

Exposition of Reality in Igbo Ontological Framework

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Article History

Received: 27.07.2022

Accepted: 14.08.2022

Published: 04.09.2022

Abstract: The most prominent essence of this work is centred on the need for a more documented idea on the concept of reality in Igbo Ontology and by all means, helps to bring about profound knowledge and, therefore, contribute to scholarship. Admittedly, by philosophically analysing the past and the present practical contact with and observations of facts or events which leave serious impressions on the Igbo man in his universe, which is the main standpoint within which reality is analyzed in this project, one hopefully geared toward achieving to some extent the conclusions for the emergent African philosophy that goes over and above the Igbo tribal milieu. To this end, any student who wishes to carry out more studies on the concept of the reality in Igbo Ontology will invariably find this research work very expedient. It will serve as a valuable starting point or reference point. If this goal of provoking and inspiring further thoughts and studies on this subject matter is achieved, then the research endeavours would not be in vain. A qualitative research design was adopted for this study. We made use of data gotten from available literatures, unpublished essays, doctoral theses, journal articles and magazines. This thesis adopted the evaluative, analytic, historical and critical research approaches as means to achieve the objectives of the study.

Keywords: Exposition, Reality, Igbo Ontology, Categorization of Being, Unity of Reality.

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Philosophy as a problem-solving enterprise is conceived with lots of fundamental problems of reality, of which the interpretation of reality as a whole is its primary concern. Through the sensory perception, the world lies before us like a dreamland: full of variety, so beautiful, so steeped in the immemorial past, yet so new [1]. In its physical appearance, the world is marked by contrasts: consider the distance between the heavens above and the earth below. The orb of the sun, suspended like a fiery ball from above, shines by day and the moon, which gives milder and consoling light, brightens the night. The star that differ in shape and size, as human beings wonder at them, twinkle and add beauty to the darkness of the night. The mountains do not only contrast with the hills; both distinguish themselves from the valleys. The rivers run their courses and contrast with dry land that marks their limit. Birds fly and animals walk. More significantly still, human beings reason, and have the capacity to give order and meaning to the world. To this end, questions like-- ‘Is there any unchanging reality behind the constantly changing face of the earth; How did I and other things that surround me come into being; How do I account for myself and the world?’-- becomes imperative as a means at deciphering to a knowledgeable extent, the realities inherent in our world.

Furthermore, the understanding of reality by different people cuts across the nexus of their thought pattern, belief system and consequently, their attitude to life. To this end, this research work is concerned with the Igbo tribe of Nigeria, with special interest in her Ontology. However, one might be tempted to ask thus- Does the Igbo have a philosophy/metaphysics that should warrant an evaluation of her understanding on things as they are, in other words, the idea of reality? There is an Igbo metaphysics which penetrates and informs all the thought of the Igbo. This Metaphysics “dominates and orientates all behavior of the Igbo people” [2].

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CITATION: Peter Chukwuebuka Obianika & Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu (2022). Exposition of Reality in Igbo Ontological Framework. *South Asian Res J Human Soc Sci*, 4(5): 315-319. 315

If by 'metaphysics' we mean knowledge of the absolute, the totality, the immutable and eternal as opposed to the mutable and temporal, knowledge of the ultimate source of all beings; knowledge of the cause or ultimate foundation, knowledge of the real in their essence and not merely in their appearance; knowledge of what is not only accessible to the senses but knowledge of reality as reality, then we can assert with conviction that the Igbo have a metaphysics that is Igbo in nature.

The assertion that there is Igbo metaphysics is strongly defended by Edeh. For him, "(Igbo) metaphysics is that branch of Igbo knowledge which involves the conscientious search for an understanding of beings in their ultimate causes, an enquiry into the intelligibility and value of reality" [3]. To the Igbo, everything is real in so far as it is, i.e. exists. Reality embraces everything that is real. The Igbo universe is a precarious unity – all aspects of reality touch and interact, forming a unified whole. Delivering a lecture on African Philosophy, Abanuka postulated: "Reality is a multi-layered unity. It is manifested in many ways and in different degrees. The Supreme Being is real; Ancestors are real; Man is real. Reality includes animals, trees and stones. Nothing as a category of reality is real as well. Then same is true for eternity, space and time" [4].

By extension, Abanuka's classification of African Ontology, applies to the Igbo concept of reality as well. For the Igbo, everything that has existence is real and therefore belongs, so to speak, to its proper level of reality. It is therefore the attempt at investigating this concept of reality in the light of the Igbo Ontology that forms the background to which this research work is central.

2. THE IGBO ONTOLOGY

Metaphysics is differentiated from ontology by its basic or inherent features or essence, function and the extent of its area or subject matter that it deals with or to which it is relevant. Metaphysics is the critical study of reality. It is a critical reflection on all that 'is' or 'can be' [5]. It is sometimes denoted as ontology or the study or science of being. Be that as it may, the primary purpose for the notion of metaphysics is to assist us to accomplish our fundamental differentiation of the Igbo ontology. In that regard, therefore, we shall immediately proceed to consider what the Igbo Ontology is all about. This exactly is the contextual perspective on which reality is debated or analyses in this work.

Igbo Ontology on the one vein, centres its inquiries to the Igbo man and the reason of his existence or presence in the world. Igbo ontology for this reason is less ambitious in scope. Succinctly speaking, it is the study of the Igbo world with special reference to the concepts of being (what is) and force. Thus, such topics as the basic features of the ultimate reality for the Igbo, the fundamental features of beings or forces (as according to Tempels) in the Igbo cosmos, the interactions that exist between the sensible-visible and the supra-sensible and invisible beings, the hierarchical structure of beings in the Igbo world, the laws of vital forces and causality etc, comprise what we know today as the Igbo Ontology or Metaphysics, the science of reality in the Igbo world-view.

What is more, everything 'that is,' is because it has 'ike-ndu' that is 'force'; and the quality and quantity of this force, determine the nature of a being. 'Force' therefore is necessarily and essentially an attribute of being in Igbo Ontology. The appreciation of this reality of being according to Ogugua "is the springboard of the Igbo-African belief in the intricate relatedness, connectedness and interwoven-ness of reality" [6]. Tempels also avers that "The world of forces is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole net-work" [7].

3. THE CATEGORIZATION OF BEING

It is admitted that every reality has a force. However, all realities have not the equal amount of force. Consequently, the fact of the various degrees of forces is the context within which at the categorization of beings in Igbo ontolog is based. In view of the above, questions like—what basic kinds of beings exist in Igbo Ontological order? Igbo world is part of reality in general. If there are beings in the Igbo world, how then are the beings in Igbo world arranged in their hierarchical order? This will necessarily serve as the primary foundation to an overall recognition and distinct substantiation of the reality-question which is the subject matter of this academic work.

Nevertheless, Igbo Ontology is very unique from the view point that it is an an ontology that is man-centered (anthropocentric). Thus, this ontology can be basically classified into two main categories, namely---'The ndi anaghi ahu anya' (invisible beings) and 'The ndi ana ahu anya' (visible beings). Meanwhile, Igbo philosophy writers like Ogugua, Edeh, Onwuatuegwu and a host of others, classified Igbo Ontology broadly into three categories. These include 'Mmuo, Mmadu and Ihe' (spirits, humans and things respectively). However, within the ambiance of this study and necessarily for the purposes of well-ordered analysis and simplicity of structure, we shall undertake the categorization of all beings, following the 'levels of the real' (that which is) as enumerated by Abanuka. Hence in categorizing the manifestations of the real, attention is given to the different levels of reality insofar as their power is greater or lesser. Hierarchically, the categories are identified thus:

3.1. 'Chi-na-eke' (The Chi-who-is-creating) [8]

He is the creator-being who created everything and continues to add new ones. He is the source of 'Ndu' (Life), the vital principle in all levels of the real that defines their existence. God is 'Chi-Ukwu' (The highest Chi); an absolute name by which the Igbo express their knowledge of God as He is in himself, apart from any relation to creatures. That God is the highest in an absolute sense means that He is the unlimited fullness of being, the perfection of all virtues, and the source of morality. Also, He is the Supreme Being.

3.2. Divinities and Spirits

The Igbo are not restricted to the consideration of physical things. They go beyond the physical to establish the reality of the spiritual. The spiritual world is cloudily filled by the spiritual entities, the superior and inferior spirits and the ancestors (the living-dead). 'Chineke' is the creator of these spiritual beings. The earth goddess (Ala) is given the power of fertility so that people's food comes from its productive activity. She is therefore an extension of the divine activity and so is a god, a servant god to 'Chukwu.' In the same way, the sun god (Anyanwu), the god of thunder (Amadioha), and other gods, exercise powers delegated to them.

3.3. Ancestors (Ndi-iche)

Ancestors are those who have lived good life on earth but are now in the spirit world. They were involved in earthly affairs with their kith and kin. According to Abanuka:

They lived their lives and performed their good deeds among their people who hold them in great esteem because of the very remarkable and socially beneficial things these ancestors have done....For the community, ancestors dwell in in-definitude. Though dead, the ancestors are alive; living an atemporal existence. They are custodians and the promoters of the welfare of the community [9].

Ancestors are regarded and revered as part and parcel of their various communities. Appeal to ancestors arouses sense of belonging and requires the individual to uphold the unity and the solidarity of social life [10]. They are not worshipped but are venerated. Sometimes, visible masquerades represent invisible ancestors.

3.4. Human Beings (Ndi-Mmadu)

Man is the centre of creation and consists of body (ahu) and soul (Mmuo). Through the soul, he can share imperishable existence with the ultimate reality and ancestors, and inasmuch as he possesses body, human beings are able to physically interact with other beings that possess body [11]. Human beings consist of those living and those about to be born. Human activities call up response from the gods and have serious consequences for the inferior beings that may have to be exploited to assure the exigencies of mankind. As such, man is an active being with the spiritual aspects of 'Mkpuruobi'(seed of the heart or soul) and 'Mmuo'(spirit) to which are associated intelligence, feeling, emotion, conscience, will, thought, ability for understanding and the knowledge of vital relationships. It is believed that it is the spiritual aspect of man that reincarnates after death.

3.5. Reity (Ihe)

The principal distinguishing attributes of specific things on the plane of reity is their inability to be aware of their existence or to think even though they exist and have feelings. They do not possess cognitive faculty or power and so cannot think [12] in the proper connotation of the term. On this level includes—animals, plants, inanimate objects and elements. Admittedly, particular things on the level of reity serve as food and are used for medicinal and sacrificial purposes. Certain animals, trees, caves, mountains and other natural objects are often associated with spiritual beings and are therefore considered sacred.

3.6. Nothing (Ihe-Nkiti)

'Nothing' occupies the last but not the least place in Igbo Ontology. It does the important function of demarcating that 'which is,' from that 'which is not.' 'Nothing' is the absence of that which is not—the opposite of that which is. Thus, if nothing is, then something is not, and vice versa. "Nothing is related to particular things just as 'nothingness' is related to reality as a whole" [13]. Hence, in considering a particular thing, it is conceivable that it may or may not be [14]. But in considering reality as a whole, it is inconceivable that it cannot be. Hence, 'Nothing' is an ontological principle only inasmuch as it performs the function comparable to that of zero in mathematics, by marking off 'what is' from 'what is not.' For to say that a thing is and that the same thing is not, amounts to a contradiction. To this end, 'Nothing' as a principle says that a particular thing is not [15].

Worthy of note is, that all beings that exist, all essences, in however way they are conceived, are all subsumed under one or the other of these major categories above. There nothing within the Igbo Ontology is conceived outside of the three main categories.

4. UNITY OF REALITY

The Igbo universe is characterized by the belief in the unity or interminglingness of all levels of reality and the ordered and harmonious relationship among all beings inasmuch as they are the manifestations of the real. In Igbo universe therefore, the spiritual and material; the temporal and eternal, touch and interact; such that none is considered in isolation. Any disorder or disharmony is seen as an effect of an improper conduct on the part of any of the beings within the ecosystem. Once the cause is known, remedy must be provided since human existence and survival, depends on the proper maintenance of the balance and the harmoniousness within the ecosystem of Igbo-African milieu.

Following the same stretch of thought, the real as the real is 'itself' and not 'not-itself.' Therefore, in reality as reality, there is no opposition; it is undividedly itself, and is not divided from anything. Thus, it is one; it is unity. Distinction, composition and multiplicity are degraded forms of unity proper to finite beings. But 'Chi-Ukwu' as subsistent reality, does not participate in unity since He is the absolutely indivisible unity that makes whatever 'that is,' in the very way it is.'

5. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. EVALUATION

Philosophical search for ages has been geared towards knowing the solution to the problems perturbing different sections of reality as advanced by individuals or societies. This too has been the case for the Igbo philosophic society. Thus, our discourse in this project centers on the interpretation of reality as a whole as it pertains to Igbo Ontology. Thus, the Igbo in their unique language interpret reality as 'ife-dinu' (that which is; whether essentially visible or not). However, in this 'ife-dinu' is found the Igbo's varied understanding of 'ife ana ahuanya' (that which is and can be seen) and 'ife anaghi ahu anya' (that which is but cannot be seen). Thus, 'that which is' in the Igbo interpretation of the whole of reality, contains not only the physical, but also the non-physical realities which are not distinct to each other, but causally intermingle.

Having this in mind, therefore, the Igbo people strongly believe that the existing things in the world are made up of the opposites. Hence, the spiritual world and the physical world are clearly distinct from one another and yet they intermingle and interpenetrate each other. While the visible world on the one hand is the domain of humans and other creatures both tangible and the intangible, animate and inanimate; the invisible world on the other hand is populated with the Creator God (*Chineke* or *Osebuluwa*) other spiritual beings and the ancestors who as also act as intermediaries between the two realms of existence.

Concurrently, by reflecting on the different categories of reality as expressed in the Igbo ontology, the Igbo have been able to develop systems of belief, ideas, cultural activities and values that have given meaning to their conception of the universe. Thus for them, reality is a unity. All things existing in the visible and invisible worlds were created by 'Chukwu' - the apex and ultimate reality of all realities.

However, there is this idea of the Igbo that the non-physical reality is the origin of the physical reality. Edeh complimented this when he says that "whatever that is existing in the physical realm has first existed in the non-physical realm" [12]. To this end, the Igbo can be said to have arrived at the notion of, and belief in a spiritual world which is over and above a visible one through the idea of fortune and misfortune. To buttress this point, there is an Igbo saying that 'a bird that is dancing with relaxation beside a forest is pointer to the fact that what is beating the music is somewhere inside the forest' (Nwannunu na-agba egwu na ilo nwere ihe na akuru ya egwu no n'ime ohia); giving relevance to the Igbo conception of fortune and misfortune. More so, the causes of these two phenomena are not far removed from the invisible world of the spirits. The good spirits are the messengers of God and as a result are the conveyors of good fortune. In the same vein, the bad spirits on the other hand are the tune-players of misfortune [16].

Consequently, the Igbo adamantly uphold that for any man to be meaningfully successful in life and for his original destiny in this passing existence to be accomplished, he must necessarily maintain a good relationship with the good spirits [17]. More so, the good spirits willingly acknowledge human freedom. This impliedly shows that in a situation where a person repeatedly chooses to follow the way of evil, the good spirits will not compel the person to do otherwise, but would rather withdraw their protection from him which consequently facilitate his following a victim of the destructive spirits.

Following the above points, therefore, one can obviously conclude the fact that for the Igbo people, there is a practical unity of the empirical world and the invisible deified-unvarying world. It is in this milieu that an Igbo man just like every other African, is given birth to, realise his existential ontological possibilities and die his death [18].

5.2. CONCLUSION

Igbo people are naturally inclined to be more practical than speculative in their manner of existence. Nevertheless, in developing the concept of two worlds, they, in their characteristic pragmatic nature maintains the equal reality of the two worlds to the extent that the two worlds seem so materialistic. The spiritual concepts connecting the invisible realm is, therefore expressed in a materialistic sense [19]. On the practical aspect, this work will go a long way in informing the way Igbo should live their lives having in mind that the physical world as it appears to them is not the ultimate end of man's existence.

To this end, Igbo Ontology/Metaphysics has much to offer the Igbo just as Western Ontology/Metaphysics has much to offer the Westerners. Viewed from this perspective, Igbo Ontology/Metaphysics is not inferior to Western Ontology/Metaphysics. Both have something to contribute to the well-being of humankind. It is the belief of the researcher that conscientious study of Metaphysics in general will bring about the greater appreciation of the knowledge of the absolute and ultimate source of all beings. Thus, it will lead to a better grasp of the real in their essence and not merely in their appearance.

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