EZIGBO MMADU: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE CONCEPT OF A GOOD PERSON IN IGBO WORLDVIEW

Chinyere Ukpokolo
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ตรวจสอบมโนทัศน์เกี่ยวกับ "บุคคลที่ดี" ในโลกทัศน์ของชาวอิกโบ อีกทั้งยังเห็นว่า "บุคคลที่ดี" นั้น ถูกสร้างขึ้นมาจากความสัมพันธ์ของมนุษย์ บทความนี้ยังได้นำเสนอว่า ความดีในความเข้าใจของชาวอิกโบ นั้นคือจุดสุดยอดของการสร้างสรรค์ของพระผู้สูงสุด และความงาม (ของการสร้างสรรค์)ก็อยู่ที่ตัวมนุษย์ในฐานะที่เป็นผู้กระทำการทางศีลธรรม การเบี่ยงเบนใดๆ ก็ตามที่หันเหไปจากอุดมคตินี้คือการลดฐานะของตัวมนุษย์เองจากจุดสูงสุดที่มนุษยชาติถูกจัดวางไว้ เมื่อเป็นเช่นนี้สำหรับชาวอิกโบ คำว่า "บุคคลที่ดี" จึงเป็นการจับฉวยและสะท้อนให้เห็นอุดมคติเหล่านั้นซึ่งจำเป็นสำหรับความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างกลุ่มและภายในกลุ่มด้วยกันเอง

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of 'ezigbo mmadu' (good person) in Igbo worldview. The paper argues that 'ezigbo mmadu' is constructed in human relationships. It argues that the Igbo people's understanding of 'mmadu' as the climax of the Supreme Being's creativity and beauty situates the human person as a moral agent. Deviating from that ideal is an aberration that reduces the human person from the pinnacle that humankind has been placed. And so, for the Igbo 'ezigbo mmadu' captures and reflects those ideals necessary for group and inter-group relations.

Introduction

Every human society has certain general framework of principles, values and norms or precepts with which people are categorized and placed in the moral scheme of things. It is on such templates that individual's actions and thoughts are judged good or bad, right or wrong. On this moral scale, everyone is placed, differentiating individual from individual, as well as group from group. This categorization is based on what the society perceives as the model of a good person and model for emulation, which in turn shapes the nature and direction of interpersonal relationships. The personalization of the model in this categorization is embedded in what the Igbo people refer to as *ezigbo mmadu*.

This paper attempts an anthropological exploration of what constitutes *ezigbo mmadu* (good person) in Igbo worldview with the intention of understanding how this shapes human behaviour and social interaction in traditional Igbo society. This is against the background of an exploration of the nature of relationship existing between the individual and the community in Igbo traditional society. The resulting questions are: (i) what is the nature of Igbo traditional society that provides the context for individuals and groups interactions? (ii) what is the nature of the relationship existing between the individual and the community in Igbo socio-cultural space (iii)What does the concept of *ezigbo mmadu* stand for in the people's construction of human relationships [iv] Finally, what are the likely parameters for judging whether a person is *ezigbo mmadu* (good person) or not? This paper provides answers to the above questions as it interrogates the moral or ethical issues that characterize human relationships in Igbo traditional society.

A Brief Comment on Igbo People

The Igbo territory is located in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The River Niger divided the land into two unequal parts, namely the eastern Igbo, which is located in the eastern part of the River Niger, and the western Igbo, (the smaller portion) located in the western bank of the River Niger sharing boundaries with the Benin people of the mid-western

Nigeria. The word, Igbo, as Uchendu (1965) noted, is used in three senses, namely the Igbo territory, the native speakers of the language, and finally a language group. Igbo language belongs to *kwa* language group of Niger-Congo family. Both Forde and Jones (1950) and Onwuejegwu (1981) have divided the Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria into sub-cultural groups. While Forde and Jones identified five sub-cultural groups, Onwuejegwu (1981) divided the people into six culture areas. Though the Igbo people speak one language known as Igbo language, there are dialectal variations. However, those who are closer in the language continuum tend to share greater mutual intelligibility. Nevertheless, the people share core cultural values such as *umunna* system, *ozo* title taking, marriage practices, *kolanut* hospitality, masquerade institution, white chalk custom, wall paintings and vigorous dancing steps (Onwuejegwu, 1981). The people are traditionally farmers and traders, while those in the riverine areas also engage in fishing. Staple foods include yam, cassava, and maize; economic trees include palm produce which yielded much foreign currency to the nation before the crude oil boom of the 1970s. The Igbo are known for their hard work, resilience and ubiquitous life style.

The Igbo people believe in the duality of human existence. Madu, (1996) summed it up this way:

> Traditional Igbo is convinced of the existence of two distinct but similar worlds – the physical world and the spiritual world. ... Whatever exists in the physical world has its counterpart, equally real, in the invisible, spiritual world (Madu, 1996: 145 -146).

The interaction of these two worlds implies that there is the need for harmonious relationships between the inhabitants of the two worlds. Traditionally, the people worship the gods of their ancestors, which include spirits and deities. They also believe in the Supreme Being whom they referred to as *Chukwu*, (the Almighty God) or *Chineke*, meaning 'God the Creator'. The Earth goddess referred to as *Ala* played important role in the people's day-to-day living. To the people, the Earth goddess is the messenger of the Supreme Being and she assists him in punishing the wicked and rewarding the just. As the earth is intimately close to

humankind, it is impossible to do anything that she is not aware of. The honour and devotion ascribed to the Earth goddess also owes to the fact that she provides humankind with food, herbs for curing sicknesses and diseases, and it is to the earth that human beings must return after death. As the interaction is inescapable, the people believe, one must endeavour to cultivate good relationship with the Earth goddess.

Igbo socio-political organization is based on the family which is predominantly polygamous, the *umunna* (patrilineage), the village and the village groups. When the Igbo talk of the family, they are basically talking of the extended family. The *umunna* is the basic political unit and the most important one for that matter. The village or the clan is made up of a conglomeration of many *umunna*. Members of an *umunna* claim the same ancestral lineage up to ten generations, and are headed by an *okpara* who is the co-ordinator of the affairs of the unit. The largest political unit of the Igbo is the *obodo*, that is, the town which is made up of a group of villages. In pre-colonial times, beyond this, the traditional Igbo person owes no allegiance to any other political unit. Leadership in traditional Igbo society is gerontocratic, that is leadership by the elders. The women groups which are basically the *umuada* or *umuokpu* institution (association of patrilineage daughters both married, unmarried, divorced) and the *inyom di* or *anumanu* (association of wives) are the two dominant women groups in the traditional society (see Ukpokolo, 2004 for a discussion on gender and socio-political organization of Igbo traditional society). The age grades are also significant and function as the executive arm of the government. In the pre-colonial period, their duties, among other responsibilities, were to carry out the instructions of the community leaders and execute the decisions arrived at by the general assembly.

The individual and the Community in Traditional Igbo Society

This section explores the nature of the individual and the community, and the relationship that exists between the two in traditional Igbo society. We view the individual in this study from the normative point of view, that is, the social and moral conception of a person. It is not that in Igbo worldview, the metaphysical conception of personhood is absent.

Rather, for the purpose of our study, the normative is more relevant to us as this is located in the social life of the people whose worldview we are reflecting on. We begin first by examining the nature of the community in Igbo culture, and then identify the interconnectedness existing between the individual and the community.

The Igbo conception of community is different from the Euro-American model. In the Igbo worldview, the community is perceived solely in terms of its communality. The Euro-American model, on the other hand, views community simply as an association aggregate of individual persons who share interests. This is in opposition to African conception of the community. In Akan culture, for instance, Gyekye notes that the community is "a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, biological and/or non-biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of the group and who have common interests, goals and values (Gyekye, 1992: 105). This is also applicable to Igbo culture. In addition, to the Igbo people, the community goes beyond human beings to include the living dead (or ancestors), the Earth goddess, the spirits and deities. Afigbo sums it up this way:

> In traditional social philosophy [of the Igbo] the 'community' meant the living members, the dead ancestors, and the convocation of the local deities and spirits. These deities and spirits were conceived as closely associated with and interested in the weal and woes of the unit (Afigbo, 1972: 34).

The members of the community, according to Igbo conceptualization, go beyond the physical beings to include the spiritual, the invisible. The Igbo people believe that all these participate and make impact in their day-to-day life. The ancestors, for instance, oversee their still-living relatives and guard them in their daily activities. Within this holism of tempo-spiritual relationship, the individual is located. Nwoga, for instance, observes that, in Igbo culture:

> The individual is a member of the community that sets the goals that have acceptability within the community. It

is the community that sets up reward and punishment systems. To a large extent, the individual in Igboland is subsumed within the requirement of the community (Nwoga, 1984: 58-59).

The individual is, therefore, bound to the values of his community because it is in this community that, as it were, he exists and has his being.

Anthropologists have observed that the impact of culture in the human person is the major distinguishing factor between a human person and an animal. Shared values and meanings integrate the individuals into a community (Gyekye, 1992). To participate in the social life of the community demands that the individual shares in the group-mind by imbibing those non-material or metaphysical aspects of the societal ideals inherent in the value system. It is these values, and how the individual live them out in day-to-day activities that constitute the parameter for the individual's categorization in the socio-cultural schemas. To be integrated, one has to conceive of these values as paramount, and in observing them in daily life one paves way one's societal acceptability. In this symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community, the action of the individual member can affect positively or negatively on the fortune of the community. Little wonder that when an individual commits an *nso ala* (abomination) like murder, or desecrating a taboo in the traditional pre-colonial society, it was the whole community that suffered the consequences, particularly when such an individual was not exposed by his family, a witness or even the community for necessary punishment or cleansing rituals to appease the gods. As a member of a community, therefore, the overriding interest of every individual within a community was to seek to live a good life within the conditions and standards set by his/her community.

To be perceived as living a good life in Igbo traditional culture, one is expected to inculcate and abide by the laid down principles of interaction within the community, and acceptable principles of wealth acquisition in the people's value system. These are the issues that allow for harmonious co-existence. The Igbo people also believe that without economic well-being, life is meaningless (Nwala, 1985). The non-material or metaphysical aspect of the people worldview is summed up in the tenets of *ofo* (*Detarium senegalense stick*). *Ofo* represents the people's moral

philosophy, the symbol of authority, justice and peace. *Ofo* also represents a two-dimensional approach to peace, that is human being to human being, and human beings to the ancestors/spirit beings. Whether in relating with one's spouse, children, friends, neighbours and associates or in the relationship between the leader and the led, the yardstick of moral evaluation is embedded in what ofo stands for. The people often say '*eji m ofo*' which literally means 'I'm holding an *ofo*' but which symbolizes one's claim of clear conscience or innocence in the face of accusation or suspicion. Of course, ofo's strengths are derived from the fact that it anchors on the people's customs and traditions known as omenana (or omenala/omenani), which literally means the 'doings of the land'. *Omenana* is an unwritten constitution that guides the people's day to day activities. The ofo simply re-echoes those principles and values inherent in the people's *omenana*. Conversely, the tenets of *omenana* re-echo the doctrines of *ofo*, which include justice, peace, honesty and the like.

Indeed, for someone to live in peace with the fellow human beings, he/she must cherish justice and have respect for the right of every individual member of his community in his daily relationships; his right to use land, for instance. This of course, is social justice. Okafor (1995), for instance, observes:

> The notion of right must be examined in the context and light of social justice. It is in fact from the taproot of social justice that individual rights in Igbo traditional setting draw nurture and strengths. And social justice demand mutual and reciprocal respect of rights and interests (Okafor, 1995: 77).

Although it is difficult at times to demarcate where individual rights and that of the community extricate in such a traditional setting, there are certain rights that are inalienable, such as right to use land. Among the Igbo, it is the community that determines the individual's right. As Gyekye rightly noted of Akan society of Ghana, it is within the context of the community that an individual person can pursue and achieve life goals, and it is this same community that determines what goals and values are pursuable (Gyekye, 1992; see also Ikuenobe, 2006). For this reason, the

individual Igbo person has unequivocal loyalty to his community, not only because his biological relationships and associational life are established within the community, but also and more importantly, the community harbours him and provides moral and psychological security, and above all, the community safeguards all that is precious to the individual citizen, especially land (Okigbo as cited in Madu, 1996: 148). Land provides food, herbs, sustains life and to the people, it also consumes life. It is a symbolic object full of ironies and contradictions. To the Igbo, land is animate. It symbolizes life, consumes life, and along the line, takes a religious significance, a goddess.

The *Ala* is the messenger of the Supreme Being who executes judgment and metes out punishment, especially when one contravenes the *omenala* of the people, which in itself represents the commandments of the Earth goddess. The belief in the Earth goddess is so pervasive that she is constantly invoked in conversations and speech. For instance, when told to carry out an activity which the addressee believes is wrong, he/she may assert, '*Nso! Ana b'ayi ekwekwa naa*', which means, 'Abomination! May our Earth goddess forbid'. The people believe that the fear of *Ala* is the beginning of wisdom. In pre-colonial Igbo society, religion was so pervasive in the daily life of the people that it was difficult if not impossible to draw a clear cut demarcation between the sacred and the secular. To the people, their religion was their existence and their existence was their religion (Madu, 1996), and the Earth goddess was a mediating force in this tempo-spiritual interaction. The metaphysical dimension of moral philosophy added ember to the moral character of the traditional Igbo person. The spiritual and the physical/social are intertwined in a symbiotic relationship that it was difficult to demarcate and concretely decide where one ends and another begins. In the execution of justice, the people believe that after all said and done, humans in their imperfection cannot adequately execute justice. The supernatural is, therefore, constantly invoked in the negotiation of social justice in human relationships. Little wonder, therefore, that the fear of the repercussions that follow evil conduct was enough deterrent for one to desist from wicked conduct.

Ezigbo Mmadu: A Socio-cultural Construction in Human Relationship

In this section, we explore the interpretations of the concept of *ezigbo mmadu* (good person) in Igbo worldview, and how the concept is constructed in human relationships. Every individual is intertwined in a web of social relationships that further define who and what the individual is. In order to fully appreciate the concept of *ezigbo mmadu* this concept must be seen in relation to the Igbo practice of morality and moral thought, with its implied dimensions of social recognition and responsibility. The concept, ezigbo *mmadu* can be linguistically analyzed as follows:

Ezigbo/ezi	good, correct, acceptable
Mmadu	humankind, human being, person

The word, *ezigbo* or '*ezi*' thus, means, 'that which is correct, good, or acceptable'. In the context of human relationships, *ezigbo* connotes such traits as sincerity, truthfulness, self respect, good nature, trustworthiness, fidelity, genuineness, fairness, dependableness, loyalty, faithfulness, and integrity. The concept *mmadu* can further be divided into two parts and analyzed as follows: *Mma and du or di. Mma* means 'beauty', while *du* or *di* means 'exists' (Otakpor 2006). *Mmadu* (human being/humankind), the Igbo people believe, is the climax or peak of Creation. Human kind is the summit of beauty and creativity. Of all the creatures created by the Supreme Being, humankind is the zenith. Nothing can equate him or surpass him. In humankind, beauty, goodness, comeliness, is exhibited in its entirety.

The opposite of '*ezigbo*' is '*njo*' or '*ajo*' which means 'ugly', 'bad', 'wicked', 'evil', 'lack of beauty', or 'comeliness'. When ugliness is used to describe an individual in human relationship, it is not the outward appearance that is being emphasized, but the the non-material aspects of the individual. That is character, behaviour, or conduct. The fact that the word mmadu means 'beauty exists' implies that the Igbo acknowledge that beauty is inherent in the human person. However, the people also recognize that this beauty can be lost. For this reason, when they say '*ajo mmadu*', 'bad person'. It means that though this beauty exists it can

be lost through bad conduct. This points to the fact that the beauty in the creature called 'humankind' is revocable if not cultivated and nurtured by the individual. To the Igbo, human beings are moral agents, and one is, therefore, accountable for one's conduct. This means that one can lose the beauty that the Supreme Being/God has bestowed on him or her, hence the need to nurture and protect it. For to lose the beauty is to lose the essence of human existence, and in the context of Igbo worldview one becomes a misfit, a deviant in the social world, and may even seize to be a member of the community. Depending on the gravity of this 'unfitness', one may be excommunicated. Hence, when an individual commits an abomination, certain steps will be taken before such a person could be reabsorbed into the different groups that constitute the collectivity. But first, the individual must acknowledge that he has contravened the laws of the land and confess his evil deeds following appropriate procedures, and if accused wrongly, proper procedure must also be followed. In Nanka, a local community in southeastern Nigeria, a respondent affirmed that in pre-colonial Nanka society:

> For confession to be made, a person has to go to '*Ana oji*' [a local deity in the village] stand bare-footed and swear that he did not commit a particular crime, and that if he did it, may our earth [Earth goddess] hold him (Pa Obuoha, oral interview, August 2005).

The implication is that the community has a space for social and spiritual purification/sanctification. According to the respondent, in a situation where the offender was not known despite all efforts to bring him/her to the open, the '*nze na ozo*' [titled men] would gather at '*ana oji*' (a local deity in the village, symbolising holy land) and began to render conditional curses: "He that did this thing [mention is made of the offence committed] let the Earth goddess hold him". The people would respond '*ofoooooooo*' which means 'So be it'.

Ezigbo mmadu is exhibited through responsible conduct. According to Mazi Udonna, a respondent:

> In a polygamous family, as a good person, the family

head must be able to coordinate his family, avoid shameful activities, for the sake of the family name. Despite rivalries in the polygamous home, he must be seen to be fair in his dealings with the wives and the children, recognize and respect the position of the first wife, for instance (Mazi Udonna, Interview, September, 2009).

When the people say, '*O bughi ezigbo mmadu'* that is, 'He/she is not a good person' or *O bu ajo mmadu meaning*, 'He/she is a bad person', such assertion occludes space for the one so referred, and determines his/her life's chances and access to social resources in that community. To deny the goodness in a person, is saying that such an individual lacks sincerity/truthfulness, self respect, good nature, trustworthiness, fidelity, genuineness, fairness, dependableness, loyalty, faithful, integrity, and reliability. In fact, the humanity in him is lost (Otakpor, 2006). The people often say that *Ajo mmadu bu ajo ofia* meaning 'A bad person is an evil forest'. In Igbo cosmology, an evil forest is a place that the corpses of the despicable people of the community were deposited in pre-colonial times. The corpses of those who had committed abomination were thrown into the evil forest. Such people were excommunicated when alive and denied a proper burial after death. They were, consequently, separated from normal human social life in this world, and life in the spirit world. In a culture where ceremonious burial was regarded as honourable and a way of ushering the dead into the abode of the ancestors and spirits (the people's concept of 'Heaven'], to cast someone into the evil forest can be likened to, in the Christian parlance, to physically cast one into Hell fire to rot with the Devil. Indeed, in traditional society the bad person was abhorred.
Concerning truthfulness, for instance, Otakpor asserts:

The importance of truth per se and truth-telling in human life and its affairs is so compelling that the Igbo believe that only those who have a passion for truth can be entrusted with the leadership of the community (Otakpor, 2006: 22).

As a respondent observed, "In Igbo culture, truth is expected

from everyone. Even when people are not on good terms, one is expected to speak the truth about the other person. This helps to maintain group harmony (Mazi, Udonna, Interview, August 2008). The people believe that the Earth goddess could strike a dishonest person dead or something mysterious could begin to happen to members of his family, depending on the gravity of the offence. The community recognizes and appreciates the good person. It is in the light of this that Chiegwe noted that the Igbo culture recognizes that:

> Opposing qualities hardly inhere in the same person; a deceitful person, for example, can hardly be fair or dependable; greedy and fraudulent person can hardly be kind and frank. ... it becomes clear, therefore, that the concept of 'truth', situated in a broad social context, takes on the attributes of conformity or correspondence to fact or reality as well as the qualities, dispositions and characteristics that are both personal and socially desirable (Chiegwe, 2006: 42).

In a communitarian society, therefore, to be an *ezigbo mmadu* one must, necessarily, submit oneself to the thought system and values inherent in such a society for one to be socially healthy.

In the context of our analysis on the relationship between the individual and community, a good person is also one who abides by the principles of communal interests and must necessarily exhibit those non-material qualities associated with goodness. Such a person stands for common good and when the self-interest conflicts with the common good, the overriding consideration is to promote common good. *Ezigbo mmadu* is that person to whom the members of the community can entrust responsibility knowing fully well that he/she is responsible, honest, trustworthy, and dependable. An *ezigbo mmadu* does not cheat or defraud people of their belongings and dues. An *ezigbo mmadu* does not relegate his role as husband, father, wife, mother, daughter, son, brothers and their children, and the in-laws but carries out the social roles and responsibilities as demanded of him/her by the customs and traditions of the people. He recognizes the power of the gods and ancestors and gives them their dues. He

does not pretend that humankind is completely self-sufficient. As the head of the family, an *ezigbo mmadu* was also the priest of his household. The *Ezigbo mmadu* is sought after whenever the need for third party consultation arises. It could be for the purpose of conflict resolution, peacemaking, or leadership. It could also be for choosing marriage partners, business associates or arranging for the apprenticeship of one's children. He is epitome of fairness and justice. As a business man he settles his apprentices when the time is due; he does not deprive the poor and the underprivileged of their rights and is courageous enough to stand for that which is right. For one to be *ezigbo mmadu* he/she must live a socially acceptable life, a life of integrity. A good person must not smear his hands with blood, that is commit murder or be an accomplice. He must, therefore, not be involved with homicide for punishment is from both the living and the ancestors. Indeed, to the Igbo, the concept of good can only be understood in the context of their social life. Issues of moral significance and value are based on communal principle of morality in relationships with others. For this reason, behaviour that militates against those values is frowned upon. Consequently, when one embezzles public fund, cheats one's neighbour, or refuses to settle terms with one's apprentice, such an individual is an *ajo mmadu* which is the opposite of *ezigbo mmadu*. Such morally bankrupt individuals were denied leadership positions in the community, which is the people's universe. For this reason, the individual Igbo person was conscious of the fact that his/her conducts were judged by the social and moral character in the people's thought system, and that his/her conducts in turn had impact on the extent to which the individual could further utilize his or her place in human relationships.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to interrogate the concept of *ezigbo mmadu* and situating it in the socio-cultural construction of human relationships among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. We have noted that the Igbo people believe that the human person is a free, rational moral agent and as such, responsible for his actions. Thus understood, the human person has the power to choose either to do right or wrong, to be

good or evil, to be selfish or altruistic, to be socially responsible or become a deviant. Nevertheless, whichever one the individual chooses assumes symbolic significance either to create or occlude space, determining the individual's life chances in that community. The Igbo, also, as we have noted, see humankind as created to reflect beauty in its entirety. Hence, the term *mmadu* means 'beauty exists'. The people further recognize that in regard to morality, it is in relationships (both temporal and spiritual) where the issue of good or bad can be significantly evaluated.

In the construction of intra- and inter-group relationships, those unwritten regulations encoded in the people's *omenana* were given due consideration. These are, in traditional Igbo society, the principles of law and justice. The judicial principle exists in two parts: human and divine laws. These human laws guard human relationships to promote common interest. Okafor, (1995) puts it this way:

> Igbo human laws are social instruments by which diverse and often conflicting interests of the members of the society are regulated in such a way that common interest of the community as a whole is placed above individual interests (Okafor, 1995: 64).

The divine law re-enforces human laws in the execution and sustenance of social justice in such a manner that where human laws stops the divine law continues. The divine law assists in establishing spiritual harmony between human beings and the spiritual world (Okafor, 1995). Consequently, both the physical/social and spiritual aspects of human wellbeing are significant in determining the acceptability or otherwise of an individual. A typical traditional Igbo person is aware of the implications of dislocating himself from the tempo-spiritual community through the violation of taboos or by involvement in any '*nso*' behaviour. The two types of law are, therefore, indispensable in fostering justice, fairness, honesty and equity among the members of the community, and in the construction of *ezigbo mmadu* in tempo-spiritual relationships.

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