

# A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE WESTERN CONCEPTION OF MAN AND THE IGBO-AFRICAN CONCEPTION OF MMADU

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## **Abstract**

More often than not, people used the concept “*man*” as an English equivalent of the concept “*mmadu*”. To most people therefore, the topic at stake is uncalled for while to some others with philosophical frame of mind, it is interesting to steer their minds to a direction they never gave conscious thought to. In this work it will be shown as far as *locus philosophicus* will allow that the Igbo-African concept “*mmadu*” is not in any way synonymous with “*man*.”

## **Mmadu as a Symbolic and Symbolismic Being**

This research work will be started with a discussion of “*mmadu*” by reflecting on the following statement made by Umeogu (2000:35) with respect to “*mmonwu Igbo*”:

*The masquerade is a symbolical or spiritual or mystic existent, whose substance of being is a function of the reconciliation or synthesis of the material and spiritual worlds (ana mmadu na ana mmuo). The masquerade is a trans-substantive piece of the universe.*

What has just been said above vindicates our understanding of the concept of *mmadu*. *Mmadu* is symbolismic or spiritual in the sense that though there is a physical representation (body) that we see and to which depending on the circumstance of gestation and birth is given a name for proper identification and differentiation, there is an aspect of *mmadu* that remains spiritual, mystical (*mmuo*): Therefore the *mmadu* that is perceived with the sense organs is a symbolismic portrayal of the real *mmadu* within. This is so because though the body of *mmadu* remains intact, the departure of that inner and spiritual aspect, noticed with the stoppage of breathing, renders the body stark and still. Awolalu observed in Orita (1972:101) that:

*According to African belief man does not take his existence for granted. He accepts that he owes his origin to God and that he is the supreme symbol of God’s authority over his creation. His life and activities are, therefore, seen in a religious context.*

Igbo Africans and indeed all Africans believe that *mmadu*; is a supreme creature of “*Chineke*”. The various opinions (because this is what one may call them) on evolution be it spontaneous or otherwise are foreign to Africans. There are variations in the mythologies espoused, by various parts of the Igbo world.

These variations have as their common denominator that “*mmadu*” was created by “*Chineke*” whether at IHU CHINEKE shrine at Ezinihite Mbaise or elsewhere.

John Mbiti as quoted in Awolalu (1972:104) simply stated it thus “that God is the originator of man, even if the exact methods of creating man may differ according to the myths of different peoples.”

While the Western Scientists according to Tilhard de Chardin see man as an animal like others “so little separable anatomically from the anthropoids and so classify him among the same super-family”, the hominidae,” the African makes a thorough distinction between man and the lower animals. In fact, it is not just an insult but also a curse to call an Igbo man “*anumanu*” (animal). It is considered a complete depersonalization of the person in that “*mmadu*” enjoys an ontological existence distinct from the mere ontic existence of the animals.

On the composition of “*mmadu*” Awolalu, (1972:103) held that:

*Africans believe that man’s nature is partly material and partly immaterial. He is composed of body, which is tangible, concrete, and measurable (by which means he acts and reacts on his physical environment) as well as the immaterial entity, which is immeasurable and intangible. In this broad division into the spiritual, there are involved complex constituent parts of human natures, which are variously designated according to the various languages.*

“*Mmadu*” therefore is a composite of body and soul. This soul (*mmuo*) among the Igbo- Africans is the essence of life in man.[ And unlike the soul of the animal, which is mortal, the soul of man is considered immortal. Therefore to the Igbo- African, life in man and/ or of man is not just mere life which is common to both man and all living creations, but goes on to include the intellectual and moral faculties as well, This is another area where “*mmadu*” seems to add something in the African knowledge and view to the western conception of man.

### **Mmadu as a Being in Relation to Others**

*Mmadu* as the Igbo- African conceives him, is a being created in-relation to others and who must live in relation to others. This is the foundation upon which the sense of the sacredness of life, the sense of community/communal relations and the sense of hospitality is built. Westermann as quoted in Awolalu (1972:112) wrote that:

*African Society is characterized by the prevalence of the idea of the community. The whole existence from birth to death is organically embodied in a series of associations, and life appears to have its full value only in those close ties.*

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“Even the spirits” according to Mbiti as quoted in Nwala (1985:33) “are in the same geographical region as men.”

*Mmadu* is a being-in-relation-to-others who in spite of belonging to the community has a personality that is unique and which singles him out from the crowd and bestows upon him sense of responsibility. But his personality has meaning and relevance within the context of the community. Okolo (1993:6) quoted Placide Temples as having the view that:

*Just as Bantus (black African) ontology is opposed to the European concept of individual things existing in themselves, isolated from others so Bantu psychology cannot conceive of man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationship with other living beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it.*

*Mmadu* among the Igbo-Africans enjoys a “we existence”.

Nwala (1985:41) wrote that:

*In the drama of life, man is the actor while the pure spirits are the moderators and the lower forces and beings are the agents. Viewed from another angle, if life’s drama is a game of chess, man is the chess player, the disembodied spirits of the ranks of deities and ancestors are the referees while the animals, birds and other animate and inanimate beings (in fact, including the abstract forces) are the Pawns.*

**On whether Mmadu is Synonymous with Man.**

Having seen what *man* is and what the Igbo African conceives *mmadu*, to be, it behooves on us here to compare the Igbo man’s conception of ‘*mmadu*’ to the Western conception of man with a view to bringing out their similarities and differences. *Mmadu* as conceived by the Igbo- African is not and could not have come into being through evolution be it spontaneous or otherwise. He is a being called into being by Chineke through his thoughtful and creative act. Hence like Martin Lutter King Jnr, himself a grandson of an African slave in America, the Igbo- African bases his philosophy of human equality on the condition that no human being came into existence as a result of cosmic accident. Reason according to him as observed in Odey (1989:16) is that:

*To believe that human personality is the result of fortuitous interplay of atoms and electrons is as absurd as to believe that a monkey by hitting the typewriter keys at random will eventually produce a Shakespearean play. Sheer magic!*

*Mmadu* can include all that the West conceives *man* to be but also has some other additions. He is a being- with or a being in- relation. This being-with does not amount to the same thing with existentialism. Menkiti (n.y:164) put it this way:

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*African concept of man contrasts in significant measure with existentialism (which on the face of things appeared to be its most natural ally among the various western philosophies of the person) Jean- Paul Sartre says that “prior to the choice of his fundamental project an individual is nothing (and) will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes himself.”*

Such a statement according to Menkiti immediately evokes favorable comparisons between the African view of man and the existentialists view, both views being regarded as adopting a notion of personhood, or self- hood, as something acquired. But this, it must be warned, is a hasty conclusion to draw. However it must be noted that the Sartrean view, that man is “a free unconditioned being”, a being not constrained by social or historical circumstances flies in the face of beliefs. Given its emphasis on individual solely constituting themselves into the selves that they are to become, by dint of their private choices such a view cannot but encourage eccentricity and individualism-traits which run counter to African ideas of what the human person is all about.

Sartre in making this statement also assumed that man has complete independence from reason to seek “a free and spontaneously authentic existence”. Prof William Abraham reacting to this in his book *The Mind of Africa* opined that “if possession of reason is part of our nature, then we cannot be enslaved by reason as Sartre sometimes seems to suggest; for no entity can be enslaved by its own nature.”

Another area in which Sartre’s existentialism diverges from the Igbo-African conception of “*mmadu*” is on the area of freedom. While he postulates an equality of status between the infant and the adult in the making of free choice, in the Igbo-African view it is the other way round. As Menkiti(n.y:165) observed that (Sartre) put it that “man does not exist in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being free”.

He argued further that:

This collapsing of the ontological distinction between young child and grown man is an illegitimate and absurd move. Even assuming that Sartrean freedom is a *sine qua non* of the metaphysics of persons, how can children with their quite obvious lack of intelligent appreciation of the circumstances of their lives and of the alternatives open to them, choose rationally? Is a choice undertaken in childish ignorance a choice that is truly free?

If such a choice is truly a free choice then why are their laws removing responsibility and culpability from infants like the infant Relief Act etc?

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Commenting on this Anthony Menser as quoted in Menkiti (n.y:166) wrote that “it would seem that little remains of the freedom Sartre has been emphasizing ...; it is hard to see how the infant can be aware of what he is doing, and if not then it is odd to call him responsible.”

As it has been mentioned elsewhere, a human being is born a child but becomes African. Therefore to the Igbo-African, what makes one African is not merely the accident of birth but an imbibing of that spirit of being-with according to which one can develop according to the influences of the community. According to Luther-King Jnr. (1964:71) the Igbo-African has the view that:

*All men are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never become what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.*

Next, while the Westerner takes a look at a feature or another of a lone individual and by induction postulates it as the essential characteristic, which every entity called man must have, the Igbo-African has a different view. It has been observed by Menkiti (n.y:157) that:

*the African denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the environing community. As John Mbiti notes, the African view of the person can be summed up in this statement: I am because we are and since we are therefore I am.*

Iroegbu (1995:158) summed the meaning of *mmadu* up in three words “relatedness, basic self possession, dynamism.” He advanced further in his writing that:

*The individual is constitutively, that is by definition, relational. The African Weltanschauung portrays a totality of relationships. It is these relationships that are primary. Further, this network of relationships is given concrete expressions in all aspects of existence and its organizations eg the socio-political and moral structure is a series of relationship, which give the person his identity in the political community. The person is first and foremost member of his community. This has the force of saying that to be a person is to be related to, to participate in the communal existence. Existence is membership. The word that best defines this aspect of the identity of the person is **MMEKO**. This can be paraphrased as communion, communication, communicating, exchange, mutual dealing or contact with.*

Wiredu(1980:138) wrote on this that “to be is to be known.” But this is not in the manner and understanding of Berkeley’s “*esse est percipi et percipere*” (to be is to be perceived and to perceive).

Iroegbu (1995:159) argued that “to be known’ as Wiredu uses it is not mere conceptual apprehension, but is a conscious, concrete presence, participation in the existence of, and with other members of one’s community. In this sense, knowledge is relatedness.”

### **Conclusion**

From the exposition so far made, it follows that the Igbo-African conception of “*mmadu*” is not synonymous with the westerner’s conception of man. This is so because while “*man*” can mean a being that can opt out of the society, the Igbo-African finds no possibility of such existence for a being that is truly African. As has been stated already outside the community there lays no possible life because a man without lineage is like a grasshopper which has lost its wings.

Furthermore the Igbo-African conceives that a human being(*man*) is born and he becomes *mmadu* by imbibing the spirit of being-in-relation to others as a creature of Chineke(God of creation) and so finds no room for any of the obnoxious and “wild views” on evolution.

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