

The Concept of Igbo Ehi and Igbo Communalism: A Hermeneutical Approach

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Abstract

There is a high trace and deposit of communalism in the African socio-cultural setting, the 'I am because we are and the 'we are because I am' is a summary of who the African is. The Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria is not exempted in this communalistic way of doing things. The cow is a big symbol in the Igbo cosmology, it is a huge animal which an individual who is buoyant can purchase, but the communalistic cultural setting prevents the individual from consuming it alone. For every cow slaughtered in the Igbo community, the extended family members of the person have rights to the animal slaughtered. This is a way of bringing and uniting people together and it forms a very good avenue to good value. The research made use of the hermeneutic method in philosophy which implies making interpretation of concepts and unclear notions with regard to the cultural settings or the environment covered by the research. The research found out that the killing of cow that is the 'igbuehi' in the Igbo socio-cultural setting is a very significant event and also seen as the highest form of respect, done to the dead, to the kindred or to the town, but most importantly, in doing this, every member of the community has a right and a share to the slaughtered cow ranging from the major owner, umunna, umuada, nwanwa, the killers, down to as low as the sweepers of the compound. The killing of the cow seems like a row call in the Igbo land and serves as a way of bringing and uniting people together.

Introduction

Prior to the European expedition in Africa, and indeed the enthronement of Western-dominant socio-economic systems like capitalism and communism, communalism and communal living has been the mainstay of African life and culture over the years. Lands were held and farmed collectively, community work and development initiatives were undertaken by everybody, and even the social interaction of Africans reflected this predilection towards community and egalitarianism. By extension, this sense of belonging was instilled into new members of the African society through a variety of symbolic objects as well as activities, in order to prepare them for their future as parts of a collective whole, which was bigger than their individual activities and lives.

Being a grounded African society with strong communal leanings, the Igbo people and their culture are not separated from this overreaching African communalist ideal, with the lives of the Igbo from birth to death immersed in a complex framework of societies and activities geared towards preserving the sense of community among her people. From child naming ceremonies to elaborate marriage rites, from vivid and elaborate title-taking ceremonies to funeral rites, all vestiges of the Igbo culture have elements of a communalist spirit in them, and it works towards deepening this ideal among the people.

This paper seeks to analyze the concept of Igbo Ehi – Cow Killing – an important element of Igbo communal living, and the processes involved in it, as a reflection of the Igbo communalist culture. The research made use of hermeneutics method in Philosophy. It further proved how this simple, yet very symbolic activity is a very important signpost for Igbo efforts to improve relations between members of society by forcing them to literally eat from the same plate.

The Igbo: A Historical Exposé

The Igbo are an ethnic group that occupies the Southeastern part of what is now Nigeria. The Igbo territory lies to the east of the Niger River and can be geographically delineated between latitude 5° 45' degrees North and 8° 30' degrees East in Nigeria. Igbo land covers approximately 41604.2 square kilometers spanning across the five Igbo states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States, as well as parts of Delta and Rivers States in the rain forest region of West Africa. About 20 million Igbos live in the traditional Igbo region, but as a very enterprising people, a further sizeable Igbo population of about 10 million live outside Igboland. Many conjectures abound concerning the origin of the Igbo people. The most popular of these is the mythical account, which holds that Igbo people are descended from Eri, a divine figure who, according to Igbo folklore, was sent from heaven by Chukwu (God) to begin civilization at the site of what is now Nri, with The first EzeNri named Ifikuanim following directly after him (Isichei, 1997). Olaudah Equiano had pointed to a Jewish origin, claiming that "the Igbo people originated from the Hebrew" (Equiano, 1837). Other scholars still leaned towards a Hamitic origin, claiming that Igbos had originated from Arabs in Egypt. However, another hypothesis for Igbo origin is that of the Confluence migration, which holds that the Igbo had originated in an area about 100 miles north of their current location at the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers between five and six thousand years ago along with other kwa family languages such as Yoruba, Idoma, Igala and a few others.

Unlike most of its neighboring ethnic groups, the Igbo were traditionally not a homogenous society living under one central authority, but were rather series of villages scattered across the region, independent of each other. This culture of decentralization and democratic autonomy probably gave rise to the popular saying "Igbo enweeze" (Igbo has no king), and proved part of why the British had such a hard time bringing Igbo land to heel during the colonial era. However, despite the differences arising from autonomy, there is still a clear collective identity of being Igbo across all Igbo people derived from the language, as well as similarities in food, dress and cultural practices.

Igbo as a Communalist Society

On a broad scale, Communalism is conceived as a system that integrates communal ownership and federations of highly localized independent communities (Wikipedia, 2015). This definition is more in keeping with libertarian philosopher Murray Bookchin's depiction of communalism as the rational lovechild of anarchism and statism, with enough autonomy as to guarantee freedom, but also collective regulation to forestall anarchy.

"Communalism as an ideology is not sullied by the individualism and the often explicit antirationalism of anarchism; nor does it carry the historical burden of Marxism's authoritarianism as embodied in Bolshevism." (Bookchin, 2005).

African communalism however refers to a more individualized scale of communalism; the traditional way rural areas of Africa functioned in the past without formal hierarchies, with equal access to land and water resources, in a way that resembles forms of egalitarianism and socialism. Apart from the economic angle, African communalism is also a moral and ethical doctrine that encompasses relations among societal members based on human dignity, rights, and responsibilities (Ikuenobe, 2006).

The Igbo society is one that has always had communalist elements from pre-colonial to current times. The very structure of Igbo family as well as community life points toward a communalist mindset, with the good of the collective entrenched in the psyche of all members of the society. While Igbo familial relationships were based on blood in a patrilineal system, these blood ties were then interconnected with other non-blood ties to create a highly efficient framework of community that held the society together. The smallest social unit in Igbo life is the *Ụnọ* - the nuclearfamily consisting of a man and his wife (wives) and their children. This was followed by the *Obi*, which was the extended family and comprised all related family members living together in a compound. Then came the *Umunna* or kindred, which consisted of a close-knit network of males from various *Obi* who are

related through patrilineal descent, but too branched out to live in the same compound. At the same level is also the *Umụada*, which is the female form of the *Umụnna*, consisting of all females born in a particular *Umụnna*. In some Igbo societies, there is yet another branch of the *Umụnna*, called the *Inyom*, which consists of all the women married to the men of any *Umụnna* though for most Igbo societies it is considered part of the *Umụada*.

However, it is in the societal structures after the *Umụnna/Umụada* that the full extent of Igbo communalism can be duly appreciated. This is because after the *Umụnna*, blood and familial ties end, so there has to be devised another way to mesh these different family networks as parts of a functioning society. For most societies, this role is assumed by a monarchy or theocracy, but in Igbo land, these interconnected roles are filled by five distinct non-familial networks cutting across various families

Council of elders: this consists of the eldest members of each kindred, and they come together to deliberate on matters not restricted to one kindred.

1. **Council of chiefs:** consists of men (and women, in some cases) who had taken titles in the community, and hence were held in high accord for their economic and social accomplishments. Their duty was similar to that of the council of elders, with the only difference being that admission to this council was based not on age, but on recognition for wealth and laudable feats through titles.
2. **Age grades:** it consists of non-related members of the community born within a specific period in that community. Depending on the size of a community, the groups could either exist on a yearly, three-year or five-year basis. The age groups formed the fighting force of the community in cases of war, and also did most of the infrastructural and other labour activities of the community.
3. **Women's Association:** which consisted of the community's married women and wielded a power of its own on matters relating to the community market, taboos, marriage issues and training of young women.
4. **Secret Societies:** which were the religious arms of the society. Their members were carefully selected based on a number of painstaking criteria, and they wielded influence through fixing of festivals, masquerade activities, mediation of disputes, as well as other duties.

Hence, after identifying these cross-cutting structures that sustained the average Igbo society, we can deduce that there is no designated authority to dictate who gets what and who does what to the community, but rather a very fluid and effective communalist framework that seeks to harness the individual skills and contributions of every single member of the society, while at the same time looking out for the well-being of all members of that society.

The Practice of Igbu-Ehi in Igbo Culture

Igbo culture is one that accords great importance to ceremonies like birth, marriages, death etc. For many of these ceremonies and indeed for the celebration of different other milestones, the Igbo people slaughter cows which are used to make such events more exotic. For the purpose of this research however, we will focus on the Igbo practice of Igbu-Ehi within the context of funerals.

Igbo culture regards funeral rites and forebears almost as much as the living. According to Igbo cosmology, ancestors are believed to be very active influencers of the lives of their offspring. This has led to a focus on funeral rites, and the need to make them as optimal as possible in order to ensure the smooth transition from life to death.

According to Isichei (1977) "one of the greatest fears among the Igbo is to die and be thrown into the evil forest, receiving no burial rites". For them, this calamity means being banned from the company of the ancestors, an outcast of the other side of life following death. This symbolizes total rejection and excommunication by both the living and the dead. Isichei further added that;

"the ancestors – those who live well spent lives, die in socially approved ways, and are given correct burial rites – life in one of those worlds of the dead which mirror the world of the living. The living honours them with sacrifices. Igbos talk of a good death as belonging to those who lived a good life,

they see it as natural death in ripe old age, these groups are accorded funeral rites appropriate to their status to enable them to reach the ancestral land, where it is believed that they continue to live a life similar to their earthly life and eventually are allowed to reincarnate. Isichei holds that the ancestors watch over the living and are periodically reincarnated unlike unhappy spirits who died bad deaths (Isichei, 1977).

Igbu-Ehi (cow-killing) is the traditional Igbo practice of slaughtering a cow to fast-track the journey to rest for deceased adult family members. Although killing of cows and, indeed, other animals for meat without any symbolic undertones is as well a normal activity for Igbo people, the practice of Igbu-Ehi as referenced in this paper is not just for casual food purposes, but is a practice tied to the success of funeral rites and activities in Igbo land.

There are many unconfirmed views about the origin of Igbu-Ehi in Igbo land. Chief Emmanuel Enemuo in an oral interview hold that Igbu-Ehi started around just after the inception of the *NzenaOzo* titles as a mark of respect for these titled men when they are being buried. Chief Jude Ezeora however, hold that its origin can be traced to when early Igbo people stopped using human heads as accompaniments for the titled and royal dead in their coffins, especially during the advent of colonialism and Christianity to Igbo land in the mid-19th century. Initially, only titled men and priests were afforded this privilege, with cows only being slaughtered based on the accomplishments of the deceased. However, as the tradition grew, not only men with special qualities in the communities were buried with cow but also respectable parents who must have left children as part of their legacies. By the end of 1900, adults with children were given full funeral rites on their deaths complete with the slaughtering of a local Cow irrespective of whether they had any worthwhile contributions to their various communities. Hence by this period, titles, qualities or accomplishments in the community were no longer regarded as the criteria for the killing of cows for funeral rites, but rather the presence of biological children.

The children of the deceased are usually the ones with the responsibility for performing the Igbu-Ehi rite for their dead parent, though the *Umunna* and *Umuada* are vital parts of the process. This responsibility means that if the children do not accord the dead this honor, then none of them will be accorded the honor on their own funeral. It is held by some variations of Igbo culture that if the children of the deceased do not have the funds and resources needed to undertake the Igbu-Ehi rite by the time the funeral rolls around, they could kill a goat in order to suspend the Igbu-Ehi until when they are financially capable to kill a cow. Others believe that if the child(ren) does/do not have the funds to undertake the rite, the *Umunna* would contribute money to help them perform the rite.

It is important to note, however, that the Igbu-Ehi rite and the meat therein are not just for cooking food for the burial, because the meat has symbolic undertones, and hence is not lumped with other food items for feeding people at the funeral. There are various rituals connected to the Igbu-Ehi rite, with these rituals and procedures varying across communities in Igbo land. Achina, a town in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State will be used as a case study here. In Achina, before the son buys the cow, he first formally informs the *Umunna* about his intention to kill a cow for his parent with kolanut and drinks at a meeting of the *Umunna*. Depending on whether the Igbu-Ehi rite is running concurrently with the funeral or if it is one done for a long dead parent, a date is fixed for the killing of the cow, usually after the funeral. On the day of the rite, gun salutes are also prepared because it is thought that they scare away any spirits blocking the way of the deceased to a dignified rest. The cow is tied and laid on its side, atop a collection of banana leaves. The *Umunna*, *Umuada* and all those related to the deceased are expected to be present. Kolanut is broken over the cow and all gathered eat. The eldest daughter – Ada of the deceased comes along and makes a knife or stick mark on the cow, to symbolize that she is part of the process. So also does the *Okpara* (the first son). After this, the cow is then killed and the meat cut up into three huge parts— the head, the neck and the rump region. The meat is then shared among all the units with the *Umunna* getting the head as well as the hind parts. The *Umuada* gets the waist region symbolizing that they are an important arm of the *Umunna* in running the clan. The youths, from whom came the grave diggers and volunteers for other

domestic chores get the neck part, while the in-laws as well as maternal relatives of the deceased also get a part. After the sharing of the meat for the different constituent traditional organizations, the meat is then cut up into small parts and kept on the banana leaves for all to see, and then all those in the *Umunna* come and pick a share based on age, starting from the eldest to the youngest. The same is also done for the *Umuada*. However, there are those who are forbidden from eating the meat of the Igbu-Ehi cow, such as those seen as reincarnations of the deceased, as well as those who are due to perform the Igbu-Ehi rite for their own dead ancestor but are yet to do so.

Hence, it can be seen that the practice of Igbu-Ehi is one that has implications for the living and the dead. For the dead, it is regarded as an avenue to secure smooth passage to the ancestral realm. It is believed that without this practice, the dead would be punished and be rejected from the company of the other ancestors perpetually. For the living, it is an opportunity for them to ensure smooth passage of the spirit of their loved one, while also being an avenue for healthy interaction among kinsmen.

The Igbu-Ehi rite is so symbolic in Igbo culture that even on occasions where a wealthy member of the community kills a cow for personal merriment, this sharing formula above still subsists. Such that even after taking out the parts to be used for personal consumption, the other parts as outlined above goes to the members of the *Umunna* and *Umuada*.

Igbu Ehi: A Microcosm of Igbo Communalism

It has already been established that communalism is the undergirding bedrock on which Igbo culture is built. The political structure and organization of the *Umunna* as well as the larger Igbo community show a predilection towards shared ownership of identity, resources and ideals. To better understand how the concept of Igbu-Ehi functions as a pointer towards the Igbo communalist spirit, it is important to understand the place of the individual in Igbo society from birth to death. In Igbo society, it is believed that the individual does not exist by himself, but rather exists as part of a tight-knit network of kinship that transcends the self. From birth, the child is seen as being born into *Umunna*, with the birth regarded not just as a blessing to the parents, but to the whole kindred. Growing up, the child is formally integrated into the kindred on his/her naming day, with the kindred becoming a very significant stakeholder in the child's life. This provides the basis for the Igbo saying "*ofu ony eadighi azunwa*" one person does not train a child. When the child grows into an adult and is ready for marriage, it is still not seen in Igbo culture as a union between two single individuals, but rather as a perpetual bond between two unrelated families and kindreds. This is why great importance and recognition are accorded to in-laws in Igboland, as they are assumed to have a stake in a family's success through relation by marriage. At death, the full extent of the Igbo collective ideal is appreciated, because it is regarded not as a loss for one person to bear alone, but as a huge loss for the whole kindred. From the time of death, the whole kindred come to mourn and comfort the children or close relations of the deceased, and they are also duly involved in the preparations for the funeral. The kindred provide those who dig the grave, those who cook and undertake other preparatory chores for the funeral, while also assisting through financial resources and other means as needed.

Hence, we see that from birth to death, the Igbo individual is not one that exists in isolation, but one that is a single part of a significant whole that works towards the whole being of all its parts, with those parts also working in different capacities to preserve the whole, in essence, communalism.

In the matter of Igbu-Ehi, Igbo communalism is seen at its apex. In every stage of the Igbu-Ehi process, there is a distinct shift towards a sense of community and shared values. For example, even before the cow is killed, the deceased's child has to bring his intention to the *Umunna* for approval, showing that it is not a venture that he wants to undertake on his own, but rather a collective action whose idea he is pitching to the kindred. This overwhelming sense of community continues with the activities on the day of the Igbu-Ehi. With all the *Umunna*, *Umuada* and in-laws expected to be present, this shows that everyone that has a stake in the dead person comes to help secure his safe journey to the underworld, while also serving as a means of showing support and solidarity to the grieving children of the deceased in their loss. This practice which allows every eligible member of the kindred to get a share of the meat underscores the very essence of Igbo communalism, which is

the consideration of the well-being of all members of the kindred, and conscious efforts to work towards this well-being. This goes to show that the cow being slaughtered does not mean that the members of the kindred are starving of meat. It rather serves as an avenue to further strengthen the bonds that hold the community, in this case the kindred, together.

It is pertinent to reiterate that the practice of Igbu-Ehi, while being largely part of funeral rites in Igbo land, is not restricted to funerals in some cases. Killing of cows also occur in some joyful instances such as New Yam festivals, opening of new houses, taking of a title, and even birth of a new child. While the procedures for the Igbu-Ehi in these situations are not the same with that of funeral rites, the underlying principles still remain the same— the cow(s) are slaughtered and shared by the kindred, symbolizing that the good news that precipitated the Igbu-Ehi did not happen just to the individual, but to the whole kindred itself, and that the sharing of the meat is a collective celebration for such good news.

Conclusion

The Igbo culture is one that has prided itself on being largely republican, while also seeking to cater for the well-being of its members. This investment in the well-being and progress of the component parts of the collective shows itself in a number of manifestations, starting from the very makeup of family and community ties, with preference given towards each individual contributing to development in their own capacity, instead of a central authority dictating to which extent each individual contributes. This communalist tendency is perfectly portrayed in the Igbu-Ehi practice, which, at its core and in the context explored in this research, brings kinsmen together to collectively clear the way for the eternal rest of their deceased kinsman/kinswoman, while also partaking in the subsequent feast without any ill will towards each other. Hence, it can be seen that Igbo communalism is one that is buried deep in the consciousness of every Igbo person, and finds expression in even the most unlikely of situations and things.

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