

IGWEBUIKE, RELATIVISM AND THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

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Abstract

In the search for truth, how do we go about it? What is truth? Is it an opinion? Does truth have a universal characteristic or standard? Does it differ in socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-political terms? Truth is often seen as being in accordance with fact or reality. But that fact or reality can be argued by the relativists to be subject to change or only spurred for the moment. This present paper tends to look at Igwebuiké as a concept and see how the term as an Igbo worldview represents a universal search for truth in reality and how it relates to relativism. Is truth absolute or is it relative? The Study seeks to answer this and the related questions. For the purpose of this paper, the Igwebuiké Research method of inquiry was employed.

Keywords: Igwebuiké, Philosophy, Relativism, Epistemology, Truth, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony

Introduction

The Igbo term *Igwebuiké* can be used either as a word in contextual parlance or as a name of a person. Just as other contextual names as *Oguejiifo*, *Ejikemeuwa* (*ejighi ike eme uwa*) and *Ozoemena*, it strongly depicts life events and people's participation in or approach to it. To save us the hurdle of ambiguity, *Igwebuiké* literarily means "Strength in many." It is the concurrence of many as against the opinionated or individualistic attitude of the few in a given circumstance. *Igwebuiké* is just like saying the more corroborating voice or acceptance an event of life has, the more it can be seen as a fact or as having a popular stronghold or influence. In other words, something can be taken as truth if majority agrees or if it has a universal application or appeal as against a relativist or particular approach.

Igwebuiké is the belief that there is strength in collectivity, in collaboration, in solidarity, in unison, in agreement, in standing together, in working and achieving together. The more there is greater number of participation to reality, the more the tendency to arrive at truth or truthful conclusions. Relativism as a term is often seen as appraising reality in contextual or situated pedestal. Relativists believe there is no universal application of reality. What is good for the goose may not be good for the gander is their opinionated assessment of things.

In the search for truth, how do we go about it? What is truth? Is it an opinion? Does truth have a universal characteristic or standard? Does it differ in socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-political terms? Truth is often seen as being in accordance with fact or reality. But that fact or reality can be argued by the relativists to be subject to change or only spurred for the moment. This present paper tends to look at *Igwebuiké* as a concept and see how the term as an Igbo worldview represents a universal search for truth in reality and how it relates to relativism. Is truth absolute or is it relative? The Study seeks to answer this and the related questions.

The Concept of Truth: An Exposé

Truth is often seen as being in accordance with fact or reality. However, even at that, the concept of truth is still very much controversial as there is no absolutism on how different scholars view truth. Each of them has differing views as to how truth can be gotten or comprehended. Is truth universal or relative? These differing views succeeded in making the concept partitioned into many theories but chief among them are:

1. Correspondence theory of truth.
2. Coherence theory of truth.
3. Pragmatic theory of truth.

According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, much of the contemporary literature on truth takes as its starting point some ideas which were prominent in the early part of the 20th century. There were a number of views of truth under discussion at that time, the most significant for the contemporary literature being the correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic theories of truth. These theories all attempt to directly answer the *nature question*: what is the nature of truth? They take this question at face value: there are truths, and the question to be answered concerns their nature. In answering this question, each theory makes the notion of truth part of a more thoroughgoing metaphysics or epistemology. Explaining the nature of truth becomes an application of some metaphysical

system, and truth inherits significant metaphysical presuppositions along the way.¹

The basic idea of the correspondence theory is that what we believe or say is true if it corresponds to the way things actually are – to the facts.² Narrowly speaking, the correspondence theory of truth is the view that truth is correspondence to, or with, a fact—a view that was advocated by Russell and Moore early in the 20th century. But the label is usually applied much more broadly to any view explicitly embracing the idea that truth consists in a relation to reality, i.e., that truth is a relational property involving a characteristic relation (to be specified) to some portion of reality (to be specified). This basic idea has been expressed in many ways, giving rise to an extended family of theories and, more often, theory sketches. Members of the family employ various concepts for the relevant relation (correspondence, conformity, congruence, agreement, accordance, copying, picturing, signification, representation, reference, satisfaction) and/or various concepts for the relevant portion of reality (facts, states of affairs, conditions, situations, events, objects, sequences of objects, sets, properties, tropes). The resulting multiplicity of versions and reformulations of the theory is due to a blend of substantive and terminological differences.³

The correspondence theory of truth is often associated with metaphysical realism. Its traditional competitors, pragmatist, as well as coherentist, verificationist, and other epistemic theories of truth, are often associated with idealism, anti-realism, or relativism. In recent years, these traditional competitors have been virtually replaced (at least from publication-space) by deflationary theories of truth and, to a lesser extent, by the identity theory (note that these new competitors are typically *not* associated with anti-realism). Still more recently, two further approaches have received considerable attention. One is truthmaker theory: it is sometimes viewed as a competitor to, sometimes as a more liberal version of, the correspondence theory. The other is pluralism: it incorporates a correspondence account as one, but only one, ingredient of its overall account of truth.⁴

In epistemology, B. A. Cornelius noted that the coherence theory of truth regards truth as coherence within some specified set of sentences, propositions or beliefs. The model is contrasted with the correspondence theory of truth. A positive tenet is the idea that truth is a property of whole systems of propositions and can be ascribed to individual propositions only derivatively according to their coherence with the whole.

While modern coherence theorists hold that there are many possible systems to which the determination of truth may be based upon coherence, others, particularly those with strong religious beliefs hold that truth only applies to a single absolute system.⁵ In general, truth requires a proper fit of elements within the whole system. Very often, though, coherence is taken to imply something more than simple formal coherence. For example, the coherence of the underlying set of concepts is considered to be a critical factor in judging validity. In other words, the set of base concepts in a universe of discourse must form an intelligible paradigm before many theorists consider that the coherence theory of truth is applicable. It is the "theory of knowledge which maintains that truth is a property primarily applicable to any extensive body of consistent propositions, and derivatively applicable to any one proposition in such a system by virtue of its part in the system."⁶ Ideas like this are a part of the philosophical perspective known as *confirmation holism*.⁷ Coherence theories of truth claim that coherence and consistency are important features of a theoretical system, and that these properties are *sufficient* to its truth. To state it in the reverse, that "truth" exists only within a system, and doesn't exist outside of a system.

According to another version (the philosopher credited with the definitive formulation of the theory, in his book *The Nature of Truth*, published in 1906), truth is a *systematic coherence* that involves more than logical consistency.⁸ In this view, a proposition is true to the extent that it is a necessary constituent of a systematically coherent whole. Others of this school of thought, for example, Brand Blanshard, hold that this whole must be so interdependent that every element in it necessitates and even entails every other element. Exponents of this view infer that the most complete truth is a property solely of a unique coherent system, called the *absolute*, and that humanly knowable propositions and systems have a degree of truth that is proportionate to how fully they approximate this idea.⁹

Pragmatic Theory of Truth holds (roughly) that a proposition is true if it is useful. Peirce and James were its principal advocates. Utility is the essential mark of truth. Beliefs that lead to the best "payoff", that are the best justification of our actions, that promote success, *are* truths, according to the pragmatists. The problems with Pragmatic accounts of truth are counterparts to the problems seen above with Coherence Theories of truth.¹⁰ First, it may be useful for someone to believe a proposition but also useful for someone else to disbelieve it. For example, Freud said that many people, in order to avoid despair, need to believe there is a god who keeps a watchful eye on everyone. According to one version

of the Pragmatic Theory, that proposition is *true*. However, it may not be useful for other persons to believe that same proposition. They would be crushed if they believed that there is a god who keeps a watchful eye on everyone. Thus, by symmetry of argument, that proposition is *false*. In this way, the Pragmatic theory leads to a violation of the law of non-contradiction, say its critics.¹¹ Second, certain beliefs are undeniably useful, even though – on other criteria – they are judged to be objectively false. For example, it can be useful for some persons to believe that they live in a world surrounded by people who love or care for them. According to this criticism, the Pragmatic Theory of Truth overestimates the strength of the connection between truth and usefulness.¹²

Truth is what an ideally rational inquirer would in the long run come to believe, say some pragmatists. Truth is the ideal outcome of rational inquiry. The criticism that we don't now know what happens in the long run merely shows we have a problem with knowledge, but it doesn't show that the meaning of "true" doesn't now involve hindsight from the perspective of the future. Yet, as a theory of truth, does this reveal what "true" means?¹³

Having succeeded in exploring the concept of truth, although, not exhaustive, let us look at the concept of *Igwebuiké* and truth in Igbo ontology.

Igwebuiké and the Concept of Truth in Igbo Society

According to Kanu, *Igwebuiké* is partitioned into three words. The three words include: *Igwe* as a noun which means number or population, usually a huge number or population. *Bu* is a verb, which means is. *Ike* is another verb, which means strength or power. Thus, put together, it means 'number is strength' or 'number is power', that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force.¹⁴ Kanu believes that at the level of *Igwebuiké*, no task is beyond the collective capability. *Igwebuiké* provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations. As an ideology, *Igwebuiké* rests on the African principles of solidarity and complementarity. It argues that 'to be' is to live in solidarity and complementarity, and to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation. 'To be' is 'to be with the other', in a community of beings. This is based on the African philosophy of harmony and complementarity, which is the underlying principle and unity of African Traditional Religious and philosophical experience.¹⁵

Asouzu in his complementary philosophy of Ibuanyidanda, presents the African reality as “an all-embracing whole, in which all units form together a dynamic play of forces, which are in harmony with each other, by completing and supporting the other.”¹⁶ Asouzu further speaks of reality as “necessary complements of each other.”¹⁷ While describing the human society, Asouzu advanced that, “Human beings and societies exist only in relations.”¹⁸ The points being espoused here are that *Igwebuike* as a concept has a people-centred orientation. It is communal in scope and application. It is the existential feeling that the more the merrier. It encapsulates the essence of life which is the fact that no man is an island. It is in strength and numbers that society is built. It is in strength and numbers that people are able to interact and build a strong network of interdependence, diplomacy and culture.

In Igbo, truth is called *eziokwu*. *Ezi-Okwu* is a combination of two words: *ezi* meaning, correct, right or good; and *okwu* meaning word or speech. Literally, *eziokwu* means the right word, the correct sentence, the appropriate statement. In other words it is the correct response to a question, the appropriate intervention in an argument. In Igbo culture, when one wants the interlocutor to say the truth, he demands of him, *kwuo ezi okwu*. This means that the interlocutor should say the truth as he knows it or heard it or saw it. In this context, truth is correspondence between a statement or a fact or a concrete thing. Also among the Igbo, truth could be obtained by analyzing what a person says. If the analysis reveals that the statement coheres with a set of accepted facts or beliefs, then it is true; otherwise it is false.¹⁹

However, truth in practice may be suffering universal application. In Igbo culture, for instance, the idea of truth should be symbolic. Corroborating this notion of the problem of truth in Igbo culture, J. U. Ikegwu noted that Igbo culture has been jeopardized by colonialism and globalization and is on the precinct of dilapidation and extinction as a result of ignorance and disdain for cultural practices.²⁰ She noted that one of the things symbolic of justice and truth in Igbo land is the *Ofo*. The *Ofo* is the symbol of truth and justice. Thus, the Igbo sees one who holds the *Ofo* to be able to dish out truth and justice in a way that shows collective acceptance or community solidarity. The reason being that it shows the spirit of the community as an upholder of truth and justice.²¹ All the post-colonial indigenous scholars unanimously believe that *Ofo* stands for truth justice and authority. Their definitions and beliefs are in agreement with Ejizu:

Ofo bụ akara nke eziokwu, ikpenkwumọtọ, ikike ọchịchị, inwere onwe, ekpere ruru chineke ntị, n'ike dij' n' aka ụmụnwọke, na

Umụnna bụ ude; na Ofo bụ akara nke eziokwu, ikpenkwumọto, ikwụwa aka ọtọ, ike ọchịchi, na ikike igọ ma ọ bụ ikpere chineke na ndi mmụọ ekpere.²²

The above citation literally means that “Ofo is the symbol of truth, justice, power of leadership, freedom, prayer that reaches God’s ear, reserved power for the men and strength in kinsmen and Ofo is the symbol of truth, justice, righteousness, power of leadership, worship and prayer to God and the spirits”²³

N. H Echem noted that in *Igbo* worldview, truth is so valued that the axiom ‘*ezi okwu bụ ndụ*’, ‘*truth is life*’, has become commonplace. In this sense therefore, a liar is someone who negates the life principle which truth gives. For them, a man’s being is diminished or increased depending on the “quantity” and “quality” of the truth he possesses. Theory of truth in *Igbo* thought and life is not based on establishing ground for belief of propositional sentences in the language. Instead, it deals with the truth of knowledge expressed in propositional sentences.

For examples:

- My friend is sick
- God exists
- Gold is expensive.

An *Igbo* man would ask, whether is it a fact that; ‘my friend is sick’, ‘God exists’, and ‘Gold is expensive’. For the *Igbo*, truth is a quality of knowledge and not a quality of being, because of this truth is never possessed. Even though they believe and say that a man’s being is diminished or increased depending on the ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’ of the truth he possesses. What the *Igbo* mean here by possession of truth is that any person who presents things as they are supposed to be is said to possess truth.²⁴

The *Igbo* understands so well, what it means to possess truth. That is why they say, that truth can never be possessed. This is because truth is not a quality of being but a quality of knowledge. That is to say that the possession of truth which the *Igbos* are talking about is different from the universal possession of truth. The possession of truth, we are talking here, is not finding oneself in the totality of truth or in ‘definite’ truth. Possession of truth, we want to explain here is or could be likened to an organism in the atmosphere. I breathe truth always and everywhere. It is my very life. However, just as I breathe only a small part of the air so also I possess only a small portion of truth. For *Igbos*, truth is an

elusive and enigmatic concept. Either as humanity or as an individual, man knows very little of the property and internal energy of things. He can only extract some immediate values in relation to his proper need for feeding himself. His food is what he finds already in nature, so also are his habitation, clothing or even arms, example: the stone. What does man really know about the air he breathes or the sun that gives him light and heat? In fact, he knows very little or nothing about the secret Structure of his proper organisms, the laws, the coordination of their biological functions, the mystery of himself. He does not know his habitation – the earth – what it is, how it is, where it is, not to talk of the stars and the heavens. Consequently, the Igbo comes to the realization that certain truths are above human knowability.²⁵

The Igbo have the conception of both Mundane and Divine or Eternal truth. Mundane truth is reached through consensus, that is, it is 'socio-praxical', it often demands the requirement of pragmatic efficacy, verdict of oracle, visionary insights, ancestral transmissions and the words of sages and elders. Divine or Eternal truth belongs to the Almighty God. This type of truth can be revealed to man through the oracles, divinities, or elders who are inspired by the gods.²⁶ Following from the above points, among the Igbo, individuals are permitted to hold to their subjective truths derived from their personal conviction borne out of their peculiar experience. Objective truth is truth accepted after communal vetting through years of authentic tests. Hence, for the Igbo, the conception of truth is both integrative and analytic, it is circumstantial and absolute, and everything depends on the matrix of discourse.²⁷

As we have already stated, that the notion of truth in Igbo thought and life is vividly explained in the two major expression with which the Igbo describe the truth of a statement. That is 'Ezi okwu' and 'Ihe mere eme'. They are used to capture in totality, the notion of truth among the Igbo. Just as we said that the expression 'Ihe mere eme' defines what truth is for the Igbo; "Ezi okwu" gives the criteria to back it up. Just as in the case of correspondence and coherence theory of truth in Western epistemology.²⁸

Now, to our analysis of these expressions. On its own, the expression 'Ezi okwu' has no moral undertones. The ezi (good) in ezi okwu is not necessarily a moral one since it is not used in contradistinction to 'evil'. However, 'onye ezi okwu', that is, one who speaks the truth has great moral undertone for 'onye ezi okwu' is many times over preferred to the opposite: 'onye okwu asi'. However, the distinction ends here, especially if it is considered why 'onye ezi okwu' is in a

moral sense preferred over and above 'onye okwu asi'.²⁹ From the foregoing, one thing is clear: the Igbo view of truth is both subjective and objective. Subjective, in the sense that truth for the Igbo can be based on personal conviction of what is right. This is seen according to how 'onye na Chi ya so aga.' For instance, the Igbo name '*Muna Chim so aga*' aptly captures this subjectivism. Thus, at this subjective level, if one walks and works with his Chi, the outcome of event becomes a true reflection of one's destined path irrespective of how others may see or view those events. Thus, it becomes truth according to how one's 'Chi' wants things to go, according to conscience and moral rectitude. On the other hand, the Igbo also see truth in relation to communal or ancestral heritage. Truth is what has been long standing and upheld by the community down the ages. It is a composition of solidarity, unity, purpose, agreement and togetherness. Thus, where there is collective unity of purpose, the Igbos believe truth prevails and exist there. It is in this sense that *Igwebuike* holds water. Here, the idea of *vox populi, vox Dei* becomes also true for the Igbo. Truth becomes eternal because it has a universal appeal.

Understanding Relativism

We have looked at the concept of truth in relation to the Igbo society. Let us discuss relativism as a concept.

Relativism is the idea that views are relative to differences in perception and consideration. There is no universal, objective truth according to relativism; rather each point of view has its own truth.³⁰ The major categories of relativism vary in their degree of scope and controversy.³¹ *Moral relativism* encompasses the differences in moral judgments among people and cultures.³¹ *Truth relativism* is the doctrine that there are no absolute truths, that is, that truth is always relative to some particular frame of reference, such as a language or a culture (cultural relativism).³² Descriptive relativism seeks to describe the differences among cultures and people without evaluation, while normative relativism evaluates the morality or truthfulness of views within a given framework. E. Westcott argues:

Relativism is sometimes identified (usually by its critics) as the thesis that all points of view are equally valid. In ethics, this amounts to saying that all moralities are equally good; in epistemology it implies that all beliefs, or belief systems, are equally true. Critics of relativism typically dismiss such views as incoherent since they imply the validity even of the view that relativism is false. They also charge that such views are pernicious since they

undermine the enterprise of trying to improve our ways of thinking.³³

Perhaps because relativism is associated with such views, few philosophers are willing to describe themselves as relativists. However, most of the leading thinkers who have been accused of relativism – for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Peter Winch, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida – do share a certain common ground which, while recognizably relativistic, provides a basis for more sophisticated, and perhaps more defensible, positions.

Although, there are many different kinds of relativism, they all have two features in common.

(1) They all assert that one thing (e.g. moral values, beauty, knowledge, taste, or meaning) is relative to some particular framework or standpoint (e.g. the individual subject, a culture, an era, a language, or a conceptual scheme).

(2) They all deny that any standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others.³⁴

It is thus possible to classify the different types and sub-types of relativism in a fairly obvious way. The main genera of relativism can be distinguished according to the object they seek to relativize. Thus, forms of moral relativism assert the relativity of moral values; forms of epistemological relativism assert the relativity of knowledge. These genera can then be broken down into distinct species by identifying the framework to which the object in question is being relativized. For example, moral subjectivism is that species of moral relativism that relativizes moral value to the individual subject.³⁵

Concluding Reflection

In the beginning of this paper, we sought to construe *Igwebuike* as a concept and contrast it with relativism in the quest and search for truth and also to ascertain which of them is more viable. Truth is basically seen as correspondence to fact. However, can truth be absolute? Is truth universal in discovery and application or relative? *Igwebuike* represents universalism in Igbo ontological understanding. If there is strength in many, it follows that what is true holds water, what is true is strong enough to disprove what is false. It means that *Igwebuike* is objective because many agree to a fact of event or reality as against a subjective construal and approach to reality which is relativism. The truth of “We” has a stronger effect than the truth of “I.” That is why in the Law Courts, a person cannot by his own prove innocence except one or multiple witnesses say what is the truth

or what truly transpired. The Judge leverages on the outcome of the witnesses to pass a verdict or judgement.

Relativism is a personal, subjective approach to viewing, judging and evaluating things or reality without public considerations. Relativism is against universalism because it cannot be applied in all given circumstances. It is always about an opinion and truth in objective construal cannot be opinion, even though, some philosophers like Kwasi Wiredu has likened it to opinion.

Igwebuike is the philosophy that the "I" is subsumed in the "We." Although, at the existentialist level, this is contentious, especially as the likes of Soren Kierkegaard disapproves of the 'anonymous mass of they.' For the individual must rise above the crowd to find personal cum authentic existence. Be that as it may, this kind of existentialist thinking has its own merit in relation to authentication and personal development but not in relation to group and societal progress or development. For a community or society to truly evolve, all hands must be on deck. The *Igwebuike* philosophy can be likened to the building of a house in which one cannot be the bricklayer, welder, plumber, architect and labourer all alone or all at once. When many people become involved in the house project, it will be completely built with ease and in record time.

Therefore, in the search for truth and meaning in reality, universal approach is better compared to a relativistic approach. *Igwebuike* philosophy, as propagated by I. A Kanu, becomes a paradigm, a leeway to the search for truth and meaning in human existence and society because it has mass appeal. The adage: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am," best captures the idea that there is strength or power in many. Indeed, *Igwe bu ike!*

Endnotes

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