

VITALISM, COMMUNITY AND HUMAN EXISTENCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

There have been claims and counter claims on the points of divergence between the road to evolution followed by the African and that followed by his counterpart from the Western world. While most thinkers try to identify this divergence with the trans- Atlantic slave trade and its concomitant dehumanization of the African, the thrust of my paper is to show as far as I can that the fundamental difference centers on the Africans sense of community and communal relations. Unlike the Westerner to whom life is atomistic, the African exists and is relevant only within the context of his society. This sense of identity and solidarity with the society is the fons et culmen of the African being and time.

Conceptual Clarifications

Vitalism is from the Latin etymol: ‘vita ae’ meaning life. Life is the opposite of death; it is the quality of that which vital activity is still operational. Man has an ontological existence while the lower animals enjoy mere ontic existence. This could have informed M.Heidegger’s assertion that man exists while the lower creatures simply are. At the core of vitalism is the conception that God/Chineke is the author and source of all lives including human life. Borrowing from Aristotle (384- 322BCE) He (Chineke) is the ‘terminus a quo’ as well as the ‘terminus ad quem’ of our existence. He is a ‘causa sui’ as well as the ‘first cause’ and the ‘final cause’ of one’s being. This view is the opposite of mechanism.

The African is created and thrown into the world by Chineke. Being thrown without consultation, he has to seek how to exist, and how to realize himself in being. In this search and choice, the Igbo-Africa exists in the community. The community in question is amorphous and not atomistic. Hence Okolo, B considers mmadu as a ‘being-with or a being-in-relation-to-others’. He can only realize himself in and through his community thereby creating what a Spanish phrase calls clan vital. Onwubiko O. (1991,p.14) says:

The clan here is clan vital- “a living clan” (A living clan is better understood as its explanation –a community where real life is assured, where one can suffer neither social nor cultural alienation. It is a clan that is a live because life in it is human and humane. In another sense, the community offers the African the psychological and ultimate security as it gives its members both physical and ideological identity¹.

JPC Nzomiwu(1977) says that there is an ontological relationship existing between the members of the community because they share common ancestral descents. His words are:

*The Igbo community denotes first and foremost ontological quality of human relations. It is ontological insofar as all the members of the community are believed to descend from a common ancestor. Every man is linked to his parents on the natural level. He receives life from them, depends on them to grow up. His parents in turn are bound to their grand parents etc. This link which binds all the members of the same family by propagation is broadened to include all members of the community or clan who are believed to be descendants of the same ancestor. Every one considers himself a member of a definite community and as part of the whole.*²

This sense of the community influences all facets of the Igbo-African life be it religious, political, social or economic. On this note Iroegu P.(1966) says that “land for instance is held in common at village, and at times at clan levels. Cult deities are also common. Both factors depict a common destiny”.³

As already mentioned, the community is in no way atomistic. The members are united by a common ancestor, common deity, common customs and common way of surviving economically. Therefore it has been observed by Iroegbu P.(1996) that ‘the village is not mere collectivity of persons, but an enlarged extended family of the same ancestry.’⁴

A close communal link between different large families (constitute the kindred), and different kindred of the same ancestry make up (the village). Different villages in turn of the same ancestry make up (the town), and different towns of the same ancestry which forms the clan. This containing ancestral union accounts in part for the strong community spirit among the Igbo. Generally called Igbo communalism.⁴

This common ancestry is a strong tie that unites and unifies the Igbo world. These ancestors are believed to be concerned with the daily activities of the living. They are also contacted as intercessors before the highest God/Chukwu/Chineke. Onwubiko O (1991) puts it this way:

*The Igbo-African emphasizes community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity. Its aim is to produce and present an individual as a community- property and therefore must be community-protected.*⁵

Such culture that “must be community protected” includes being ones brother’s keeper and accepting “individual responsibility within a communal ownership and relationship”. An illustration of this is seen in the altruistic help, which Nwakibie rendered to Okonkwo, the protagonist in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Biko S. (1975) puts it this way:

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Poverty was a foreign concept. This could be brought to the entire community by an adverse climate during a particular season. It never was considered repugnant to ask one's neighbour for help if one was struggling. In almost all instances, there was help between individuals. Tribe, chief and chief etc even in spite of war.⁶

The sense of community among the Igbos includes free and equal participation of all members in the social, religious and political functions held at the Village Square or in the market square. Thus Uchendu V. (1965) avers that :

Community spirit is very strong among the Igbos. Almost from the first start, the individual is aware of his dependence on his kin group and his community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group to which he owes so much. He seldom, if ever becomes really detached from the group wherever he may live.⁷

The reason for the emphasis is to establish that though the Igbo-African is because he belongs to community such that he cannot opt out of his community for ever, his individualism and singularity is assured. Iroegbu P.(1996) further maintains that “his adherence to the *community* is constructive, not passive and blind”.⁸ He depends on the community, is right or wrong only with the context of his community, yet he is autonomous. This is why the Igbo give such names as Afamefuna (may my name never go into extinction) to his children. It is also common to hear the Igbo-African say “Onye na nke ya (every person on his own). They also say “Uche bu akpa, onye o bula nya nke ya. (Wisdom is like goatskin bag, everyone carries his own). This individualism of the Igbo does not contradict his sense of community. Njaka in Iroegbu P.(1996) summarizes what has just been stated thus:

The individual claims an extra ordinary autonomy within the society and it is his belonging to the community that helps him to develop his potential, his initiative and-drive for achievement, his originality and his ability to ward off inordinate self – ambitions which could remove him from the society's communion. His union within the community of persons gives him pride, boldness and individualism.⁹

Iroegbu P. (1996) expatiates more on this sense of autonomy. He says:

In autonomy the individual is free though relatively. Autonomy is a form of creative critical freedom possessed by the members of the community, which makes for the particularity and distinctness of the individuals. Yet, it does not turn them into atoms.¹⁰

Commenting yet on individualism but with reference to palm-nut products” or British and American trained elites who imbibed the western brand of individualism, Prof. Ayandele E. (1974) writes:

The individualism of the educated elite would have been good thing were it not a jarring one. Unlike the indigenous society where individualism was healthy in the sense that it integrated the individual in the corporate unity, the individualism of the educated elite made the society they were creating ever more atomistic. Theirs was a community of individuals that never succeeded in nucleating into small groups, how much less evolve into one single society with corporate attributes.¹¹

This is because of the fact that these elites retrained in the Western culture in opposition to their indigenous customs. Their education was in most cases community – sponsored. Hence the appellation “palm nut products”. Nevertheless, they disappointed their people. Onwubiko O. (1991) observes that “*they ostracized themselves from their very communities and thereby killed the community spirit.*”¹²

ContonW (1966) while leaving in search of the Golden Fleece received this advice from his father:

...Then my father went on to remind me that I had now started to climb a palm tree which was high and difficult to climb; that many were watching my progress, and many ripe fruit was awaiting me on the successful conclusion of my climb. He ended with a warning that if I failed to reach the top, those watching me, both living and dead, would curse me for failing them. On the other hand, if I reached the top in order simply to gorge myself with fruit I would surely become sick and fall to the ground and die. But if I returned to my people to share with them the fruit of my labour, then all would sing to my praise and thank me and honour those who brought me to life.¹³

This is the authentic spirit of the Igbo-African sense of the community. Writing on this sense of community, Maurier H. in Iroegbu P.(1996) says “*relation is constituent of the human person, without it, the human person is isolated, and falls into nothingness.*”¹⁴

From what has been said so far, the following points could be deduced:

The Cartesian Cogito ergo sum, the Kantian transcendental noumena, and the Rawlsian veil of Ignorance are alien to African thought categories which are most concrete, existential, and practical. Relatedness as defining (in part) a person is not an abstraction. It is a vecu.¹⁵

Maurier H in Iroegbu P.(1996) therefore concludes:

*The analyses (abstraction and confrontation of subjects) do not tally with African experience. A form of thought fundamentally relational is prevalent in this empire... presence is less an affair of consciousness than of life.*¹⁶

Referring to the prevalence of this sense of community among the Igbo-Africans, Achebe C.(1999) Sept 4th, Odenigbo lecture series says:

ihe Kwuru, ihe akwudebe ya. Oso ya ya buru Soso ihe onu o yi n onu. Nke a kpatara na mgbe a huru ihe ojoo ahubeghi na mbu; ndi Igbo na-asi na nkea bu ajo ihe n' onu oto.

Iroegbu P. argues that right from conception, the Igbo child enjoys a community. First is the community of its mother, then the community of the midwives, then the smaller group that comes around to welcome it into the world. Finally is the wider world in which and within which he lives and interacts. He therefore enumerates the following seven items as the constituents of the community. They are: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, race, colour and habits, common historical experience and common destiny. Expatiating on this, Nwala T. (1985) comments:

*The community itself has its being or existence defined by this common blood. The life of a member of the community is interwoven with the others through the common blood, which they share and through the web of economic and social interdependence, which practically exists in the community.*¹⁷.

Thus, human existence in the Igbo-African world is only understood within the context of the community. Mbiti J. (1971) summarizes this when he says, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am." Human existence is real only within the community, which is ubiquitous. This is why the Alozi proverb says "go the way others go. If you go alone, you will have reasons to lament".¹⁸

Iroegbu,P. (1995) himself an Igbo-African summarizes the Igbo-African sense of human existence as being-with in these words:

That community-consciousness resounded to constitute the backdrop of a person's realization of his consciousness as a person, distinct, but already immersed in one's community.

*At the level of personal or self-identity, the story is similar. My identity is partly constituted by the community. What I am is partly what the community has made of me. I do not have the definition of self pre-ably, apriori or outside community ties, obligations, care, love, rules and custom and tradition.*¹⁹.

This runs counter to the Western metaphysics of personality, where personhood is defined by “distinctness of the individual to the self”. Menkiti, I. () argues that “it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory”.²⁰

I shall conclude our discussion on Vitalism, Community and Human Existence by citing Abanuka B. (1995) who says:

*The community is the place for concrete relationships: through his roles and expectations in the community, the individual comes to a deeper self-understanding-first, he comes to grasp that inasmuch as he is a member of the community, he cannot live and act in disregard of the community's customs, laws and traditions. For it is these customs, laws and traditions which constitute the primary moral consciousness which informs customary conscience.*²¹

The community therefore is the custodian of the people's morality and is the only context within which life is human and reasonable in the Igbo-African world. Unfortunately people have through cross cultural contacts and imbibing of Western education with its concomitant exocentric attitude towards whatever that is African lost this African sense of community and communal relations. This to me is the beginning of the loss of identity and values that glare the African face today. That is where the rain began to beat us in the African world because no body can permanently sever from his roots and no one can bury his past forever.

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