

Re-Examination of Igbo Values System, and the Igbo Personality: A Kantian and African Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The primordial Igbo personality is subsumed in a world view of metaphysical reality in which God, as the Supreme Being, plays a central role. The construction of the model Igbo personality starts with an adequate appreciation of the communal role of the individual in maintaining societal balance, peace, prosperity and moral transparency. It is impossible to think of the individual as different from the community. There is a pre-existing metaphysical and social bond that inextricably links one to the other. The interests of the individual are concomitant with that of community. His aspirations, dreams and hopes for a better future and a fulfilled life are dialectically tied to the communal apron strings of what is good for the community. Thus it is “alu”, “nso ani” and “ajoo-mume” (evil and evil conduct in the Igbo moral sphere) for the individual to even think or act against the metaphysical and cosmological position of his indigenous Igbo community. With this attunement between the individual and his community, it becomes easier to build personalities who see themselves as members of the community. Most importantly, these personalities do exhibit values and virtues which strengthen the spiritual, ethical, social and economic heritage and resources in the Igbo communities. The conception of the Igbo personality, primordially speaking, is a conception in which the individual radiates, as it were, communal values. These communal values are the structural principles and powers that define the identity, integrity and inner self of the Igbo person. When an Igbo man reflects a personal behavior pattern filled with these action-values he is seen to be on the path of a dignified existence. He becomes, as it were, the embodiment of the universal merited dignity of humanity as we say in Igbo lore—“Onyenkabummadu” (this person has human dignity and lives it in his conduct). We can then re-examine to what extent the Igbo communal values are in attunement with the Kantian concept of human dignity. This paper posits that the Igbo communal system has the best indigenous ethical and environmental structure for the restoration of man’s dignity as posited by Kant and, has, for ages before Kant, been at the forefront of this restoration, ethicalization and construction of values for human dignity.

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Kant, Human Dignity, Communalism, Human Values, Ethics

1. Introduction

All over the world of the Igbo man of Africa there is a general cry over the moral degradation affecting the average Igbo conduct and behavior. There is a current and recurrent materialism which has gripped and crippled the Igbo person, leading to the generation of a new set of vice and material values courted by both the old and the young. “Mma Nwoke”—money—is at the root of this materialistic philosophy and has become the biggest benchmark for a well endowed and successful personality. This material culture has spawned a new generation of immoral personalities who are selfish, self-centered, criminal in intent, corrupt in management of state resources and educated without adequate character molding. We are beginning to witness the era of the “successful” Igbo man and woman without character and values. These new generations of Igbos have lost all sense of communal values which is different from a well balanced and dignified community citizen who cares for others, puts others first and works for the common community good. It is now obvious that these morally nescient citizens cannot, in all honesty, claim to be communal citizens since they have lost their human dignity acquired over time from their Igbo forebears and forefathers.

There is, furthermore, an erosion of core Igbo communal values and dignity as a result of the negative impact of the Eurocentric concept of the human person which elevates the importance of the individual personality over and above the interest of his society. In this Eurocentric concept of the individual, the interests and values nursed by the individual for his perpetuation and personality are eulogized and elevated to the level of state craft. In modern statism such values manifest in the condemnable phenomenon of Igbo leaders who are corrupt, nepotistic, despotic and power hungry. The presence of such crop of leaders has also been worsened by the corrupting speed of globalization and the prevalence of global values which attack the roots of African communalism and communal values.

In Africa, especially in Igbo land, a man who has lost his human dignity is no longer into touch with his fellows and his society’s values (Mbiti, 1990: p. 52). Such a morally derailed personality will continue to drift and dwell in a selfish world of only his dreams, interests and ambitions. His presence in governance becomes a development disaster because he will fail in the first test of leadership which is to mobilize and carry his society along in every policies and programs implemented by him. Leadership in Igbo land is going through a crisis as a result of this loss of values and lack of personality integrity. The ability to carry other members of the community and state along is a core Igbo governance value used by the “umunna” (Ebigbo, 2002: p. 4) to take and arrive at critical developmental decisions in the primordial community of the indigenous Igbos.

As we shall see presently, it is because the Igbo personality of today has lost the core communal values which define his cultural dignity that the modern state in Igbo land is culturally, socially, politically, technologically, economically and nationally destabilized and morally anaemic. This results from the fact that a personality without the dynamic building blocks of moral dignity becomes weakened from producing creatively and synergistically for the enhancement of the society’s destiny. Leadership competence can only be effectively demonstrated with the leader is well grounded on the moral communal values of the community.

2. Re-Examining the Communal Values of the Igbo Man’s Personality

The African personality is a personality centered on communal values which are necessary fallouts of his metaphysical and cosmological world centered naturally upon his God. In his inner world the Supreme Being, who oversees the affairs of the community is manifested and represented in his personality as his chi, a personal conscience which determines his sense of moral right and wrong. While the Supreme Being creates a social conscience with communal values which ensure that the society progresses, prospers, and succeeds at what it applies itself to do, the individual conscience ensures compliance with the metaphysical synergy of the society. Such vibrancy and development could result only when the social and individual integrity of the community is maintained. The destruction of such integrity results in much destruction and underdevelopment in the community. There is no doubt that, by single tragic act of abandoning Igbo core primordial values, the Igbo man of the 21st century has become a ghost of his former vibrant and dynamic self who was capable of contributing sel-

flessly to the creative and productive development of his society (Ekei, 2002: p. 46). In the 2002 Iguaro Igbo heritage lecture entitled “The Igbo lost worlds; Ebigbo (2002) enumerates some positive values and negative vices which have, for good or bad, contributed to the current deplorable state of underdevelopment and moral asphyxiation in Igbo land. It is necessary to enumerate some of the personality traits Nd’igbos are known for and are currently losing as a result of moving away from their traditional value system. Ebigbo outlines and explains these lost values and acquired vice as follows:

2.1. Disregard and Disrespect to Elders

The Igbo today obviously has more regard to material wealth than he has for human beings. He has no respect for elders. He feels that everybody is equal in all spheres of life in as much as he fends for himself. This has given them bad reputation in other parts of Nigeria.

2.2. Selfishness

He has more concern for himself than for others. He is such that forgets every other person when it comes to satisfying himself. This has made him infamous in Nigeria.

2.3. Arrogance

By all indication, an Igbo man is the type that feels very arrogant to reckon with others at any point in time. He believes that he is a king in his home in as much as nobody feeds him and his family, therefore damning every other person and the people in authority. This has made him infamous in Nigeria.

2.4. Transparency or Proven Character

An Igbo man, of course, is naturally endowed with and exhibits a proven character or transparency. This results from the Igbo belief that “imebi aha nwa ogaranya ka ogbugbu ya” as well as their belief in the Igbo customary meaning that “Neze aha ka uba”. This transparency still exists but has been badly battered by the present phenomenon of 419 (What is known as advance fee fraud under Nigerian criminal law). This is a reflection of Ozo-Eze symbolism propagated by the Nri system. This Igbo value and characterization is in accord with what Norris (2001: p. 12) would regard as the roots of a federal democracy and its survival.

2.5. Self-Esteem and Self-Belief

An Igbo man is one who strongly believes in self-esteem and self-belief. That is, the consciousness that whatever is worth doing is worth doing well and the desire to attain the peak of his target in it. The Igbo man has strong self-reliance in his ability to achieve his goal in life. He believes that there is nothing any man could do to him and could not be even better.

2.6. Dedication to Duty

An Igbo man is known to be highly dedicated to duty resulting in his belief that in whatever field of endeavour he or she is found he must remain an achiever.

2.7. Rectitude

An Igbo man believes that he is being cultured in doing things in a proper or universally accepted manner. In other words, he is bestowed with pure sense of standardism.

2.8. Ambition

An Igbo man is no doubt a man full of ambition. He wants to be at the top or ahead of others in every field of life.

2.9. Perseverance

An Igbo man is one who always perseveres in his struggle to make ends meet. He is extra resilient to retrogressive factors of life. No matter the ups and downs in his struggle to survival, an Igbo man believes that giving up

is not the best, so the end determines the means. This is a reflection of Ikenga symbolism.

2.10. Self-Control

An Igbo man is one always full of self-control. His all time consciousness is to respect and avoid disgrace to himself. This imbues in him the sense of self-control. Again this is another Ikenga quality.

2.11. Bravery

This is one of the natural attributes of an Igbo man. An Igbo man is conscious at all times of self-defense and the desire to conquer. This is found in the Igbo adage “mberede nyiri dike, mana mberede k’iji ama dike” meaning: surprise attack conquers the brave but it is also that which marks the brave.

2.12. Hard Working

The Igbos are hard workers, because they naturally believed in the philosophy that one must always be the architect of his or her own destiny. Therefore, they determined to work hard and succeed. This is again another Ikenga symbolism¹ (Ebigbo, 2002: pp. 43-46).

3. Human Dignity and the Igbo Man’s Personality

In this research the effort and the attempts to throw light on, and show the fundamental similarities and differences between African and Kantian ethical conceptions by examining the foundational ethics and morality using the communal golden rule principle of African ethics and Kant’s categorical imperative as tools of comparative analysis needs a little exposition. The basic elements of African indigenous ethics revolves around the “Golden Rule Principle” as the ultimate moral principle. This principle states that, “Do unto others what you want them to do unto you”. This principle compares favorably with Immanuel Kant’s ethical foundational principle whose main thrust revolves around his “Categorical Imperative”, with the injunction for us to “Act only on that *maxim* through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” The categorical imperative becomes for Kant, the principle of reason and universalizability, which according to Kant, is categorical and must be equally binding on everyone. This idea of Kant (2002: pp. 45-53), we argue, compares with the “Golden Rule Principle”.

Comparing the two ethical principles, Azenabor (2008: p. 49) gives more exposition but gives more authenticity to the humanism of African communalistic values:

Both are rationalistic and social but the limitation of Kant which I hope to point out is the idea that moral intentions can be fully grounded on reason. I argue that human interest or welfare is the basis for morality. This refusal to see the wider horizon of morality is precisely the limitation of Kant’s principle, which makes it quite insufficient as the foundation of morality. The African conception is more humanistic and better describes morality. The main difference between the two ethical systems lies in the fact that whereas the “golden rule” starts from the self and considers the consequences on the self before others, the universalizability principle on the other hand considers the consequences on others first before self. We argue that both are rationalistic and social but that that of Kant is insufficient as the foundation of morality and that the African’s, which is more humanistic and pragmatic, describes morality better. African ethics is that branch of African philosophy, which deals with the critical reflection on the manner, or nature of life, conduct, behavior and character of the African. African ethics is defined by K. Wiredu “as the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interest of the individual to those of others in society” (Wiredu 1998: p. 210), it is the conceptualization, appropriation, contextualization and analysis of values within the African cultural experience. African ethics presupposes a regional ethics. Even though theories and ideas of universal character are propounded in ethics, they do not diverge from their prevailing cultural experience, the philosophical spirit of their age, challenges of the time, history, tradition and civilization that they find themselves. This is the basis then for the appellation “African ethics”.

From the above arguments and depositions there is stable theoretical background that gives authenticity to the

¹The Ikenga symbol is a symbol of power and strength of a special kind. The power of synergy that results from a rarified individual embodiment of societal moral and metaphysical values in indigenous Igbo world.

existence and application of the pristine Igbo man's ethics, morality and values as the projection of contemporary African ethical disciplined source of a better human conduct and behavior. While arguing for the comparative moral pragmatism of African morality to Kant's mere individualistic bent, this does not give any theoretical room for this discourse to throw away the entire efficacy of the Kantian moral template, especially as it concerns the concepts of human dignity and its role in the refinement and creation of a better human society which we have already referred to and would be explained in greater detail later in the article. This exposition therefore throws more light not only on Igbo morality but also the basic thrusts of the African moral discourse which is aimed at creating a better society where human dignity and rights is respected and honored. Each time I go through Monsignor Professor Obiora Ike's work, "*Understanding Africa*", I have this strong intuitive perception of the correspondence between the concept of human dignity and the communal values that define the personality and integrity of the Igbo man. According to Professor Ike, the Igbo African communal values are the only authentic basis for culturally rooted and sustainable development in Africa. According to Ike (2001: p. 34):

It has thus become necessary to expand the scope of on going debate and bring to the fora of academic discourse, values and information that could enhance the world's appreciation of indigenous African societies and cultures. These values express humanity's most authentic and distinctive features in order to nurture that intrinsically universal cultural "soil" which makes fruitful and constructive dialogue. The referred values are not only African. They exist and are appreciated universally.

There is no doubt that when Professor Ike talks about African indigenous values which are universal and shared globally we have on our hands the concept of the human dignity and the values which produced them in human personalities as espoused primarily by Emmanuel Kant (1999: pp. 322-323). These values when maintained as in the African past, have always contributed to the balanced development of its society and ensure the well-being of its citizens (Wiredu, 1995). There is interconnectedness between the maintenance of these values and the development of the society. As argued and pointed by Ike, Obiora:

A deeper understanding of the African culture and its peoples will ultimately breed a profound respect for, and embrace of, African traditional values which, when properly understood, reveal to the discerning mind a wisdom of the ages, capable of providing some solutions to our contemporary search for sustainable development and a peaceful, equitable society.

There is need to harness the innovative potential in our societies and cultures with a view to effecting a sustainable and self-reliant rationalization and modernization of communities. Our challenge is to search for appropriate paradigms and expressions to define and evaluate cultural, social, ethical and religious conditions relevant to our many Africa societies (Ike, 2001: pp. 3-4).

Tempels (1963: p. 121) refers to the grounding of ethical and moral values on ontological, religious and metaphysical foundations and explains this below:

There is the ontological, religious and communal foundation of African ethics. *The Ontological Foundation* which revolves round the basic assumptions of African metaphysics and African morality is a derivative of African ontology—a wrong moral action is one, which offsets and diminishes the set-up and man's life force (Oluwole, 1992: p. 23). African morality Tempels tells us is something demanded by the very nature of things. It is "ontologically understood and has social dimension to it" (Ilawole, 1998: p. 78; Idowu, 1968: p. 34).

There is indeed "a great ocean of oral and pre-literary tradition which our ancestors have left behind for us to transmit to other generations" (Kant, 1978: p. 206) and use as the moral-social pedestal and foundation for engineering new paradigm structures for African development. Such is the template of Igbo primordial and communal values that define the Igbo man's personality and determines his effectiveness as a creative moral citizen of his state. It is important to examine the meaning of human dignity and draw out Kant's profound thinking on the dignity of the human personality. After that exercise we shall be in a better position to draw out analogies between the indigenous Igbo man's personality and Kant's concept of the global citizen (Kant, 1968: p. 205).

4. Human Dignity

The expression "human dignity" is used by a lot of people with different interpretations and meanings, and under different contexts. Dignity is a universal value and concern which is used often in moral, philosophical, legal,

social and economic discourses. The Igbo man's concept of human dignity is drawn from the primordial communal content of his personality as already defined. The values cherished by the Igbo man in his community as "a man-in-community" qualifies as what he calls human dignity. Human dignity, though a universal concept, has cultural correspondences in all indigenous communities of the world. According to Professor Edwards Younkings, author of "Dignity Demystified":

Dignity is etymologically rooted in the Latin *dingus* or *dingnitas* meaning "due a certain respect or worthy of esteem and honor". A fundamental inalienable dignity inheres in every human person by virtue of his uniqueness in distinction from all other natural creature. Each human being has free will and is capable of acts of reflection, insight, and choice. Each person is an originating source of action, has control over his own life and is responsible for his own actions (Younkins, 2012: p. 1).

5. Kantian Conception of Human Dignity

Emmanuel Kant (1974: p. 65) treated dignity as a concept of universal human application when he made his famous ethical observation:

"Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (Younkins: 12).

The direct implication which could be drawn from this position is that if you treat your fellow human being as an end you have demonstrated a respect and honour for him while at the same time allowing him a freedom to choose between two moral choices. Dignity enables the individual to choose right over wrong; to choose the best interests of others over his own and to obey the morally sanctioned values of his society as a primary preservative and coherent tool for the welfare of all other members of his society. Human dignity is something natural and inalienable for every human being. According to Momoh (1995: p. 23) this dignity enables man to participate and contribute effectively to the development of man. Since it is enjoyed by all men and women in all societies, dignity is taken to be the fundamental number one value that defines the Kantian concept of a global citizen (Kant, 1972: p. 102).

Dignity is intrinsically linked to the creation of wholesome individuals and social character. According to Idiodi Kennett, a society or a nation is great in nothing which is loose or low in moral character (Idiodi, 2000: pp. 16-24). Character moulding and stabilization in the human personality is at the heart of successful communal and state building using the contributions of morally responsible citizens. As again argued by Professor Younkings:

Dignity is attached to a human being because he has the capacity to be a responsible person. When a responsible human agent enters into his own creative endeavours, not only should he avoid anything counter to universal human dignity, he should also use his capacity of rationality to achieve a meritorious form of human dignity by developing a virtuous character and by engaging in moral conduct. A person develops his virtues as a means to gain his values and achieve flourishing happiness. Living according to moral principles contributes to one's having a sense of dignity (Younkins, op cit: 24).

6. Human Dignity as a Core Igbo Value

The Igbo man, primordially, is able to perpetuate his race as a result of his community-in-person values which propel and motivate him to strive to achieve and maintain self-respect, esteem, pride, sense of social shame, indignation and resentment for evil doing in the community. His community-in-person values, which he has lost today, derives from his cultural and philosophical sense of dignity under pre-modern Igbo world. This sense of human dignity, very strong when he maintains his commercial values, leads to the achievement of self-control, self-restraint, and self-regulation in the context of the pressures and challenges coming from his society. His world is even more threatened in the face of onrushing globalization values, especially as he has lost grip of the powerful communal values which have, in the past, equipped him with a dynamic resilience and given him the human dignity to be original in his creations and productions.

7. Conclusion

It is obvious that the Igbo man has lost his inherent sense of Igbo cultural dignity with an attendant erosion of

other sense values which have resulted in the loss of a cosmological and social sense of being and development. Human dignity as espoused by Kant is correspondent with the pre-modern Igbo idea of same because African communalism preserves the African Igbo's moral values when he is challenged by societal pressures. That the Igbo man increasingly finds it difficult to successfully grapple with the challenges and problems of modernity revolving around underdevelopment, poverty, corruption, crass selfishness, laziness, materialism, consumerism, and globalization result from the loss of his indigenous human values. The starting point of retrieving that cultural loss is the immediate recovery of his cultural human dignity around which revolves a pristine world of dynamic primordial value system (Ackermann, 2012: pp. 597-612).

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