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CULTURE AND FREEDOM: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE IGBO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY.

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ABSTRACT

"Culture and freedom" is a philosophical reflection that builds up a meta-ethical epistemology of the human person within the context of the Igbo African world view. Man is said to be a rational Being. However, freedom constitutes the very law of that rationality. This freedom is the sole determinant of his existential authenticity. It is the freedom to be expressed through the consciousness of responsible obligation for a creative initiative and choice. This is the basis for human rights, dignity and sanctity. Man gives vent to his rationality within the context of society and culture which may enhance or impede the freedom of the human person.

INTRODUCTION

Freedom as a concept of social thought has over the years witnessed a watershed of meaning. The concept however has become most prevalently a preoccupation with the moderns. Nowadays, it is very difficult for any social or political theory to dissociate itself from freedom, and not giving it one meaning or the other. The concept has acquired a traditional metaphysical meaning and a contemporary individualistic meaning. Each carries its own atom of truth, presumably, geared towards the maximization of the individual essence. Common to all conceptions of freedom is the ontology of the individual person. But, while some schools make this ontology supreme, others, subdue it to what they thought to be a superior value.

But freedom remains an essentially individual quality. On one hand, it is argued by the metaphysicians that what matters is the actualization of the individual within the community and that this could be best realized through the instrumentality of culture or custom in which a person is existentially born. The background to this thinking is that utter liberal conception of freedom, is purely negative and leads to volatilization of social life. On the other hand it is argue by the liberal philosophers that individual freedom is best achieved where no constraint of any kind exists to thwart the individual's efforts to achieve his desires.

The argument is not and should not be whether, the individual should exercise autonomy, but the value of such a autonomy that will either absolutise the individual or make some

infringements necessary. Our immediate concern here is to trace out the compatibility of the individual existence and the demands made upon him by his traditional Igbo society.

The idea of society evokes some ideas of constraints, but since the idea of individualism is harbored by the Igbo epistemology and metaphysics, the aim of this work is no more than a comparative venture. We are not however talking of freedom as an instance of socialist and capitalist controversy, but as a feature that could be discussed concerning peoples way of life, as they live in their cultural environment. It is therefore freedom as a phenomenon of culture. The effect of culture, tradition and the general organization of society upon individuals ability to determine for himself what he is to do and to become. 1

VIEWS OF FREEDOM

As a philosophical concept, there is no unanimity regarding freedom. Two principal ideas of freedom prevail in its history one which is called the liberal view, a negative conception of freedom sees it as the absence of constraint to the attainment of our desires. The other is a positive conception of freedom. It makes constraint a condition for the realization of our freedom. This is the view of the philosophical metaphysicians which sees freedom as a means of self-actualization. We shall treat two philosophers or thinkers as examples of each school.

Freud Sigmund "Culture Restricts Man's Freedom"

Sigmund Freud adopted a negative conception of freedom. His basic contention is that culture restricts freedom. His argument is a mixture of psychological and hedonistic view points. For Freud, the only measure for true freedom is pleasure and happiness which aim at the maximization of our instincts. People tend to adopt attitude of hostility towards culture because "...it is to blame for a great part of our misery, and we should be much happier if we were to give it up".² People become neurotic because they cannot tolerate the degree of privation that society imposes on them in virtue of culture ideals. Freud describes culture as the "...sum of the achievements and institutions which differentiate our lives from those of the animal and serve two purposes, namely, that of protecting humanity against nature and of regulating the relations of human beings among themselves..."³ Freud is right to acknowledge culture as a holistic concept. Culture therefore becomes synonymous with civilization and covers the "philosophy", science and technology", "Ethics", "Hygien" etc. of a people. What he calls "components of culture".

Freud would therefore agree that culture has accorded man the freedom with which he conquers and subdues nature and improves his social relations. But he maintains

a central pessimism in the midst of all these achievements. For him, they accord man "cheap pleasure" and increase his anxiety. Culture intoto, thwarts pleasure, and this is seen as a constraint which society imposed on the individual because "...it restricted their possibilities of gratification.4

The effects of culture on freedom is best described as the modification it effects on the known instinctual dispositions, which it is the economic tasks of our lives to satisfy. For instance, the renunciation which the whole of the ethical code has over sexual relationship in society. This is what he calls the "sublimation" of instincts. This cultural privation is to him risky because it may be certain of producing serious disorders. We may keep aside the gamut of criticism to which Freud's opinion is opened. For him, all the achievements of culture noted, it restricts our freedom to instinctual enjoyments through its ethical codes that regulate social life. This is the main reason why people grow neurotic. For the stoics and Christian moralists, it will be a greater show of freedom to suppress these feelings.

Malinowski Bronislaw "Culture is a Condition of Man's Freedom"

Malinowski subscribes to a positive conception of freedom. An utilitarian view of freedom, which subjects the idea of individual freedom to the collective aspirations of the community. He sees culture as the basis of emancipation of the human specie. Culture therefore accords human race the freedom "of survival"5, which enables man to conquer nature in its many ramifications. For Malinowski, culture implies directly and immediately an initial installation in freedom".6 He defines culture as ...The environment which gives man an additional control of certain natural forces. It also allows him to adjust his own response in a manner which makes his adaptation by habit and organisation more elastic and efficient.7 Culture includes, what man can achieve in physical terms and the situation in terms of laws and custom that sustain and foster this achievements.

The integral freedom given to man through the development of his cultural instrumentality is objective. "It consists in a more efficient and better founded-way of satisfying the innate biological desires of man, and in the indefinite extension in the range of human monility" 9. He opens that this integral increment in freedom, has its demands and sacrifices on the part of the individual.

Culture in its initial state, grants the freedom to live in "security an with the margin of surplus, while at the same time it implies obedience and submission to certain restraints. These restraint consist... in the rules, laws of custom and social give and take"10 In the absence of culture or the restraints it imposes, all the achievements would be eroded and it would be foolish to talk about the individual when the society is extinct. Through culture, man is born to a new freedom which he can only achieve by taking

up the chains of tradition. These chains are the instruments of freedom.

BASIC ASSUMPTION OF IGBO SOCIAL LIFE SYSTEM

1. *Community Consciousness*

The social life of the Igbo encourages the philosophical dictum "Esse est coesse" to be is to be with. Hence their emphasis on the individual need for community consciousness. This is stated in Igbo "otu osisi adighi eme ohia". This underscores the significance of "IKWU na Ibe" in Igbo social life. The Igbo as shown in the above wise sayings are very conscious of community life in society. The philosophical as is stated by J.P.C. Nzomiwu is that "...ethical duties are closely related to his citizenship and his membership in the community"¹¹ What seems then obvious is that this mass consciousness tends to submerge the individual freedom. The Igbo of course does not subscribe to an absolute individual freedom. At this juncture, we have to look at the Igbo concept of individuality, to see the much air of freedom he is allowed to exercise in the midst of this community "consciousness syndrome".

2. *The Concept of Individuality*

As the problem which we are probing is that of freedom, its significance is mostly unraveled in connection with the measure of autonomy, individualism, personhood accorded by a culture to an individual. However, we do not mean, the kind of individualism that fosters anarchy and hooliganism but which give impetus to initiative. According to Dine George, "individuality means all the characteristics that belong to an individual and that mark him out from others in a group"¹² This in philosophical anthropology is the concept of "personhood". "Mmadu". Mmadu is created by Chukwu who endowes him with distinctiveness exemplified in "akala-aka" - a physical manifestation of the principle of individuation on the palm of every person. Igbo metaphysics allows us to believe that man is a composite being, made up of matter and form, body and soul.

Dr. Emezie, in connection with the Igbo concept of person, affirms that "man is created by God... that God create each individual person... the spirit, "muo" is the real self directly created by God. The destiny spirit "chi" is a spark of the creator in man which assigns to each his personal destiny..."¹³

The "Obi", heart is the animating principle and seat of "affection and volition".¹⁴ Through this analysis, it is obvious that God endows each man with a personality, uniqueness which should transcend the realm of community control. But how far is non-interference with my "akalaka" promoted in Igbo organic social set up?

3. *Communalism*

Now within the framework of what we are treating, "freedom and culture" in Igbo

traditional society, we want to search deep into what can be described as a peoples way of life, to see and evaluate how much we can talk of the individual and his freedom. The totality of this way of life is what Mbonu Ojike,¹⁵ has called omenanism. What Dr. C.B. Nze would not like to be identified as "social movement" or crowd or mass behaviour,¹⁶ but a pattern of living, lived and practiced by a people.

This way of life is called communalism. The concept itself is a lived and practiced concept, it is therefore ineffably definable. From day to day living, it is the principle that determines the Igbo-African social life. According to Nze,¹⁷ the principle is at the root of economic and social relations and it governs property ownership and fathoms the depth of the interdependence and inter-relatedness of human beings in community. The principle is therefore pervasive of all spheres of life of the community. Communalism sees the whole community as a one big family. Every individual becomes either a "... brother or sister, father or mother, grandmother or grandfather, or cousin or brother in law, uncle or aunt or something else to everybody else".¹⁸ It does not stop at this, communalism makes authentic life a question of total identifiability of the individual with the community. The individual can therefore only be said to be because he is one with many. He exists in and through the many. To be human is to belong completely in a manner of complete resignation to the whole community. "The individual apart from the community is nothing real".¹⁹

African communalism sees life as a continuum, this is why the great family is not only made up of the living, but of the dead and the future generations. The link of communication is maintained and reinforced through rituals which maintain the cosmological equilibrium. The spirits of the dead serve "invisible but strong string"²⁰, that controls and determines affairs of the living. So, the Igbo social life principle has a deterministic metaphysics at its background. This readily explains why the elders and those who hold positions of leadership possess unquestionable authority, since they are considered very close to the spirit world and competent to transmit their orders. The dead consist the "supernatural protectors and guardians of social well being, the law and morals of the people".²¹ Again apart from this metaphysical determinism at the foundation of the Igbo social life, the Igbo social structure is highly hierarchical. This it is believed is at the best for the implementation of the principles of communalism. Wisdom and rulership are considered a sacred exclusive preserve of the old or titled men. This does not allow for easy diffusion of deliberation to cover all sectors, women included. So the Igbo believe in the inherent inequality of men and women. This of course is an aspect that elicits the question of the problem of freedom.

The communistic arrangement, permits the community to make unlimited demands on the individual. Demands which actually vitiate the uniqueness and autonomy of the individual as an "I". For instance in marriage, individual choice is

discouraged and there is no doubt that break down of families may result from the intervention of the community in this matter. When C.B. Nze says in the *Aspects of African Communalism*, that "in property ownership, as in marriage death or indeed any other sphere of life, the spirit of communalism is so strong and functional that one wonders how much of the individual is left to him"²², he confirms the fact that the individual is stifled in the Igbo social set up. No area of jurisdiction is left to him.

The individual lives a "totus tuus" life quite inseparable from the rest of his community, a life in the community, by the community and for the community. This stresses the element of total identification with the community to the point of synonymy. A unity that does not allow the individual to meditate on his uniqueness or act likewise. Communalism has its points the maintenance of social solidarity and of social life in the best possible way without the least marginalization of the individual. It helps the individual to realize his fullness as a social being. On the other hand, we cannot say that freedom is its major value of concern. It recognizes other values as superior to the freedom of the individual. For instance social cohesion and justice. So in communalistic thinking, the autonomy of the individual is not existent, since it is not itself an individualistic system. Communalism sees no sense in individualism, but is this position always conducive for the individual elements in the society?

Phenomenologically speaking, I feel a times to do things which I would not need to have anyone to interfere regardless of the saying that two heads are better than one. This feelings in the individual is quit real and need be given expression. Though social life warrants mutual interdependence and no doubt this mutual interdependence is given its best expression in communalism, the individual as a metaphysically real entity needs space of non-interference, "non-communalistics areas' of operation. The fact with communalism is that it tends to have a kind of psychological conditioning, effect on the individual.

Initiative and progress may be jeopardized as Mill argues, if we strictly argue that things must be done as the community wishes it. If we refer to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we recall the episode of Enoch's conversion and the wave of societal condemnation that followed, we can see how aversed communalistic thinking could be to change. An episode that questions the reality of freedom of conscience of the individual in a communalistic enclave.

There is even some suspected and real interference on the individual right and freedom to his life. Communalism abhors individualism and would not like the individual to map out and follow strictly his own ideas of life which might not even be antithetical to the spirit of communalism. This is most glaring in their strict obedience to the laws of precedence. The tendency of communalism is to swallow up the individual in the anonymity of the "they". Existentialist philosophers like Heidegger and Satre except

the philosopher of mass conformism Bubber, Stress the need for the individual autonomy as the gate way to authentic existence. This does not mean that man must be or is essentially anti-social, but that individuality is to an extent a measure of what is called "existentialist integrity". To maintain that "I am" only "because we are" and for one" to be completely dead to the corporate humanity of his forefathers"²³, is to loose sight of the richness of the individual. Communalism might neutralize individualism or make it redundant even totally preposterous. All these stem from simple factual truth, pragmatic and empirical efficacy of communalism but does not dislodge the truth that man is both social and autonomous and needs to be treated so. What communalism tends to forget in treating man completely as a social being, is that he is equally an indivisible substance of national nature. That he could drink on a purely individualistic like. To maintain that "I am" only because "we are" is to loose sight of this reality.

Dr. Nze arguing in favour of communalism, and from the perspective of choice as an instance of freedom, defines choice as "... something to do with desire, thought, will and appetite".²⁴ He further states that in communalism, choice and its motivation are dominated by the interest of collectivism. How therefore could the individual have chosen for himself? Since his actions are appropriated and even substituted by the actions of the collectivity? Though in communalism, "individual chooses for the community in choosing for himself and the community chooses through the individual choices of the members of the community", ²⁵ in the final analysis, it is the community that determines the choice. The individual choice becomes identified with what the collectivity choose for him. This riddle has a close affinity with the democratic despotic principle of Rousseau's general will - where it could be said that the individual, in depending totally on the will of the state is free in the highest sense. Igbo communalism does not allow freedom of choice, in the sense of allowing the individual the initiative to choose without any constraint real or imagined. That is, the choice originating and terminating in the individual.

Dr. Nze further maintains that the preponderance of the interest of the collectivity does not vitiate responsibility. I may say that the individual is however constrained and consequently responsibility reduced. However, freedom seems not to have been curtailed because of the impact of the system and the scale of values it engenders. The utility accorded the constraint outweigh the inconveniences it causes the individual. The point is not that it is not of great value to curtail the individual liberty in the interest of collectivity. However, there is a much more problem if an apparent curtailment is not recognized as curtailment at all. It is a curtailment only that it is taken over by a greater value.

CONCLUSION

From what we have discussed so far, it is obvious that the Igbo social setup subscribe to a positive idea of freedom. This idea has its value of giving prominence to social utility-harmony and peaceful co-existence. On the other hand, we are only adopting what is our appreciable way of life. But that does not make it an ideal form of freedom. The individual still remains distinct and needs some purely autonomous areas of operation. "In Igbo African communalism is never 'I' as 'I', but always "I" as in "we". It really "deprives the individual of the possession of his very soul".²⁶

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