbo (Igbo people)”. Thus Ilogu (1974:9) avers;

the West Niger Igbo refer to all East Niger Igbo as ndi Igbo; the Onitsha people refer to all living east of them as ndiigbo. The Nri refer to others including Onitsha as Ndi Igbo, while the Aro refer others including Nri and Onitsha as ndi Igbo.⁸

Despite all these, the name Igbo has become a symbol of unity among Igbo. The Organization of an Igbo state union, though politically motivated, played some major role in bring about a type of consciousness of ethnic unity. Thus, Omwuejeogwu (1972:4) defined the word Igbo as a community of people, the diversities and variations found in Igbo culture have been attributed to diverse ecological situations in which the Igbo people are found and partly to factors like, the influences which other cultures have had on their own in the course of contact. Thus:

*The peripheral of intrusive communities such as Onitsha and Abo, Oguta, Arochukwu or places bordering on other tribes, will tend to show cultural featured differing from those of other interior or central Ibo particularly those of Owerri division.*⁹

Igbo community stretches further from Northern Savanna to the very thick forest of the Southern region, occupying the Southern palm belt Northern grass and scarp land region, the Niger and Cross River basin, incidentally, the area that may be designated as one of the core neighbours of Igbo land. The Owerri-Orlu is also the densely populated part of Nigeria of West Africa with a population density of over 3000 per square rule. According to Onwuejeogwu (1972:4):

*The present Owerri-Orlu area may be regarded as one of the primary core Igbo culture area. Linguistically, heavy nasalization and aspiration occur in Igbo dialects of this area. There is linguistic evidence to indicate their early Igbo population dispersed from this core to other secondary core, for as moves out of this area in any direction seem to be archaic traits of Igbo language.*¹⁰

Despite all the cultural and ecological difference, one issue that remains to be settled about the Igbo in this paper is the values or features that interpreted them as a unified entity in the world.

2.8 Igbo Person and the Unifying Features of the Igbo People

Question may ask, what is it to be an Igbo? Being an Igbo involves a person possessing Igbo descent, a person born, and breast fed, fostered, grown, married and procreate within Igbo environment “Igboism” or “Igboid”, includes also those born in diaspora, but with Igbo blood and fluid, Igbo person is a being-with, he is a being in relation to the cosmological and ontological existence. There are however, certain values that defined the identity of the Igbo people. The values, nevertheless, distinguished Igbo people from other societies of the world.

Thus, the values are:

(i) Sense of Community Identification

This explains that the existence of an Igbo person (Onyeigbo) is meaningful only in his community, an authentic Igbo person (Ezigboonyeigbo) is identified via their existence with the kinsmen. Individual persons in the strict sense constitute the community; but the community overrides the rights of individual. Hence, individual persons must abide to the rules and tradition of their communities, of which any deviation may lead to excommunication, which perhaps, may result to the person’s miserable death. Power however, belongs to the community (Umunabuike). Thus, the

Igbo saying,” otuonyesiereoha, ohaericha, manaohasiereotuonye, ogaghierichaliya.” This implies that a person cannot contend with the community. This however, reflects J.S. Mbiti’s (1982:27) dictum, “I am, because you are, because, you are, therefore, I am¹¹. Every Igbo person, however, is a communal being. Interpreting herself as a communal being, the writer says, “I exist because my community recognized me, otherwise, my existence is as good as I do not exist.”

(ii) Sense of Human Relationship.

Igbo people help one another without demanding for recompense or remuneration. Igbo maintain brotherhood relationship. This explains the idea of Onyeaghalanwanneya in Igbo phraseology, and the Julius Nyerere’s philosophy of Ujamaavillagization. Igbo people maintain communal efforts, in dealing with issues of life and other ideals to achieve their objectives. This however, portrays the concept of “Bunu, Bunu, IbuAnyiDanda in relation to the South African philosophy of “Ubuntu”. Igbo people, Asuzu (2004:186) says, “exhibit the spirit of oneness, and thus partake in the sorrows and happiness of one another¹².

(iii) Sense of Hospitality.

Igbo people are well known for their hospitality trait. They welcome and incorporate strangers and give them land to settle. Thus, the saying, “Igbo in their communalistic life style, will welcome a visitor today, feed him with yam and fish, but tomorrow, he will give his visitor hoe and net to cultivates and toil fish to fend for himself¹³. Igbo people however, express welcome attitude to strangers via presentation of Kola nut (oji), traditional gin (Kaikai), coconut, (akibekee), cohise chalk (nzu) etc.

(iv) Sense of Religious Participation.

Religion is an integral and inseparable part of the Igbo culture. Igbo people are both pantheistic and monotheistic. They do not believe in the existence of God who stays faraway from them (Deus Romotus) nor in an uncertain God (Deus incertus) or, even in an idle God (Deus Otiotus). They believe, rather in an ever dynamic supreme being called “Chukwu” (God) and other divine, but lesser gods who were created for errand purposes. Thus, they are not far away from the physical and moral universe of the Igbo. Gods in Igbo religion are full of awe and also approachable. In accordance to this, Nze (2007:621) says, “during life as well as death, Igbo people (ndi Igbo) and other Africans strive to have contact with the Gods, this contact enable them to obtain a better bargain, which is an occasion, a vehicle through which they acouire wisdom.

(v) Sense of the Sacredness of Life.

The Igbos like other African nations abhors violence; they dislike shedding of human blood because human life is of primary value and needs to be preserved. It is a grievous offence and abomination in Igbo land for a person to take his life not to talk of killing another person. There are certain occasions that could lead to killing of human being, such as accident. Killing in this type of situation in Igbo land is not liable to punishment. But certain rituals are needed to be done for cleansing of the physical and spiritual bodies of the victim as well as the pacification of the spirit of the dead and that of the land. Deliberate killing of a person in Igbo land is abomination, and it attracts punishment such as excommunicating the killer from the community. But, in

this contemporary Igbo, police is normally involved to nab and arraign the killer, charge him to court, for prosecution, and conviction etc.

(vi) **Sense of Respect for Elders.**

Respect for elders is one of core values that interpret Igbo identity. Igbo people cherish old age. Respect for elders starts with one's immediate family precisely with the parents, the elder sibling and, thus to kinsmen, clan and the world at large. One Igbo parlance says, "He who listens to elders is like one who consults an oracle (Onyena-egokenyenti, di kaonyekpoturuonyeanuma, maobuonyeisinchuankeChukwu). Elders are the repository of communal wisdom, they command authority and are conceded leadership in the affairs of the community. They maintain custom and tradition and are considered to be closer to ancestors from the hierarchy of forces etc.

3.0 Analysis of Findings.

In this section, we will analyze the data gathered.

3.1 The Meaning of Reality in Igbo Language.

Reality in Igbo Language means "Uwa". This shares equivalent translation in meaning with alien languages such as: English-world, German-die welt, latin-Mundos, Spain-Mondo, Italian—ilmondo, French-Le monde etc. the concept Uwa, has much deeper meaning in scope, connotation and orbicular resiliency than the English world. There are however, other African conceptions of reality which have synonymous interpretations with the concept Uwa. The concepts, like the Igbo concept Uwa, have richer contents than English world. The concepts include as follows: Obot-Efik, Aiye-Yoruba, DuniyaKasa-Hausa. Each of these conceptions of reality has a larger extension than the concept world, which ordinarily means the material world. Thus, the depth of the Igbo concept Uwa, according to Iroegbu (1995:339), has been well defined in the following statement.

The entirety of existence from God, the highest Being to inanimate beings of our cosmos, can be summarized in the en-globing concept of the term Uwa. Uwa is all inclusive. It mirrors being, existence, entity, all reality. It en-globes all that is animate and inanimate, visible and invisible. It is a comprehensive, universal and global. It is transcendent and immanent in scope as well as explicative and prospective elasticity.¹⁴

The concept Uwa is much more than we perceive, it comprises of the palpable and impalpable contents. There are different connotations, though not unrelated conceptions in the concept Uwa. They, however, include: (1) The English term world (Uwa). This is constituted of (1) the Cosmos—"elu-uwa"— meaning the earth on which we live, and the ontological side of the nature—"Imeuwa", this reflects the inside, the interior part of the world. (2) Life, this explains the differences in human life. It involves the intricacies surrounding individuals' existences, hence different individuals expressions like, "**uwa m, abughiuwagi**- meaning my world is not your world; Uwa m di ichen'uwagi' - meaning, "my world is different from your world; Uwa m nauwagiabughiotu- meaning, "my own world", is not the same with yours. (3) Destiny or fate, this reflects to all the positivities and negativities encircling different persons encounter with the world. It could reflect either successful circumstances of human lives led. Thus, in Igbo land, one could be described as "**onyeuwaoma or**

onyeuwaojoo". The former implies a lucky, progressive person, while the later explicates the difficulties and hardship a person has been passing through in life. This apparently, interprets the Igbo parlance, "**omewere ma chi ekweghi, onyeutaatalaya**-one should not be blamed for being unfortunate in life. Igbo people, nevertheless, express this condition via the names they answer e.g; Uwakwe, Chikwem, Unokwe-meaning, if the world permutes". (4) Time-Oge. This points to the past, present and future events. There are certain Igbo words or phraseologies that explain time or period as a connotation of the concept Uwa. Such are; Uwambu ma obu, uwauwagboo, gboo- ancient world, uwandinnaanyi ha- meaning our forebears' or ancestors world. Uwaugba- meaning the present world, uwan'abia, abia-the forth coming world, Uwaebighiebi- the unending or everlasting world. This last connotation and its explanation portray Igbo people's belief that, this physical world-humanity, cannot end, it exists adinfinitum. Since, the physical world is the prototype of the spiritual-Godian world (i.e UwammuonkeChukwu). (5) Earth-Uwaanyin'ahuanya, Uwaanyi bi n'ya, this is the land on which we are marching, living in and spending our ethereal lives. (6) Reality in totality-Uwaniile; this is all en-globing, Uwa in its universal sense contains all that exist. All that exist is being and being in Africa generally is conceptualized as force. This force in Igbo nomenclature is tagged "Ihe" (Thing), Ihe, gunyereiheuwaanahuanya, nakwaiheuwandianaghiahuanya- meaning the visible and invisible things (realities). This unlike the Western reality is not static but ever dynamic. Hence whatever, in so far as it is in Igbo world-view is Uwa matrix-force.

3.2 The Components of Uwa Matrix

Uwa as a matrix contains the physical and non-physical things. This in Kants' conceptualization denotes phenomenal-material and no noumenal- immateria existences. There is no pole apart amidst these two existences. Thus, the immaterial existence is superior to the material existence, in that the material existence is its prototype. Ede (1985:77) acknowledged this by saying, "Whatever obtains here in the physical has its replica in the world of unseen"¹⁵. Supporting this, Aja (1992:146) avers:

Whatever exists in the world of our senses, contends the traditional Igbo, has a dual existence. That is to say, the reality of individual existences in the two posted world.¹⁶

Thus, the elements that constitute Uwa ontology in the Igbo world are: (1) The Godian World (UwaChukwu) in the word of Iroegbu Pantheon. This Godian world is the apex, (ultimacy), the source of all other things (ihendiozo) or being, this is the force itself. It is not dependent on anything, but in itself. Following this, are (2) the nature gods who are the subordinates to God? These are the messengers to God (Chukwu) they take charge of the perceptible creatures. These however, are classified into the sky and earth gods or spirits or deities e.g; thunder god -egbe-igwe, sun god -anyanwu, rain-mmiriozizo, moon-onwa as well as aluajoku-god of agriculture, alaorani-earth goddess etc, following forth the nature gods or deities is (3) the ancestry (ndiichie, ndinnaanyi ha). These are our forebears. This also has two categories namely, the recent or living dead and the long dead. The long dead are tagged the ghost, because their passage has reached up to fifth (5th) generation, the people that recognized them no longer exist, hence they can be used to perform both benevolent and malevolent activities. The recent or living dead are the newly dead ancestors; their existences are

still fresh in the memory of their families and children. They normally appear to their family members for one purpose or the other, sometimes for advice, information discipline etc. Next to the ultimacy is (4) the human world (Uwammadu). This comprises of the living and the unborn human being. It also involves the family, kinsmen, villages and communities. Human being is the centre of creation-connecting the Godian (UwaChukwu) world with the material-object world. Next to this is (5) the animate and inanimate world (Uwaumuanumanunaihendiozonwerendu di kaosisinakwaihendienweghindu di kammiri, okwute). The last of the contents of Uwa is (6) the infra being or nothingness according to Abanuka (Ihendina-enweghiihe ha bumanauche (mind) mere kaaghotana ha di, di ka (e.g); okwuonu-spoken word or nommo, ukwuo festivity etc.

4.0 Conclusion

Philosophical search for ages has been on the solution to the problems perturbing different sections of reality as advanced perhaps by individuals or societies. Our discourse in this paper, however, centres on the interpretation of reality as a whole as it pertains to Igbo ontology. Relating to the proffered interpretations by the Euro-Western Societies, the Igbo in their unique language interpret reality as “Uwa. This uwa, when referred to African holistic conceptualization is “force-meaning being”. Uwa possesses varieties, though, not related connotations as explained in the body of the work. Uwa matrix contains both the physical and non-physical realities which are not distinct to each other, but causally intermingle. Ede, however, complimented this when he says that”, whatever that is existing in the physical realm, has first existed in the non-physical realm. This by implication means that the non-physical reality is the origin of the physical reality. Drawing from this, Igbo people adopt their mother-African definition of reality (being) as force. But, due to the problem of non-unified language, they resorted to describe force as a unification of “Ihe”-thing in English lexicon. Ihe (the thing) comprises of the (ultimacy)-the spiritual realm of God (Chukwu) which is the apex, nature gods or deities (Chi) as the messengers of God, which control things of nature, the ancestor-ndiichie (Our forebears), the humankind –mmadu the centre of reality (force) and the connector of all there is – reality, the reity- animate and inanimate reality-ihendinwerendu ma ha enweghiuche, and the infra reality-ihendienweghiihe ha bumana, uche mere kaamarana ha buihe, ma dirikwa,infra realty are not perceptible, but emotion explains their existence e.g (di ka) okwuonu- nommuo (i.e spoken world), ukwo-festivity, mma-beauty etc. conclusively, reality in Igbo ontology means Uwa. Uwa is being, and being in African ontology is force. Therefore, uwa is force that is constituted of the corporeal (ihendianaahuanya) and incorporeal (ihendianghiahuanya) forces.

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