

THE NOTION OF LIFE IN IGBO ONTOLOGY: A HERMENEUTIC EXPLORATION

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Abstract

The concept of life in Igbo ontology has been widely discussed, yet a clear and systematic philosophical interpretation is still lacking. This study addressed the problem of defining life within Igbo metaphysics, particularly its structure, ethical meaning, and cyclical nature. Employing the philosophical method of hermeneutics, the study sought to uncover the principles that shape the Igbo understanding of life. The findings revealed that life in the Igbo thought system is considered a sacred gift from God (Chukwu) and is closely tied to personal destiny/god (chi), communal existence, and the belief in reincarnation (ilo uwa). The study also highlighted the Igbo view of reality as a dual system where the physical and spiritual worlds are interconnected. Consequently, the study concludes that the Igbo concept of life offers holistic and relational insights into existential questions, ethical living, and the pursuit of harmony between the individual and the community.

Keywords: Igbo Ontology, Life in Igbo Thought, Hermeneutics, Personal destiny/god (Chi), Reincarnation (Ilo uwa)

1.0 Introduction

Various attempts have been made by various scholars, groups of people, and cultures to understand the concept of 'life' and its intricacies. However, no consensus has been reached regarding the true purpose and essence of life, leading to disparate conceptions of life among different peoples of the world. In Western philosophy, discussions on life often revolve around biological, existential, and metaphysical considerations, with some scholars emphasizing mechanistic explanations, while others advocate for a more vitalist perspective. In contrast, African philosophy - particularly Igbo thought - conceives life (*ndu*) not merely as a biological phenomenon but as a sacred and dynamic force that connects individuals to their destiny (*chi*), their ancestors, and the broader community. Life is considered a gift from God (*Chukwu*) and is guided by moral and spiritual principles that emphasize interdependence, responsibility, and continuity (Kanu, 2018, p. 8). Uzukwu (2018) observes that the Igbo people, in their apprehension of ultimate reality and meaning place human life at the centre of their universe. For them, life stands out as a value around which other values find their meaning, as reflected in names like *Ndubuisi* (life is first) and *Ndukaaku* (life is greater than wealth). When the Igbo affirm *Ndubuisi*, they are not referring to life in a generic sense but specifically to human life (*mmadu*), particularly within the family, village-group, or clan (pp. 194–195).

Given the centrality of life in Igbo thought and the limited systematic philosophical engagement with the concept of life in Igbo ontology, this study seeks to bridge this gap through a hermeneutic analysis, elucidating the true notion of life among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. It begins with an overview of Igbo ontology, situating life within the broader framework of Igbo metaphysical beliefs. The study then focuses on the core subject - the notion of life in Igbo ontology - analyzing its dimensions as a gift, as communitarian, and as cyclic. Finally, it concludes with key insights and reflections.

1.1 Understanding Igbo Ontology

Before delving into the discussion on Igbo ontology, it is pertinent to first take a brief look at the meaning of 'Igbo'. First, it must be admitted that varied accounts exist as regards the meaning and the origin of the word 'Igbo'; but as Mbaegbu (2012) states "a good number of scholars are of the opinion that the term 'Igbo' may stand for a collection of a people; or connote a language. So that the people are 'Igbo', their land is 'Ani' or 'Ana Igbo' (Igbo land or country) and their language is 'Igbo'. Igbo is therefore both the language and the name used to refer to the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria" (p. 90). As regards the geographical location of the Igbo people, Obiakor (as cited in Ejikemeuwa & Kanu, 2019) has this to say: "the Igbo occupy the east and west of the lower Niger. They inhabit the Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states of the southeastern region of the contemporary Nigeria. The

Igbo are also found in parts of Delta, and Rivers states in the south-south region of Nigeria” (Ejikemeuwa & Kanu, 2019, p. 46). Besides the dialect and geographical location, *Ndigbo* (Igbo people) are identified by the fact that they “share common religious beliefs and have common economic, political, philosophical and ideological ways of life” (Aguinam, 2021, p. 33).

Having given a brief overview of the word ‘Igbo’, there is need to explicate ‘Igbo ontology’. Ontology comes from two Greek words: ‘on’, which means ‘being’, and ‘logos’, which means ‘study’. Hence, ontology, etymologically means ‘the study of being’. As a branch of metaphysics, ontology “studies issues about the existence and mode of existence of things, especially, abstract entities, suprasensible realities and the supernatural” (Agbanusi, 2014, p. 18). It is the study of the most fundamental categories of being and the relations among them. Igbo ontology is anthropocentric, that is, ontology centered on man. “It restricts its inquiries to the Igbo man and his presence in the world and world view” (Mbaegbu, 2012, p.120). It covers both the invisible beings, (*ihe ndi a na ghi ahu anya*) and the visible beings (*ihe ndi a naahu anya*). These beings (visible and invisible) can be categorized as; *muo* (spirits), *mmadu* (human being), and *ihe* (things).

In African and Igbo philosophy, the concept of being is bound to the concept of force in the most abstract thinking upon the notion of being. Everything that is, is because it has force (*ike-ndu*) and the quality and quantity of this force determine the nature of a being. Each ontological being is believed to embody a spiritual essence, which functions as its active principle. This spiritual essence, often referred to as *vital force*, constitutes the fundamental characteristic of existence. In alignment with this perspective, Tempels (as cited in Mbaegbu, 2012) asserts that “force is the nature of being, force is being; being is force” (Mbaegbu, 2012, pp. 153-154). Force is for Tempels the same as being. The Igbo person undoubtedly directs all actions toward the preservation of this very force: when he prays to *Chukwu* (God), when he offers sacrifices to gods and ancestors, when he pours libation, when he performs ritual, all these **practices are aimed at sustaining and enhancing this life-giving force.**

Our discussion of Igbo ontology would be incomplete without considering the Igbo conception of the world. The Igbo people have a religious conception of the world. They hold tenaciously that the world is made up of two planes: the physical and the metaphysical or the sensible and the supra-sensible. However, these two worlds are considered by the Igbo as one continuous interacting life. This is to say that there is no dichotomy between the two worlds. Parrinder (as cited in Mbaegbu, 2012) carefully articulates this perspective, stating that, “there is no sharp dividing line between the sacred and the secular...material and spiritual are intertwined, the former as a vehicle of the later” (Mbaegbu, 2012, p. 112). Similarly, Nwoye (as cited in Mbaegbu, 2012) observes that “there is a dual-traffic and interaction between the inhabitants of the two worlds such that spiritual beings and forces are highly intermingled” (Mbaegbu, 2012, p. 112).

The structure of the Igbo world consists of: the world of man *Elu uwa* inhabited by all living thing and the spirit world *Ala Muo*. Mbaegbu reveals that the dual nature of the Igbo world is based on the theory of cosmic balance upon which “everything in the world has a double” (Mbaegbu, 2012, p. 112). Corroboratively Ilogu (1974) asserts that:

The universe is basically structured into two main inter-related parts according to Igbo traditional ideas. (a) *Eluigwe* – Sky (b) *Elu uwa* – the Earth (also called *Ala*). These two believed to be equal in extension. Apart from this, there are two realms or orders of existence. (a) *Ala Muo* – the spirit world or supernatural order (b) *Ala Mmadu* – the human world or visible order (p. 35).

The spirit world (*Ala Muo*) is the abode of God (*Chukwu*), the gods, the disembodied and malignant spirits. The world of man (*Elu uwa* or *Ala mmadu*) is however, inhabited essentially by all created beings and things both living and non-living. It is worthy to note that the Igbo beliefs are anchored on the firm ontological foundation that for whatever exist, something else exists beside it (*ihe kwuru ihe akwudobe ya*). Based on this conception, the Igbo always strive to maintain the middle course in life,

being careful not to disturb the equilibrium of their spiritual and physical existence. In the light of this, Achebe (as cited in Ilogu, 1974) opines that:

The pre-colonial Igbo life was highly materialistic society. But at the same time a strong spiritual dimension controlled its materialistic aspects. And the culture was successful because there was a complementary balance between the two, the materialistic dimension of Igbo life being related to its masculine principle and its spiritual dimension being related to its feminine principle (Ilogu, 1974, p. 35).

So far, the point remains that the two worlds of the Igbo; *Elu uwa* and *Ala muo* interpenetrate each other in the sense that there is no dichotomy between the two worlds despite the fact that they are essentially different. Relatedly, Tempels (as cited in Kanu, 2018) observes that “the world of forces (beings) is held like a spider’s web in which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (Kanu, 2018, p. 15). This means that the *muo*, *mmadu* and *ihe* categories of being are all linked together by a network of relationship and interaction upon another. Consequently, Metuh (as cited in Ndubisi, 2017) writes: “There is a continuous exchange between all Igbo beings, irrespective of the class of being (visible or invisible) to which they belong. Men can be possessed by spirits and spirits sometimes incarnate themselves in the visible form. Men can influence the deities and the spirits through sacrifices, prayers and spells. Conversely, the deities can intervene in human affairs to bring order and blessings” (Ndubisi, 2017, pp. 120-121). Therefore, the beings in the Igbo two world (*Elu uwa* and *Ala muo*) inter-relate and interpenetrate each other.

1.1 Life in Igbo Ontology

The concept of life has been examined by scholars across a range of academic fields and eras. However, the focus here is to expose the Igbo notion of life. Similar to other African communities, Igbo ontology has been accurately labelled as highly anthropocentric, that is, centred on man. Consequently, the Igbo immensely value human life; zealously and religiously guarding it. For them, life is first (*Ndubuisi*) since it guarantees other values such as wealth, health, etc as well as confers meaning and authenticity to man’s perceptions of reality. For a better understanding of what life means for the Igbo, this section shall be discussed under three sub-sections: life as a gift; life as communitarian; and life as cyclic.

2.0 Life as a Gift

In Igbo thought system, *Chukwu* (God) is considered the ultimate source of all life; and the act of creation is seen as a divine gift. This notion of life as a gift is portrayed in the Igbo saying; *ndu si na chi*, meaning ‘life is from God’. The gift of life is not merely a biological occurrence but is imbued with spiritual significance. Kanu (2018) observes that: “When a child is born it is taken to be a gift from God. The life of children is not attributed to mere biological fact of conception because every child has existed in an antecedent world of a divine master” (p. 8). The names given to children among the Igbo also lend credence to the belief that life is a divine gift. Some of these names include *Chi-nyere ndu* (God gave life), *Chi-na-enye ndu* (God gives life), *Chi-nwe-ndu* (God owns life), and *Chi-ji-ndu* (God holds life).

While the Igbo say *ndu si na chi* (life is from God), they also affirm that *ndu di n’aka chi* (life is in the hand of God). The implication is that the giver of life is also the protector of life. Consequently, individuals are called upon to not only express gratitude to *Chukwu* for the bestowed life but also ask for protection. Ugwu (2021) sums up the prayer of a typical Igbo person thus: “thanksgiving to God (*Chukwu*) for giving and preserving life; invocation of the ancestors and other spirits for help in preserving his life, that of his family, relatives and others; petition to God, ancestors and the spirits for provision of the necessities for maintaining and increasing life” (pp. 5-6). He also quotes Egudu and Nwoga, who capture the pattern and spirit of the prayer as follows: “Protect me and my household from evil men and spirits; wish no man evil, but if anyone says I have lived too long, let him go before me to see what it is like in the land of the dead...” (Ugwu, 2021, p. 6). The deduction therefore, is that beyond the fact that prayer centres on thanksgiving and request for protection against harm and negative influences, one is at the same time reminded to desist from wishing, planning or doing evil to others,

for such comes with repercussion. Here, the Lord's injunction: 'do to others the way you wish done unto you' comes to mind. One cannot be asking God for protection whence he desires evil for his brother; such runs contrary to Igbo-African spirit of brotherhood. The wish of every Igbo person, which is always on his lips whenever he prays is to live long life and in good health (*ibi ogologo ndu na ahu ike*), and equally to enjoy the good things of life (*ihe aku aku ihe enwe enwe*). It must be pointed out that the Igbo man's desire for longevity is not unconnected with the Igbo notion of 'after life'. Death in Igbo world view, as Mbaegbu (2012) made us understand, is not the final stop to a person's life. One dies to live again in the invisible world either as an ancestor or *akalagheli* (wandering spirit) (p.40). He maintains that the goal of every Igbo person is to become an ancestor after his sojourn on earth. In his words: "apart from few voices of dissent with respect to the final end of man in Igbo ontology, the majority opinion is that attainment of ancestorhood is the ultimate goal of man or the person in Igbo worldview" (Mbaegbu, p. 140). He however warns that death does not guarantee one automatic entry to ancestorhood, but one meets certain basic requirements among which is 'ripe old age'. He enlisted other requirements as; good life, procreation, good death and good burial (Mbaegbu, p. 115). The deduction from what has been said is that Igbo person prays both for his existential and eternal needs. His request for *ogologo ndu* (long life) which is accompanied by *ahu ike* (good health), *ihe akuku ihe enwe enwe* (riches and prosperity) speaks of his existential needs. Yet, the underlying hope is that such a life will ultimately lead to acceptance into the revered community of ancestors.

The Igbo notion of life as a gift (from God) comes with a call to respect and value life which is solidly based on Igbo people's recognition and acceptance of the inviolability of life and its sacredness (Anuolam, 1993, p. 352). Ugwu (2021) observes, "life stands out for the Igbo as the greatest value around which other values like wealth, health etc. find their meanings. It is the greatest and the most prized value which is at the centre of Igbo man's experience of the universe and which confers meaning and authenticity to his general perceptions of reality" (p. 5). Corroboratively, Ehusani (as cited in Ugwu, 2021) avers:

Igbo world is principally anthropocentric such that human life is immensely valued, zealously and religiously guarded, hence anything that threatens life is ruthlessly dealt with. For instance, one who is a witch could either be killed or expelled from the community and never to return because that witchcraft is permanent threat to life (Ugwu, 2021, p. 5).

Anything that threatens life or that would lead to the spilling of human blood is vehemently detested by the Igbo. In fact, taking of another person's life including one's own life is considered in Igboland as the highest crime. The culprit (in case of murder) pays with his/her life. Anyone who commits suicide is said to have desecrated the land (*o mere nsoala*) and as such denied formal burial. Life in Igbo ontology is sacred, valued and remains the highest gift.

2.1 Life as Communitarian

The Igbo conception that life is communitarian stems from their firm belief that individuals are interconnected and interdependent within the community, thus creating a shared sense of identity and responsibility. When Mbiti (as cited in Obiajulu, 2019) says that "the individual can only say; I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am..." (Obiajulu, 2019, p.108); he seeks to suggest that the existence of the 'I' depends on the existence of the 'We'. The 'We' as used here refers to the community whereas the 'I' refers to the individual. The being of man in Igbo ontology is communitarian. Here, the community takes primacy over the individual since the individual is realized in the community. This very conception is born out of Igbo belief that blood (*obara*) ties the physical part of man, *ahu* (body) to his consanguine and his society. Okoye (2011) affirms this notion, stating, "The blood is a bond that unites oneself to another self and this extends to the whole community" (p. 64). The implication therefore, is that the self cannot be explained independent of the society from where the individual comes. All about the individual departs from the community and ends in the community. Mbiti (1997) lays credence to this when he says that the individual being "owes his existence to other people including those of past generations and contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual for the individual

depends on the corporate group” (p. 106). The deduction is that, the individual is not only of natural birth but also a product of the society. Little wonder he says: “physical birth is not enough; the child must go through the rites of incorporation so it becomes fully integrated into the entire society” (Mbiti, 1997, p.108). The process of incorporation, according to Mbiti (1997), is an endless drama that may ring its echo even beyond the grave. Thus he writes: “These rites continue throughout the physical life of the person, during which the individual passes from one stage of corporate existence to another. The final stage is reached when he dies and even then he is ritually incorporated into the wide family of both the dead and the living” (p. 106).

For the Igbo, life is meaningful only when lived with others in the human community. This is because they view life as a shared experience. They believe that ‘we are because others are’, and our being finds meaning and expression in the being of others. This reflects the spirit of Igbo African communalism, characterized by *esprit de corps* and the maxim *onye aghala nwanne ya* (let no one leave his brother behind). It embodies the philosophy of *live and let live*, reinforcing the ideal that in brotherhood, the Igbo people stand together.

3.0. Life as Cyclic

The belief in ‘life-after death’ lies at the core of the Igbo notion of life as cyclic. “This belief” (in the life-after death), according to Mbaegbu (2012), “is grounded on the Igbo illogical, superstitious but strong belief in the re-incarnation – a return to the world” (p. 115). The Igbo have firm belief that death is not a cessation of life rather the gate-way to joining ancestors in the spirit world. This explains why when one dies in Igboland instead of saying, for instance, that Ekene *anwuola* (Ekene is dead), the Igbo would say; Ekene *ahapula* (Ekene has left), implying that Ekene has left for a journey to the ancestral world. Ancestors or the living-dead, as defined by Uchendu (cited in Mbaegbu, 2012) “were men and women of proved upright character whose dealings with their fellow men reflected accepted traditional standard of conduct. They have been exposed to critical tests and certified good” (Mbaegbu, 2012, p. 149). Among the functions of ancestors in Igbo worldview is that they watch over their families and constantly seek to obtain blessings, prosperity and protection for the members of their families.

On the basis of the above, the Igbo cyclic perspective on life places a strong emphasis on reverence for ancestors. It is thought that departed ancestors still exist in the spiritual world and have an ongoing impact on the living. In order to celebrate and acknowledge the ancestors' ongoing connection to the cyclical nature of existence, rituals and ceremonies are held. Meeting with the ancestors serves to affirm the concept of a timeless continuity in which the past, present, and future are inextricably intertwined. We can therefore sum up the Igbo cyclic notion of the life thus: “man is born into this world to live life here on earth, perfect himself, perfect the society and at the end of this earthly life joins his ancestors in the spirit world from where it returns to this world to inform another body for another span of earthly life” (Mbaegbu, 2012, p.115).

Conclusion

Until now, we have been faced with the task of exposing the concept of life in Igbo ontology. We began by thoroughly examining Igbo ontology, which served as a prism through which to comprehend the Igbo concept of life. The discussion of the Igbo concept of life was approached from the perspective of three deep concepts contained in her ontology. The Igbo people are first and foremost grateful for life, viewing it as a sacred gift from the Supreme Being (God), which instils in them a sense of obligation and appreciation. Second, life is fundamentally communal, weaving individual existence into the fabric of communal well-being, promoting interdependence and a shared ethos. Third, life is viewed as cyclical, reflecting the notion of reincarnation, which holds that existence continues through generations and that the past, present, and future are interconnected. This comprehensive view of life as a gift, a communal endeavour, and a cyclical journey not only shapes Igbo culture but also provides ageless insights into the complex web of human experiences.

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