

CONFRONTING THE CONCEPTS OF TRUTH IN IGBO LAND FROM CHRISTIANITY AND THE INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITIES

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Abstract

On various existential phenomena and social settings, the Igbo person is the struggle for social ethics. Pulled by Christianity on one side, and the indigenous spirituality on the other side, finding a balance in his existential values becomes challenging. Truth is one of those issues that reflect the complexities of the reality of Igbo people, a complexity that emerged with Christianity. In Christianity, truth is theological, theoretical, absolute, personified in Jesus Christ. The Igbo indigenous spiritualities consider truth practical and operational. It is that which aligns with objectivity and is functionally expedient. This article aims to reflect on the concepts of truth in Igbo land from Christianity and the indigenous spiritualities, expose the incongruousness and the relevance they may still have among the Igbo people in their social realities.

Keywords: Culture, Christianity, Igbo, Indigenous Spiritualities, Truth, Moral/Social Ethics

Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s, Christianity had a very decisive influence on a variety of social issues within Igbo land. Despite the challenging factors of inter/intra-denominational rivalries and unfavourable ethno-political settings, churches were resorted to as abodes of fairness and justice. Community and individual charms and deities were submitted, discarded, or destroyed through a wave of charismatic renewals by priests and pastors (Isiramen 2015, 283). People would lean on the churches for an amicable resolution of their differing issues. It was normal to hear that pronounced enemies, quarrelling extended families, or even warring communities, have withdrawn their cases from the deities or even the kings to the church because they want to resolve it peacefully. Truth, forgiveness and peace, fairness and justice accompanied deliberations done by the church, and people were able to let go of grudges and generational acrimony. Today, most Igbo people profess Christianity.

In the last 20 or 15 years, a deteriorating social orientation is now experienced within Igbo land where people are retracing back towards the concept of justice that the indigenous spiritualities proffer. The usefulness of the Christian/church solutions is reserved for trivial cases (Udoye 2011, 16). The Igbo who loses his/her property to a thief does not want the consolation of a priest and the sermon of praying for his/her enemies. He/she wants the thief to face the full wrath of a deity, to be exposed through a shameful severe repercussion, and to recover the property. He/she who is losing his/her partner to another person or feels deprived of a right would now recourse to a

deity for a consequence against the contender as a deterrent to others. It has to be swift, shameful, and public. The days of being a good Christian person while being abused and exploited are long gone. The prevalent social consciousness has conditioned the average Igbo person not to rely on the church and her brand of justice and amicable results, where both the victimized and victimizer rest on a no victor–no vanquished settlement. In the stead, the Igbo person wants to reinvigorate the indigenous system of *ofo na ogu*, the justice system that would be swift in consequence and severe in execution (Nkwocha 2008, 161).

So what does this paradigm shift in the social relevance of Christianity with regards to truth and fairness mean? The people want truth, but no longer the Christian confessional protective truth. It must be a truth that is expository, *Ezi – okwu*. They want peace, but not the peace that enables the evildoer to summon the courage for a repetition. Rather it should be a peace, like the silence after an explosion, like the settlement of dust after a rumble; a peace that reigns when the victimizer can no longer victimize any person. Let us unfold the concepts of truth in Christianity and the indigenous spiritualities within Igbo land. Since Christian concepts have become ingrained in the socio-cultural fabrics and philology of the Igbo people, how does it's concept of truth translate in Igbo land?

The Concept of Truth in Igbo Indigenous Spirituality

Among the Igbo people, a culturally heterogeneous people dwelling in the southern part of Nigeria, the word used for truth is the same everywhere; *Eziokwu*. These are two words coupled together as one, *ezi* and *okwu*. *Okwu* means word, but it is coupled to the main word *ezi*. *Ezi*, on its own, means right, and can contextually mean truth. In the context of correspondence, one can say *Ezia* to confirm another thing as right. But generally, both are used together as *Eziokwu* – Truth.

The root word here is *zi*. *Zi* is a stem word meaning straight and has different word offshoots, like *ziziriri* – orderliness/Straight, *nkuzi* – to teach, *igbaziri* - to direct/advise, *imezi* – to amend/ to rectify, and so on. From this root word, one can see other contextually synonymous words to truth, like straight or rectitude (Okere 2003, 333). One could ask, if *ezi* could stand-in for truth, why does the Igbo language need to add *okwu* – word/speech to *ezi* – right, in order to have *Eziokwu* for truth?

The Etymology of *Eziokwu*

There are three explanations for the etymology of *eziokwu*.

a) The *Uzi* (tree) Narrative

The *uzi* tree is arguably one of the biggest trees in Igbo land, along with *oji*. *Uzi*, however, is known not only for its towering height and perennial stability but also for

its natural style of growth. An *uzi* tree grows so straight without bending that if one would stand at its base one could enjoy a view of its straightness till the top end of it. *Uzi* serves as an analogy of *eziokwu*. As it is straight, and one can see from one end to the other without any ambiguity, and as it grows much taller than other trees around it and can stand strong for hundreds of years against age and harsh weather, so is truth. Okere calls it the ‘Tree of Truth’ (2003, 334). However, beyond the physical analogy, *ezi* (truth) is etymologically connected to *uzi* (tree). Both share the same root word *zi*, and this root word serves in *ezi* exactly that which it serves in *ziziriri*, and *uzi*; which is proper, rectitude, right.

b) The *Ezi* (compound, in the open) Narrative

The Igbo word for compound or in the open is *ezi*, pronounced a bit different from *ezi* (truth). For some, the Igbo concept of truth is derived from the word *ezi* – in the open. The sameness of the word for ‘truth’ and ‘in the open’ is not a coincidence. Also, it is supported by the logic of the addition of *okwu* to *ezi* (compound). *Okwu* would have been a superfluous addition since *ezi* already expresses the word truth. But *okwu* becomes an important addition in this understanding of truth by the Igbo. *Okwu* means speech. In this context, *eziokwu* would literally mean that which is spoken in the open (Otapkor 2008, 159). The word *ezi* (compound) needs the word *okwu* (speech) to distinctively express this concept of truth, as that which is public, clear, acceptable, spoken in the open, as opposed to that which is ambiguous, discreet, not made public. In this context, the capacity to be open and public is a quality of truth. *Ezi* might serve as truth, but it might also serve as compound/in the open. Without *okwu* (speech) to it, *ezi* (truth) would lose the quality of openness in Igbo philology.

This is similar to the concept of *aletheia* (truth) in ancient philosophy from the pre-Socratic until Aristotle, which was revived in modern philosophy by Heidegger in his philosophy of Being and Time.

c) The *Ezi* (good, right) Narrative

This is simply the theory that truth is that which is right and proper. It is in this context that the Igbo people use the aphorism *Eziokwu bu ndu* – Truth is life. This concept bears a moral undertone. Truth here carries a positive energy. Aside from truth, nothing carries that same energy. Whether eloquence, smartness, dexterity, or proficiency, if it is not serving truth, it is not considered proper. Hence, shrewdness was not considered right. Only truthfulness is considered proper. This is why honesty was a necessary quality for consideration in assuming someone into the council of *Ichie*, *Nze*, or *Ozo*, the institutions to ensure orderliness within Igbo land (Dine 1983, 126).

The Igbo Correspondence Theory of Truth

The most basic and most naturally referential concept of truth is the correspondence theory. That it is true which corresponds to the reality it was referred to is a logic that all sentient beings can relate to. It is not just about the determination of the facts. It is also about confirming that the claims correspond to the facts they were referred to. In other words, the claims were true. Hence, for the Igbo people, a concept of truth is only socially relevant if it is operational. To sieve out the truth from two possibilities is not the only challenge. Another major challenge is determining which fact is real; which fact is authentically acceptable because facts in themselves are not always enough. If both Mr. A and Mr. B have provable documents of ownership of the property, then one must go beyond facts to determine the ‘true’ ownership, the facts must be authenticated. For the Igbo, an acceptable authentication of fact must be referred to an impeccable, authoritative, and impartial force. No physical or human force can attain such impeccability. So, it must be a force beyond dubitability and corruption. It must be metaphysical. ‘A truth-telling culture would be consistent with a high social order’ (2008, 166), Otakpor explains. Hence, there is the *Ofo na Ogu* justice system.

Ofo na Ogu is a justice system that is invoked when human deliberations and dialogues have been exhausted. It is a system in which truth is attained by invoking severe consequences on anybody usurping the correspondence of claims to the acceptable facts (Ogungbile 2015, 14). It circumvents the nuances of subjective perspectives through which facts are sometimes muddled, in order to establish a straightness between claims and facts. Simply put: Claims become oaths. A person is handed an *ofo* staff and the claim could sound like this.

I know for sure and do not doubt all that I own this property. May our ancestors bear me witness. I place my barefoot on mother earth, and I spread my palms to the sun. If my hands are not clean, if the accusation against me is true, if I am lying, may they carry out the just punishment I deserve. If I am sincere and innocent, may they grant me the justice I deserve.

After this, the person strikes the *ofo* staff on the ground as a seal to his/her claims. At this stage, the ambiguity of a legal process, the astuteness in eloquence and articulation, the sophistication of exposure or financial resources, and every other factor through which truth can sometimes be remoulded are discarded. What then counts is: if your claim is not true, the cost will be severe (Okorocho 2009, 108).

Ofo is represented as a six or seven-inch staff, carved out of a *detarium elastic* tree. It is a ritualistic symbol of truth and justice. The bearer of the community *ofo* is usually the chief priest. Even though the *opara* (first males) of the families bear their family *ofo* but if they are compromised by family dynamics and are no longer honest, it is believed that their *ofo* becomes impotent. The community chief priest must guard against all odds not to be compromised for the sake of justice and truth in the community. *Ogu* goes with *Ofo*, and usually precede the usage of *ofo*. *Ogu* is also a ritualistic staff, usually tied with palm leaves. It symbolizes peace and is used when

amicable resolution is sought. It works together with *ofo* in the justice system but does not seek fierce and punitive measures like the *ofo*. *Ofo* is presented as a male force fiercely chastising the guilty. *Ogu* is the female force balancing retribution with peace and succour (Ogbonna 2016, 17).

What all these mean is that for the Igbo, justice and truth are mutually inclusive. The concept of truth in Igbo is intrinsically related to the concept of justice (Okorochoa 2009, 108). Since truth is that which corresponds to the fact it is referring to, justice is the necessity of ensuring and sustaining the relationship between claims and facts. To ensure this relationship, the system of justice capable of sustaining claims to facts must be cordially amicable (*ogu*), fiercely punitive (*ofo*), and necessarily beyond human corruptibility. Where truth cannot be sustained, justice fails. And at this juncture, may I refer back to my previous question: Why does the Igbo need *Ezi* + *Okwu* for the word truth, when *Ezi* could be used?

Besides the philology of the Igbo language on the etymology and grammar of *ezi* (compound, truth) and *okwu* (speech), already explained above, there is yet another point as to why both words need to be combined to create a concept of truth. The correspondence theory of truth is necessarily connected to speech - *okwu*. Why? To correspond, you need a means of reference. Generally, this means of reference is language, speech. If you must claim truth, then you must refer to a fact. If you must refer to a fact, you must do that in language/speech. So, because the concept of truth is necessarily connected to speech, speech becomes assumed into the etymology of truth. Speech becomes part of the concept of truth among the Igbos. Hence the transliteration of the word for truth, *Eziokwu*, is true speech.

The Concept of Truth in Christianity

The discussion over the absolutism of truth in Christianity seems to have reached an impasse. It is neither suppressed nor allowed to progress. It is rather avoided, unattended. Ratzinger reflects on how the whole discussion stops at the probability of certainty; what if? 'The Catholic Christian could only in all humility put the question that Martin Buber once formulated to an atheist: But what if it is true? Thus it becomes apparent that, beyond all particular questions, the real problem lies in the question about truth' (2004, 10). Geisler provides what he thinks truth is and is not.

Truth is not that which works...Truth is not that which coheres...Truth is not that which was intended...Truth is not that which is comprehensive...Truth is not that which is essentially relevant...Truth is not that which feels good...Truth is what corresponds to its referent (2009, 29 – 31).

In a religious context, most times, the referent is a non-verifiable subject, justifiable in the parlance of faith. Should one submit, therefore, to the discourse of religious truths

as non-absolute because they are not scientifically verifiable? There are two aspects of the Christian concept of truth: Truth as absolute, and Truth versus dialogue.

a) Truth as Absolute

Can there be the absolute truth? Absolute truth is the unchanging completeness of God. It is that which is neither dependent nor conditional on the relativism of time and place, nor the particularity of a religion. It remains eternally the same. Christianity teaches that God revealed this absolute truth in Christ Jesus (Joh 14:6, 18:38, Eph 4:21).

The relativists, however, would argue that ‘no religion can make a valid claim to possess the truth’ (Moyaert 2013, 213), that people perceive differently and have different realities. So truth should be different depending on people, phenomena, or circumstances. Secondly, the relativists argue that in the long run, religions teach similar or the same truths; love, tolerance, just life earns eternal life, etc. ‘All truth, especially religious truth, is one, relational, transformative and dynamic’ (Lane 2011, 124), they argue. But the relativist’s claim that no truth is absolute, is absolutistic in itself. We do not need to dwell on this old, incoherent relativistic view of truth (Lints 1993, 247). Rather we ask: what does absolute truth in a religious context mean?

Jewish and Islamic monotheistic understandings are in opposition to the Christian Trinitarian monotheism. The person and nature of Jesus Christ, his death, the notion of salvation or reincarnation, all these issues are conflicting points of religious truths between Islam and Christianity. So, ‘the conspicuous disparity of their religious teachings, incongruity of their religious fractions and the opposing convictions that they profess are at least academic and scientific proofs that some of them are wrong by default’ (Author 2017, 301).

It becomes imperative to human nature to wonder which of the alternatives is true. So, in the search for the absolute truth, one concentrates on the options of A or B or C. However, what experts in religion, like Trigg Roger, suggest is to address the issue from another perspective. ‘They [religions] are so different that it appears impossible for them all to be true. The rational conclusion might be that none of them are. Another reaction could be that it is not the function of religion to proclaim “truth” (2014, 1). In other words, it is not suitable for interreligious encounters to lean on the search for absolute truth. Religious encounters would not be adequate for critical appraisals of religious truths. There is a sense in which this view is considerable. If it has become acceptable by the academia that no religion can make a valid claim to possess the truth, then the claims of truth must be denied of religions for religious encounters to be effective. ‘This is because the dialogical forum suggests unity or even unification, abandonment or even renouncement of one’s religious identity, re-prioritization of the ontological and structural categories of religions for the social and external categories’ (Author 2017, 140). One wonders, is it that no religion can make valid claims of truth or no religion should make valid claims of truth?

While belief in truth might have made us incapable of dialogue (Ratzinger 1999, 94), ‘what meaning does belief then have, what positive meaning does religion have, if it cannot be connected with truth’ (Ratzinger 2004, 10). One can decide to view the problem of absolute truth in religion with a less anti-religion purview. There are two approaches to this. The first one I call *the concurrence approach*, which has similarities with Lessing’s philosophical thoughts on religion. This approach proposes that religions can attain the absolute truth in their various capacities. The capacities are the human and social constituents that naturally construct religion (Allison 2018, 73). The claims of a religion reflect its capacities in concurrence to the absolute truth, God. This approach respectfully considers the differences in the claims of religions about the absolute truth, the search for God, and their ontological, structural, and exterior categories. The differences are not for comparative rather for harmonious reasons, through which the fullness of God’s revelation, even when it is from a particular religion, would become accessible by and for all. Because of this harmony, this concurrence is very necessary for the manifestation of the absolute truth. The differences in religions become necessities that cannot and should not be relegated. Thus, in the stead of a futuristic multi-religiousness where different religions are collapsed into a sameness or one-religion system, this approach proposes a harmonious interreligiousness where, beyond the search for the absolute truth in particular religions, the personal openness towards faith encounter with God becomes a mutual aim of the religions.

The second approach still takes seriously the implications of the question: Can a religion claim possession of the absolute truth and fullness of God’s revelation? I call it the *divine-projective approach*. What if it is not as much about the receptive capacity of religions to divine revelations as it is about the projective intentions of the divine? It does suggest that beyond the excesses and imperfections of religions, a divine intention helps make sense of the existence of different spiritualities and religions in the world (Harrison 2002, 115). It is thus plausible to consider this divine intention as an active source in the search for absolute truth. The more religions work beyond truth and peace in the world, toward the absolute truth and personal openness of faith to God, the more they align to the divine intention in their differences (Clooney 2020, 273).

b) Truth versus Dialogue

As it has been hinted, the development of theology since the Vatican Council II has been an either-or polarization between truth and dialogue. Dialogue is supposed to be inclusive and progressive, whereas truth is supposed to be exclusive and intolerant. If truth must be tolerant, it must exist as a “dialogic truth”, which means relative, considerate, and dependent on its tolerant and unifying capacities. In other words, truth is not supposed to exist as absolute, rather dialogic. Interpreting this in the

practical sense of Christianity, McDermott asks: ‘If Jesus is the fullest form of God, why had God permitted these religions to rise and flourish? Where was God in all of this’ (2007, 21). ‘If God did not make the whole world Christians, or at least the majority of humanity, then there is no conviction towards a particular understanding or worship of him’ (Author 2017, 301). The thought-line of the “scandal of particularity” suggests the dethronement of religious truth and the enthronement of dialogic subjectivity in Christianity. But how can there be dialogue without truth? ‘An “authentic” dialogue would be one where some actual recognition of truth took place’ (Molnar 2007, 188). Hence, ‘dialogue should always be about truth participating in the underlying Word [Logos]; it is a search for truth, not for mere tolerance’ (Ssenyondo 2013, 57).

While some thinkers like Lints argue that the empirical reality of different faiths warrants a rejection of particular truth claims of any single faith (1993, 245), others argue that the particularities of religions cannot be subdued as anti-plurality? ‘Pluralism is never the problem and does not nullify the particularity, the truth, at least in Christian religious perspective...pluralism appears to be God’s *modus operandi*. If then it is a problem, man is not to blame and cannot solve it’ (Author 2017, 302). It is in and because of plurality that the particularities of religious truths exist at all. So, there are different religious truths and there is the absolute truth to which the religions reflect according to their capacities.

Truth and its Social Relevance among the Igbo People

So far, we have explored the concepts of truth from the perspectives of the indigenous spiritualities and Christianity. Both perspectives seek context and relevance in Igbo land, among the Igbo people. The Igbo person has to respond to these variations in his/her daily dealings. In what ways do these concepts contrast each other? How do these truth concepts manifest in the life of the Igbo person and how does he/she respond to it within his socio-cultural reality?

a) On the absolutism of Truth

Christianity teaches that truth is absolute, and having faith in the truth sets one free (John 8:32). Truth as absolute means that truth is Godly, in the person of Jesus Christ. But it is not an ephemeral absoluteness. The Igbo Christian, for example, experiences some changes in his/her church, from liturgy to the teachings about God. Once, he/she was taught that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. He/she was once taught that, besides a church organ, other instruments or even clapping of hands during the liturgy would be an affront to God, and so on. Nowadays, these things are at best, taught with reservations. These experiences conflict with his/her indigenous mentality of truth as ‘something that has been long-standing and upheld by the community down the ages’ (Onwudinjo and Ejikemeuwa 2019, 501); as something that corresponds with fact. Even though he/she may not be explicitly confrontational

that the things taught about the unchanging God in the church seem to be changing according to time and human caprices, he/she suspects that nothing seems absolute in the Christian teachings, even the historicity of Jesus Christ himself. So, the absoluteness of truth in the person of Jesus Christ is far away to his/her social relevance. The Igbo is unable to translate truth in Jesus Christ into his social reality. Hence, some scholars call for deeper inculturation (Udoye 2011, 374).

The truth of the indigenous spirituality, on the other hand, seems more stable, more perennial, and relevant to his/her social reality (Otakpor 2008, 166). If it was true that the gods or ancestors were angry 40 years ago over a case of murder, incest, or infanticide, then it is accepted that they would still be angry if that occurs today. If they answered when invoked 100 years ago, they would still answer today when invoked. If *oji* (Kolanut) or *oso-oji* (Alligator Pepper) was an antidote to a particular spiritual ailment a century ago, it would still be an antidote to the same ailment tomorrow. It is easier for the Igbo to rely on these truths which seem stable. So, while the absolutism of truth in Christianity is Christus-persona orientated, indigenous spiritualities consider truth through its existential relevance to the society.

b) On the Resignation to Faith

Christianity teaches that it is in Jesus Christ that truth abides absolutely. This enables faith in him. Without this absoluteness, the search for truth continues *ad infinitum*. Truth then becomes a subject of relativistic vagary. This is why, in the absence of faith in Jesus Christ, a systematic recourse to relativism becomes inevitable, both in the society and up to the Christian institutional levels. So the person of Jesus Christ makes the absolute truth identifiable and acceptable. And this identifying and accepting him is theological faith.

However, this Christian logic has a side effect among the Igbo people, within their social reality. Faith seems to have made the Igbo Christian over-reliant on a miraculous Jesus Christ, over things he/she could do for him/herself. The Igbo Christian relies on Jesus Christ to provide, protect, and fight for him/her, and so on (Unegbu 2019, 343). And when his over-reliance on God exposes him/her to the opportunists of the world who would prey on his/her vulnerability, then faith douches his/her anger that vengeance is for the lord. While the evil person benefits from his/her dubiousness, the Christian seeks consolation from God.

Some Igbo people are deciding differently on the submissiveness of their entire fate to faith in Jesus Christ. Partly because they have seen the abuses of such vulnerability on those who tried to live like that in the past, and partly by the fact that there was no meaningful social development or betterment that proceeded from such a religious mentality. Since faith in Christ is possible because truth abides absolutely in him, the

Igbo Christian tends to indulge alternative truths into his/her social reality and at the same time, claim faith in Jesus Christ.

c) On the Operationality of Truth

A major point of digression between the Christian concept of truth and that of the indigenous Spiritualities is in their operationality and social efficacy. Within the Igbo context, Christian truth is reflective. In a sense, one can interpret the Christian concept of truth to be passive, non-aggressive. Its operational relevance in the society is hardly felt. Christ teaches; everyone who belongs to the truth listens to me (John 18:37). This truth is not confrontational, rather appealing. It is not fierce and demanding. It is mild and receptive. That is why its message is to love your enemies, to pray for those who hate you, to bless those who curse you, to give to those who ask from you, to cherish altruism and be careful of wealth and affluence, to turn the other cheek when hit.

To reflect this in the reality of the Igbo person, especially in this present age, is near impossible. As a consequence of very many factors, wealth has become the utmost value, higher than education, respectability, or discipline. Nwapa argues that the Western presence brought about some changes in the Igbo traditional value system and wealth became a major determinant of power and recognition (2016, 281). The social consciousness of the Igbo demands that he becomes recognized. Now, it is not the truth that sets the Igbo free, it is wealth. This value, in turn, sets the standard of social priorities. Anything that can lead to the attainment of wealth becomes mostly acceptable, or at least tolerable. The Igbo has accepted that he/she cannot achieve the social value placed on wealth with a Christian passive, non-aggressive truth approach, as long as he/she is in Nigeria. The concept of truth that is compatible with his/her social consciousness is not to love his/her enemies and turn the other cheek to be hit again. It is not being honest when he/she would make more money with dishonesty or to not hold worldly wealth in high esteem. It is the truth that assures him/her of safety against enemies in the competitive world. And it is not Christianity, rather the indigenous spiritualities that provide him/her with this truth.

d) On the Exclusivity of Truth

Where there is absolutism, there is exclusivism. The Christian concept of truth is exclusive and unique as far as Christ himself is exclusive and unique. On several occasions, Jesus Christ himself claims exclusiveness in his nature and as the truth. I am the way, truth, and life (John 14:6), and many other verses in the Bible attest to this, like John 1:14, John 1:17.

For the indigenous spiritualities, truth is not exclusive. It is clear, unambiguous, and right, but it does not embodied exclusively in a particular person, institution, community, or deity. However, the present social climate within Igbo land is characterized by arrant dishonesty and flagrant insincerity in all ramifications.

Sincerity, while it remains a priced and respectable value, is at the same time a very rare quality to witness or live by within Igbo land today. To tell the truth is very difficult for many people if a lie would serve their immediate interest. Dishonesty in all aspects of life to make extra money is acceptable and no longer considered wrong. Whether it is in school, partners by a business transaction, church members and workers, a labourer repairing your car or working at your house, a trader selling at the market, all aspects of social and religious life are characterized by an accepted dishonesty. Osuagwu calls it a 'culture of liars' (Otakpor 2008, 159) Worse, I would argue, is not even the indifference, the ease with which insincerity is being normalized. It is the deep-rooted consciousness that compels it as good to be dishonest. There is now no prick of conscience on deceiving a customer, swindling a business partner, ripping off an ignorant buyer, exploiting an innocent bargainer, or indulging in all sorts of cheating in order to gain more money. An average Igbo trader would be calling you with your religious title, pastor or father, swearing on the life of his/her mother, and still be lying to you about the price of a commodity. He/she would feel sad if he/she did not succeed in swindling you or ripping you off. At this level, I wonder if it could get any worse.

One can reflect on various reasons why the societies in Igboland have degenerated on the operational value of truth. Some factors like social proclivity to wealth, ambitiousness and over-zealousness, the decadence of political structures, lack of basic amenities and politically engineered poverty, and so on, always come forth in such a discourse. I would like to spare us the socio-economic analysis of these arguments. They may be explanatory, but they are neither consoling nor comforting, and for many people, do not justify the decadence in the practical value of truth. I do not intend to proffer an opinion that would justify the decadence either. I think, however, that there is something deeper, something more basic that has caused such a chasm between the ideological/religious value of truth and the operational value of truth within Igbo land.

Truth and the Necessity of Ethics

Despite the high regard for truth both in Christianity and in the indigenous spiritualities, the practical relevance of truth within Igbo societies has continued to diminish. Barely 30 years ago, the poor teacher in Igbo land who would miserly 'measure out the quantity of yam to be cooked' due to financial lack still commanded a respectable social value. There was still dignity to his/her personality because he/she represented rightness, properness. One was regarded esteem who would stand on the truth to the detriment of his/her provisional interests. One of the greatest honours to be ascribed to a person in Igbo land was: He/she is or was a truthful person. Whatever he tells you today, he would tell you tomorrow; *O bu onye eziokwu. Ihe o gwara gi taa,*

biakwe echi, obukwa ihe o ga-agwa gi. ‘Ibo traditional morality demands the virtues of truthfulness, peaceful co-existence, hospitality and the avoidance of sex laxity’ (Ilogu 1974, 143). How did the operational value of truth lose its relevance to the Igbo society within two to three decades?

I submit that it was basically because of the decadence in Christian morals and social ethics. As Ilogu recognizes, ‘it was among the second generation Christians that a good deal of ambivalence to Christian ethics and moral life started appearing’ (1974, 143).

Christianity and the Decadence of Ethics

Let us address it first from the Christian angle. Pentecostalism started as new churches in Nigeria but developed into a Christian ideology that can be seen and experienced in almost all variant denominations of Christianity in Igbo land today. From the early 1980s up to the late 90s, when the first wave of Pentecostalism was intense in Nigeria, there was a new vibrancy in Christianity and moral/ethical awakening in Christian pedagogy. (Mwaura 2005, 247). Church teachings and teaching in the church had one clear aim: to make people ‘holy’, to conscientise people towards proper moral and ethical living lifestyles (Achunike 2019, 6). The message of repentance and avoidance of social evils and immoral behaviours in order to be saved from judgment was in all Christian propagation, from the altar to the pulpit, from the schools to the songs. The revival theology summed up is: Conversion through repentance and become a ‘born again’. These were the hay days of deeper Life church, Assemblies of God, Student Union, Watchman Catholic Charismatic, and so on. Many of these ministries broke off from the orthodox churches because they felt a redundancy in spirituality and decadence in moral/ethical standards. But in turn, they lost their popularity for the same reasons they broke off; Biblicism and theological rigorousness (Marshall 2009, 83).

Then the second phase of Pentecostalism set in, towards the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. There was little or nothing doctrinally similar to the first phase in this second phase. One could even argue that it was the Pentecostal churches of the first wave that suffered more than the orthodox churches (Marshall 2009, 83). They lost many followers and more importantly, their teachings were eroded out as oblivious, unacquainted, and crude by the fanciful, progressive, and sensational new ones (Mwaura 2005, 247). The new pastors with permed hair, eloquent and technical skills of communication were putting out more entertaining and sensational services, investing and expanding into businesses and properties, and could afford a dream life of affluence. They lived out what they preached – God is not a poor God and would bless his children in his riches.

One of the aspects of Christianity that the Pentecostal churches of the first wave revived in Igbo land was the moral/ethical consciousness of being a Christian (Mwaura 2005, 247) In the orthodox churches, like the Catholic Church, faith and bible teachings were an important part of the parish programs, also as extended efforts in explicating the Vatican Council II (Aba 2016, 279). Usually, on Sunday evenings,

before adoration, the churches were filled with children and adults, providing existential questions and discussing the experiential implications of the Christian teachings. It was called Sunday teachings or Teaching on Faith (Nkuzi nke Okwukwe). The Pentecostal churches were also very serious with their Sunday school programs. It is important to note that, besides the denominational undertone of these church pedagogical systems, the issue of morals and social ethics were commonly foundational to the teachings. The catechism was elucidated into the ordinary vices against lies, greed, gossip, and so on. But it was all subtly countered and discarded by the new pedagogy of the new Pentecostalism. The Igbo Christians, 'in their eagerness to acquire as much wealth, power and influence as possible tended to neglect the moral demands of Christianity' (Ilogu 1974, 143).

A bulwark of its theology was a contextual misrepresentation of Paul's message: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom 10:9). This was explained into a new consciousness in Christianity; a consciousness that purported that all one needed to be saved as a Christian was to believe in one's heart and proclaim Jesus with one's mouth. The rigorousness of morality and the 'peddling' of guilty became the derogatory descriptions with which the orthodox and some Pentecostal churches were dismissed by the ideology of Pentecostalism. The new message is: be happy to live out how you want, be proud of who you are, be convinced that you are a Christian because you say so, not by abiding to some church moral teachings.

The result of this is that after two decades, some Igbo Christians have become so bereft of the ethical foundations upon which they can lead a truthful life (Ilogu 1974, 143). Since they are no longer taught that truthfulness is crucial to Christian life and that this moral quality is contributive to their salvation, then its practicability has become irrelevant. Now the ethical and moral fundamentals are at best, respected as ideological consciousness in Christianity with no practical necessary relevance. In the stead, to believe and proclaim Christ, suffices for heavenly salvation. The lack of discipline in Christian morals and social ethics, I therefore argue, is majorly contributive to the problem of operational truth within Igbo land.

The Indigenous Spiritualities and the Challenge of Social Ethics

The Igbo people have a rich and versed cultural heritage, often very complex to elucidate. One of the beauties and at the same time challenges of the complexity of Igbo cultural conundrum is the nuances in its philosophy. The Igbo has a unique philo-cultural hybridity. Igbo philosophy is very flexible and at the same time very stiff. Its uniqueness is not only in the application of flexibility or strictness but also in the conscious awareness of when and what warrants flexibility or strictness. Nzegwu argues that it is on this point that feminists and gender theorists derail (2004, 566).

Igbo wisdom is translational and relative. This is very well exposed in the ambivalences in its adages, arts, and anecdotes (Ofomata 2002, 345). The Igbo wisdom which says *eme ngwa ngwa, emeghara odachi* (An early deer drinks the cleanest water) is the same that would say, *onye buru chi ya uzo, ogbagburu onwe ya n'oso* (Never be faster than your God). The Igbo socio-cultural consciousness has always been about context and relevance. This is why their republican social structure seems to have sustained them so far (*Igbo enwe Eze*). The Igbo consciousness has a unique propensity to asserting differing positions as equally acceptable, giving cognizance to the strong innumerable intra/inter-ethnic distinctions within Igbo land. Yet, the awareness of when and what needs definite clarity solidified the communal structure of the Igbo societies.

However, another major factor which has sustained the Igbo societies in communality, instead of a social disintegration into individualism because of their republican mentality, is their social ethics (Nwosu 2011, 47). These social ethics functioned on the principle of consequentialism, and it was very effective. The society had its taboos – *Nso ala*. A breach of these taboos unleashed ripples of consequences beyond the individual, on his family and the entire community. It was not necessarily the supernatural unfortunate eventualities that kept the Igbo on an ethical leash. It was more the social consequence, and shame was one of the most potent instruments. Aja calls it the shame-orientated ethics, rather than the guilt-orientated ethics of the Christian faith (2006, 47).

It is almost the same principle of the 'woke' culture, especially in social media. If one digresses from the mainstream thought-line, one is mopped and stigmatized. One is shamed and even banished from the social space. Well, before the internet, the Igbo culture was very effective with that, in practical parlance. Shame, stigmatization, banishment, and other social consequences restricted people from a flagrant display of unethical behaviours. In other words, one can lead any life one wants within one's contextual and relevant interests. But one is not allowed to lead a life that would draw repercussions to one's family or community. This is what Ejikemeuwa and Onwudinjo meant when they argued that truth, in the Igbo cultural context, is both subjective and objective (2019, 520). One who stole did not just shame oneself, but the entire family or community. One who lied has damaged his/her communal trust and disgraced the family name. Generations would always refer to the family as a family of thieves or liars. Nobody wanted that. Till now, if something unethical is shared on social media, like a man was to impregnate his brother's wife, and it happened in Igboukwu, just for instance. If you check the comments you will realize that many Igbo people are unconsciously connecting it to the community and its people, saying, '*Hmm Igboukwu people, nawa oo*'.

Now, we live in a time when ethics and its values have been replaced by quick pleasure and money. The average Igbo seems to have no need for social ethics or fear of its consequence anymore. Consequentialism is gone. The social consequence from the indigenous corner dealing the cold hands of shame, stigmatization, and banishment on the individual and his/her family, and the consequences from the church corner

comprising fear of eternal punishment in hellfire, excommunication from the church community, rejection in the social life, including education, all had their grips on the ethical pillars of the society (Ilogu 1974, 143). The ideological or religious consequences of unethical behaviours are not the major hindrances to antisocial behaviours, and have never been. The social consequences are. So, in the absence of the social consequences, if one can hardly be banished or shamed, if there are no ripples of consequence on the family or community, if the society accepts and tolerates unethical behaviours, then it becomes easier to be dishonest than honest.

Conclusion

In a climate of comfortability in dishonesty, the question of truth becomes challenging. It is challenging because it is a confusing time. Rudeness is expressed as being woke, nudity is flaunted as body positivity, bad behaviours are accepted as zodiac signs and sauciness is justified as a mood swing. It is a time in which respect and politeness are discarded for bluntness and insolence. Fraud is considered 'hussling'. Gluttony is euphemized as 'foodie'. A philanderer is an explorer of all his/her options. Stupidity can be excused or justified with puberty. To be arrogant is now to be confident to be a swindler is to be a 'sharp guy.' But then to be truthful is to be judgmental. The danger is in the culture of the Igbo to function with a high sense of group consciousness. For the Igbo, if something is socially acceptable, or at least tolerated, then its intrinsic value as right or wrong has become irrelevant (Aja 2006, 47).

So, what would ensure this social ethics better; Christianity, the indigenous spirituality or a concatenation of both? Isiramen, for one, 'suggests an incorporation of indigenous spirituality in Business ethics, and a modernization of Igbo indigenous business ethical standards' (2015, 15). Ilogu argues that the combination of both perspectives did the work just fine decades ago. 'The fear of the punishment from the earth goddess, and from the structures of the community, which they had developed in their traditional moral upbringing, as easily transferred by the converts into the fear of the punishment in hellfire...' (1974, 143). Or, should a completely new social paradigm, different from the hitherto Christian and indigenous paradigms, be initiated?

Whichever it is, without truth or honesty, a society can only struggle with peace and harmony? 'The Igbo believes that truth brings life to any society and sustains a good relationship with God' (Eneze 2016, 103). Invariably, a culture that extols lies brings death and destruction. How Igbo would the societies remain if sincerity holds no operational social value anymore?

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