

IGBO PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE VIS-À-VIS THE PROLIFERATION OF PRAYER HOUSES IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

A person or group of persons is known and identified by the philosophy of life the person or group treasures. Philosophy of life has to do with the general principles that guide an individual or group of individuals. It has to do with the ideology that helps individuals to understand and interpret the world. Studies have shown that Igbo philosophy of life is summed up as community consciousness, hard work, competitiveness, adaptability to change, determination to success among other things. These are some of the qualities that characterize Igbo philosophy of life. Today, the proliferation of prayer houses in the southeast Nigeria is growing in geometric progression. Most of these prayer houses lay more emphasis on miracles, divine intervention and devil possession. Employing the philosophical method of phenomenology, this study observes that the proliferation of prayer houses in Igboland – southeast Nigeria – encourages laziness, disaster, family division, etc. and as such constitute a serious threat to the hard earned philosophy of life of Igbo people. The study therefore recommends some mechanisms to checkmate the excesses and the negative influences of these prayer houses in Igboland.

Keywords: Igbo, Philosophy of life, Prayer Houses, Southeast, Nigeria

Introduction

Every person or a group of persons has some peculiar marks of identity. This personal or group identity can be seen as a manifestation of the cherished values

of the individual person or the particular group. In Nigeria today, Igbo people are well known simply because of the peculiar qualities they exhibit. When a non-Igbo interacts with an Igbo person, even without formal introduction, he (the non-Igbo) will find it easy to identify the Igbo person because of the ways and manners Igbo people reason and behave. This is simply because of the nature of Igbo Philosophy of Life.

On another note, it is a general knowledge that every human person enjoys natural rights, otherwise known as Fundamental Human Rights. These are the basic rights which every human person is entitled to. These rights “are basic to human existence and necessary for man’s self-fulfillment and happiness”¹ Among the fundamental human rights are rights to freedom of worship and freedom of association. This implies that people are free to choose their mode of worship and where to worship provided that their choice and mode of operation do not constitute a problem to the society. Experience has shown that many people in Igboland today go into the business of praying ministries for varied reasons. There are many self-acclaimed bishops, priests, pastors, apostles, evangelists, etc. at every nook and cranny of Igbo society. These self-acclaimed men of God establish prayer houses at any available space. There is rapid growth of prayer houses in Nigeria, especially in Igboland – southeastern part of Nigeria.

The mode of operation and preaching of the managers of the mushroom prayer houses constitute a source of concern to the rational minds of the researchers. Therefore, this paper is set to investigate the challenges posed by the proliferation of prayer houses to the cherished Igbo philosophy of life. The paper begins with a general look at the notion of Philosophy of life and Igbo philosophy of life. It further beams its searchlight on the proliferation of prayer houses in Igboland and also the attendant problems associated with the proliferation of prayer houses in Igboland. The paper ends with a conclusion.

An Overview of Philosophy of Life

Before delving into the discussion on the notion of philosophy of life, it is pertinent that we take a brief look at the general notion of philosophy. Etymologically, the word, philosophy, is derived from the root words: *Philein* which means love and *Sophia* which means wisdom. Therefore, from its etymological perspective, philosophy is understood as love of wisdom. “To be a philosopher is to be a lover of wisdom.”² Philosophers generally are always in

love with wisdom. Philosophers do not claim to be wise men but simply as those who are in love with wisdom; those that pursue the acquisition of wisdom wherever wisdom can be found. T. U. Nwala reports that Pythagoras was the first person to refer to himself as a philosopher in preference to being called a wise man.³ In this sense, philosophers do not claim to know everything as it is generally misconceived in some quarters, but they have interest in searching for wisdom and also the acquisition of wisdom. This position is corroborated by Agudosy thus: "... to be a philosopher is to be a lover of wisdom, for the philosopher does not de facto claim to be wise or to have possessed knowledge, but he is one who is eager to learn about all things."⁴ In this sense, wisdom encompasses anything that is knowable by the human mind. Philosophy entails "knowledge, experience of life, proper technique of handling situation, a discriminating sense of values or all these together."⁵

Having given a brief overview of the etymology and nature of philosophy, it is very important to note also that the nature of philosophy is understood in two senses: formal and informal. The formal sense of philosophy has to do with what academic or professional philosophers do. It is in this sense that philosophy is regarded as a rational inquiry into whatever is insofar as it is.⁶ C. B. Okolo gives clearer view on the formal meaning of philosophy:

Philosophy in its academic or professional meaning is a critical enterprise, sometimes dynamic, a quest, a search, indeed; one would even define it as a spirit of evaluative explanation or inquiry into all areas of human experience, of the world in which we live, man himself and his place in the universe ... in short, philosophy carries out a critique of daily experience in quest of truth of all existence as it is rationally possible.⁷

One important thing to note is that in its formal sense, philosophy is seen practically as a rational and systematic inquiry into whatever there is. However, our major concern is not on the formal sense of philosophy and so we have to turn now to the informal sense of philosophy.

The informal sense of philosophy is seen as the loose sense of philosophy. Here, philosophy is understood as a worldview. This is what is generally referred to as philosophy of life. It is the sum total of one's beliefs, values and assumptions which can manifest itself as a result of one's interaction with one's environment.

It is simply a product of human experience. Philosophy of life, as understood in this study, is concerned with the wisdom of life especially when one is engaged in interpretation and evaluation of what is most significant and meaningful in life. It is the principle that guides people's life either as an individual or as a group. This is what informs, guides and controls people's approach to life.

Philosophy of life is understood as a worldview. It is seen as a google or lens through which one sees or interprets the world. It is in this sense that Enyeribe Onuoha observed that "it comprises a set of values, concepts, attitudes and images which guide man's perception and interpretation of facts and events."⁸ He further stated that philosophy of life as a worldview is "a mental map of the universe".⁹ T. U. Nwala provides a more comprehensive understanding of philosophy of life:

The complex of belief, habits, laws, customs and tradition of a people. It includes the overall picture they have about reality, the universe, life and existence, their attitude to life and to things in general; what they do and think of what life is, what things are worth striving to attain; what man's place is in the scheme of things.¹⁰

The view of Nwala above provides us with a clearer overview of the notion of philosophy of life as understood in this study. It is in this sense that we hear people say: "My philosophy is this or that". When people talk of their philosophy in this sense, they are actually referring to the principle that guides and controls their perception and interpretation of the world. Every person or group of persons is expected to have guiding principle(s). One thing to note is that a person's or group of person's philosophy of life will certainly help to build the individual's personality or the group's social identity.

Having taken a brief look at the understanding of philosophy and philosophy of life, the next subtopic shall focus on Igbo philosophy of life.

Igbo Philosophy of Life

It is an existential fact that something cannot stand on nothing. In this sense, it is pertinent that we should have, at least, a faint idea of Igbo people before delving into Igbo philosophy of life. For sure, there are varied accounts about Igbo people. Be that as it may, C. C. Mbaegbu reports that "a good number of scholars

are of the opinion that the term “Igbo” may stand for a collection of a people; or connote a language. So that the people are “Igbo” their land is “Ani” or “Ana Igbo” (Igbo land or country) and their language is ‘Igbo’.”¹¹ In this regard, the word, Igbo, is used to refer to the people and also the language of the people. N. J. Obiakor asserts that as a people, “the Igbo occupy the east and west of the lower Niger. They inhabit the Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states of the southeastern region of the contemporary Nigeria. The Igbo are also found in parts of Delta, and Rivers states in the south-south region of Nigeria.”¹² The concern here is not a detailed account of Igbo people but simply to give an insight on the geographical location of Igbo as a people as the basis for our discussion in this subsection.

We have already noted that philosophy of life has to do with a set of principles that guide people’s lives either as individuals or as a group. Igbo have unique and characteristic principles or qualities that distinguishes them as a people. J. O. Oguejiofor relates that Igbo philosophy of life “consists of the ensemble of qualities which writers on the Igbo people, starting from the Igbo exslave, Oladuah Equaiano, has pointed as prevalent among the Igbo people.”¹³ The point emphasized by Oguejiofor is that Igbo philosophy of life has to do with the conglomeration of qualities that are identified with the Igbo as a people. One important thing to note is that a person’s personality is highly dependent on the values the person cherishes. And so, it is easier to identify a person’s philosophy of life from the person’s ways of life. This is the same with the Igbo philosophy of life.

Igbo philosophy of life is derived from the experience of Igbo people. This is made manifest in the ways and manners Igbo people perceive and interpret the world around them. Some of the qualities that characterize Igbo philosophy of life include hardworking. Igbo are not known as beggars. They seriously believe in ‘aka aja aja n’ebute onu mmanu mmanu’ (translated to mean: no cross, no crown). This spirit of hard work is anchored on the desire for achievement. And so, every Igbo person is always success-oriented. You can easily identify an Igbo in Nigeria and elsewhere because of Igbo relentless spirit. Igbo people are not known to be lazy.

Igbo people are highly entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurship is all about wealth creation; the ability to turn waste into wealth. Some people erroneously say that

Igbo people love money too much; but this is simply a misconception. The fact is that it is in the spirit of an Igbo person to be entrepreneurial. They are creative and innovative. It is very hard to find a city in Nigeria that one will not find an Igbo business person. Igbo are unique in doing business. Where other Nigerians cannot go, the Igbo person will go there as long as it will bring money and food to his table. Experience has shown that Igbo people have good business acumen as exemplified in their philosophy of life.

Another quality that characterizes Igbo philosophy of life is adaptability to change. The nature of Igbo philosophy of life is such that it enables them to adapt easily to difficult situations. They hardly take no for an answer as long as they are convinced in what they do. In discussing Igbo philosophy of life, Oguejiofor recounts: "Among the Igbo, the spirit or philosophy of life has sometimes been viewed in the negative light, and sometimes less negatively. The Igbo have thus been described as stubborn, troublesome, headstrong and ambitious."¹⁴ Community consciousness is another quality that characterizes Igbo philosophy of life.¹⁵ Igbo people believe in 'onye aghana nwanne ya' (translated to mean: let no one leave his or her brother or sister). Every Igbo person is always conscious of his or her root - the community where he or she came from. The understanding of Igbo community consciousness is amplified in the philosophy of *Igwebuike*.¹⁶

Igbo philosophy of life, as discussed so far, captures the basic belief system and ways of life of Igbo people. Attempt has been made so far to outline some of the qualities that sum up Igbo philosophy of life. In the next subtopic that follows, we shall take a look at the proliferation of prayer houses in Igboland and thereafter focus on the effects of the various and numerous prayer houses on Igbo philosophy.

Proliferation of Prayer Houses in Igboland

It was J. S. Mbiti who said that the African is notoriously religious.¹⁷ There is no doubt that the human person is not only a rational being but also considered as a religious being. This explains why the human person makes effort to understand the world through the means of religion. Religion becomes a means of finding solution to human needs and problems. And so, there exist some churches, mosques, shrines and temples. Our concern here is on churches with special emphasis on prayer houses.

When we talk of the proliferation of prayer houses, otherwise known as healing ministries or solution grounds, we are referring to the multiplicity of priests, pastors, men and women of God, evangelists, apostles, etc. who claim to have answers to all human problems. In the contemporary Igbo society, there are a thousand and one prayer houses. Hardly would a person pass any street in Igboland without seeing at least one prayer house, healing centre or solution ground. Every corner of Igboland today is charged with “men and women of God”. Both the orthodox and unorthodox priests and pastors are seriously competing for relevance in Igboland today. In the past, it used to be only the Pentecostal pastors that engage in praying ministries, but today the orthodox priests and pastors are now involved in full force. In Igboland today, prayer houses exist in warehouses, family houses, uncompleted buildings and any available space. New prayer houses emerge almost on a daily basis.

One thing common among the prayer houses is their overemphasis on miracle, deliverance, family liberation (oru ezi n’ulo), and gospel of prosperity. It is a fact of human experience that illness and diseases have been with mankind for ages; they have been inseparable from human history. But the managers of the prayer houses claim that every sickness and mishaps are products of the evil spirits, witches and wizards. And as such, they emphasize on miraculous intervention on everything. Many people troop into these prayer houses in search for solution to their problems. Another common feature of these prayer houses is overemphasis on demon possession. They see devil in almost everything. And so the need for deliverance and family liberation. Most times, believers and adherents are required to pay a huge sum to enable prayer warriors to do fasting and also to engage in the actual prayer. Experience has shown that the owners and managers of these prayer houses have caused a lot of problems to many individuals and families.

Among the common features of prayer houses in Igboland is preaching of the gospel of prosperity. This is “a redefined prosperity which connotes not faithfulness or prosperity in virtues but overwhelming monetary superabundance invariably complemented by steady income that grows in pari passu with tithe payments and offerings.”¹⁸ The prosperity preachers are usually known for these maxims: “poverty is not my portion”, “poverty is a curse”, “my God is a wealthy God and so I must be wealthy”. The managers of the prayer

houses make effort to detach suffering and hard work from human experience. The point here is that the rate at which prayer houses multiply in Igboland today is quite alarming and disturbing to any sane mind. The multiplicity can be attributed to a lot of factors, namely, economic hardship, poverty in the land, arrogance, doctrinal disagreements, frustrations in life, among others.¹⁹ However, a detailed discourse on the factors for the proliferation of prayer houses is not the focus of this study.

Challenges of Prayer Houses on Igbo Philosophy of Life

As earlier observed, the managers of prayer houses in Igboland place more emphasis on demon possession, deliverance, miracle and gospel of prosperity. This exaggerated claim constitutes a serious threat to Igbo philosophy of life. The proliferation of prayer houses is a cankerworm eating deep into the fabrics of Igbo philosophy of life. Instances abound on how the so-called pastors have dislodged the reasoning cap of many Igbo people. Some Igbo people prefer to move from one prayer house to another from Monday to Sunday without making effort to go to work or to attend to their business. They are easily brainwashed to believe that God is their provider and as such, wealth is of God. This, in the view of this paper, is one of the ways of making Igbo people to be mentally lazy as against the quality of hard work and entrepreneurial spirit of Igbo people. Some Igbo people no longer accept suffering and hardship as part of existential life. Any form of suffering is seen as the work of the enemies. The so-called ministers of God have sown the seed of discord in many families today. Their overemphasis on demon possession and evil spirits made them to attribute every problem to evil cause. When someone's business is not moving well or when a woman is having challenges in pregnancy, they (the so-called pastors) would always and easily say that either the father, mother, brother, sister, father-in-law or mother-in-law is responsible. This type of attitude has killed the Igbo communal spirit which characterizes Igbo philosophy of life. The simple point here is that the proliferation of prayer houses in Igboland has affected deeply the Igbo spirit. People see the establishment of prayer houses as a quicker means of making money. A person whose business is failing would easily turn his shop into a prayer house instead of making effort to revive his business. Everything now is all about prayer and less emphasis on hard work and discipline. R. G. Ikeazota opines that this kind of attitude can be very dangerous.

Economic activities have been stalled by those who claim that economy is worldly. What matters is preaching the gospel ...

many unguarded individuals have been deceived to accept that hard work is not necessary for wealth. As a result of this, many able bodied individuals who should have been gainfully employed spend time praying in the church in total abandonment to the development of economy.²⁰

In the name of religion, the managers of prayer houses have resorted to deception in a bid to woo their adherents and admirers. This is against the Igbo philosophy of *aka aja aja n'ebute onu mmanu mmanu* (translated to mean: no cross, no crown).

Conclusion

So far, we have been able to highlight some qualities that characterize Igbo philosophy of life. This study does not claim to have made an exhaustive discussion on Igbo philosophy of life but simply to bring to the fore what we considered to be the salient qualities that constitute Igbo philosophy of life. Also, we have been able to establish that the proliferation of prayer houses in the southeastern part of Nigeria constitute a serious threat to the hard-earned Igbo philosophy of life. The multiplicity and mode of operations of the prayer houses have negatively affected the mental consciousness of some Igbo people and also caused them to think and behave unlike Igbo people. Some Igbo people now are becoming too lazy and are now over-depending on God's intervention in everything.

In the face of the challenges posed by the proliferation of prayer houses to Igbo philosophy of life, this study submits that Igbo philosophy of life should not be allowed to phase out. We therefore recommend that Igbo traditional rulers and elders should make it as a point of duty and calling to rekindle in Igbo people the spirit of hard work, self-sacrifice, entrepreneurship, discipline, etc. that characterize Igbo philosophy of life. The political elite should help to salvage the ugly situation. There is no doubt that poverty and harsh economic conditions foster the trend of prayer houses in Igboland. It is the position of this paper that prayer houses multiply in its geometric progression because of hardship, illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. Hence the need to reduce hardship and poverty; boost educational standards and create more opportunities for employment. This will go a long way to reduce the multiplication of prayer houses and their attendant consequences especially on Igbo philosophy of life.

More so, it is true that there is freedom of worship and also freedom of association, government should introduce proper licensing of prayer houses to checkmate their excesses. There should be laid down criteria for the establishment of prayer houses in Igboland. The managers of prayer houses should be made to undergo basic philosophical and theological studies to enable them broaden their horizon. Furthermore, the use warehouses, uncompleted buildings and shops for prayer houses should be banned. This is to ensure proper control of those that engage in praying ministries. Finally, all hands must be on deck to ensure proper revival and rebirth of the cherished Igbo philosophy of life. Posterity will never forgive us if we allow the proliferation of prayer houses to demean and erode Igbo philosophy of life. There is no better time to act than now.

Endnotes

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