



Religio-Philosophical Significance of Relationality through the Igbo Understanding of the Human Person

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Abstract

The question of human subjectivity has occupied the human mind from time immemorial. Different religions, cultures, fields of study, and human endeavour have conceived subjectivity in varying ways, each reflecting the way a particular group understands the human person, the dynamics of interaction among human persons, their place amidst, and relative to, other created realities and sometimes the supernatural beings and forces. Opinions range from those who conceive subjectivity in isolationist, purely rationalistic, and ideational terms to those who see relationality as an ontological ground for subjectivity. From philosophical and religious viewpoints, the Igbo understand the human person in uncompromisingly relational terms. For them, to be is to be in relation. To exist is to coexist relationally. Relationality, therefore, appears to be the ground for authentic existence and realistic co-existence. This paper aims at examining how, for the Igbo, human subjectivity is nothing less than relational subjectivity, both from the philosophical and religious points of view. To achieve this aim, the paper will examine the concept of relationality in the western philosophical tradition, with special reference to the relational turn exemplified in the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. It will also examine relationality in Christian theology and psychoanalysis. This is intended to bring the reader into some level of conceptual clarity before this concept is examined in the light of Igbo religion and philosophy. In sum, the paper brings to light three major affirmations, viz. a) the definite turn to relationality witnessed in the West was not witnessed in Igbo thought, because the Igbo have never thought about the human person in non-relational or isolationist terms; b) the ontological relationality entailed in Igbo concept of human subjectivity touches human relationship with created realities, with the Supreme Being, and with other supernatural beings and forces in the Igbo universe; c) relationality can be a strong resource in forging a united society built on love, communalism, peace, and togetherness.

Keywords: Relationality, Human Person, Self, Subjectivity, Igbo

Introduction

The “turn to relationality” is witnessed today in different fields of study. It has caused breakthrough in the field of science, philosophy and religion. This turn has helped to shed light on our manner of being in the world, on the behaviour of human beings vis-à-vis the material universe, as well as human interactions among themselves and between them and the supernatural forces. It challenges our excessive and exaggerated self-interest and loss of interest in others and how intricate our relationship with them could be. Relational turn marks a departure from the understanding of our manner of being in the world and the way created realities interact with one another. It invites us to radically reconsider and reconceptualize being and our position in the world in terms of connectedness and relatedness, such that to be human is to be relational, to be implicated in the life of the other, making us bear mutual responsibility to one another.

This understanding of the way of being in the world is very much ensconced in the Igbo understanding of the human person. The Igbo see relationality as constitutive of human identity or selfhood. For the Igbo, a human person is not a monad, an isolated individual, but one enmeshed in an intricate web of relationships, connections, and communions that he or she can do nothing about. To attempt to do something about this is to affirm the reality of this interconnectedness, and may inevitably lead to deeper and richer interconnectedness and relationships. The Igbo, very much rooted in their religious worldview, strongly believe that human beings are not only strongly tied to one another but more importantly to the multiplicity of spiritual beings and forces that inhabit the Igbo universe. They think about God, human beings, spiritual realities, death and afterlife in relational terms.

This paper uses a critical hermeneutical approach to show how the Igbo understanding of the human person is a veritable tool in understanding their thinking on relationality. This is hinged on the central position occupied by the human person in Igbo cosmology. It will be shown how this could be a major point of reference in promoting fraternity and unity among the people. Both from the philosophical and religious point of view, it holds a promise of hope and contains a salutary inspiration for forging a united humanity.

The author begins by examining the concept of relationality in Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, then Theology. This will help to bring about some conceptual clarifications on the concept. This will be followed by a critical analysis of the Igbo understanding of the human person and how this points inevitably to nature of the human person as relational. The author will also utilize some Igbo expressions that bear on this understanding of the human person to buttress the significance of relationality among the people.

Concept of Relationality

Generally, relationality pertains to the capacity or the character of beings to relate and interrelate, to affect and to be affected, to affiliate and to be affiliated to, etc, in diverse ways. Relationality allows us to view reality as fundamentally, naturally, and unavoidably relational. It touches the very root of existence and can sufficiently lay claim to the statement, “to be is to be in relation.” For human beings, relationality articulates that attribute by which we exist not as isolated monads, but as relational selves who are intricately interwoven in a complex web of interconnectedness and communion with one another and with other beings in the universe with which we establish contact – animals, objects, spiritual realities, sub-atomic particles. Nothing stands and can stand alone but in constant relation with others. This has varied implications in our conception of our humanity, human-human, human-divine or divine-human, human-animal or animal-human, human-material world or material world-human encounters and/or meetings.

This attribute is not accidental, but intrinsic to the constitution of subjectivity. It directly confronts the definition of the human person by Boethius (512) as “*naturae rationalis individua substantia*” (ch. III). As an “individual substance of a rational nature,” relationship does not form part of what makes us who we are; our rationality does, our individuality does. Boethius' definition presupposes that a human person can be perfectly understood in isolationist terms. This is also the case with the Cartesian understanding of the self as absolute individual consciousness. The “I” exists solely within the context of thought – the thinking self, so discrete, and absolved in thought, absolved in itself and the knowledge of itself in a disembodied and isolated fashion. Hence, the affirmation of Descartes (1911), “*Cogito ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”).

In what follows, the concept of relationality will be examined from the philosophical, theological and psychoanalytical points of view. We have chosen these because they are the ones most affected with the relational turn since the last century, especially as it relates to relationship among human beings.

Relationality in Philosophy

As a philosophical category, relationality is thought about within the context of plurality. It presupposes plurality in which its truth lies. According to Shults (2003) from Aristotle to the present, many philosophers have discussed about relation as a category. Aristotle assigns it a category distinct from substance but secondary to it. Similar trend was followed in the Middle Ages with the ontology of substance taking the primary place while relation was given a secondary one. Natural sciences turned significantly to relationality in the twentieth century, Shults notes, with the

developments in relativity and quantum theory. Shults insists that it was only in Immanuel Kant that a significant shift was noticed in philosophy from substance ontology to that of relation with Kant's inclusion of substance and accident under the category of relation. Hegel advanced this further in his dialectics by absolutizing relation. Hegel, Shults argues, did not make the Absolute a substance, but a dynamic subject. Shults also traced the history of relationality in philosophy through Kierkegaard, Charles Sanders Pierce, Whitehead and Emmanuel Levinas.

It is sufficiently clear that Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1978), which, according to Heidegger, was a move to recover the "question of being", that has long been forgotten, could also be seen as having provided a seminal or implicit idea on relationality that later developments within his own thought and in later philosophers would be based. Heidegger saw his project as an attempt to counter the Cartesian model of subjectivity. For some, like Dreyfus (1991), Heidegger accomplished this project. For Taminiaux (1991) Heidegger ended up falling into the same problem of Cartesian subjectivity that he set out to solve. Emmanuel Levinas holds a view similar to that of Taminiaux, as shall be shown later. That notwithstanding, this paper shows that Heidegger transcended the Cartesian subjectivity. His analysis of *Dasein* (being-there) as being-with (*Mitsein*) contains unmistakable relational account of being, but his discussion of anxiety, authenticity and being-towards-death leaves his philosophy open to accusations of solipsism; an accusation he openly denied, as shall be shown later.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger challenged any decontextualized notion of being or the self, but advanced the notion in which the self finds itself in the world as part of it and thus interacts with others. For Heidegger (1978), *Dasein*, in its finiteness, becomes a being that is inevitably and irreducibly immersed in the world and its activities. *Dasein* is simply thrown into existence, and being-with, being-in-the-world-with (*Mitwelt*), and being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) form fundamental aspects of its existence in the world. Our identity cannot be thought of outside this context of time and our being-in-the-world with the defining moment of death. Heidegger maintains that one can only experience death not through the death of others but through one's relation to one's death, which, for him, is the "possibility of impossibility" against which one's potentiality-for-being (*Seinkönnen*) is to be gauged.

Against Heidegger, Levinas (2000) argues that one can only experience death through the death of others, because death is beyond experience. *Dasein* cannot comprehend or grasp it. It is beyond mineness. It is about alterity, otherness and the responsibility arising therefrom. He asserts:

The death signified by the end could not measure the entire significance of death without becoming responsibility for another- by which one becomes oneself in reality: one becomes oneself through this untransferable, undelegatable responsibility. It is for the death of the other that I am responsible to the point of including myself in his death... I am responsible for the other in that he is mortal. The death of the other: therein lies the first death (p. 43).

Unlike Heidegger, for whom anxiety over my own death reveals who I am to me, Levinas argues that this revelation does not come from anxiety over my own death but that of the other. Reacting to accusations of solipsism in his ontology of *Dasein*, Heidegger (2001) asserts that “*Dasein* is essentially an issue for itself. At the same time, this *Dasein* is defined as originary Being-with-another. Therefore, *Dasein* is always concerned with others. Thus, the analytic of *Dasein* has nothing whatsoever to do with solipsism or subjectivism” (p. 116). In his analysis of affectivity, Heidegger (1978) uses the word *Befindlichkeit* to show how one can find oneself as well as use language to communicate this knowledge to another. This shows again that in our situatedness in the world, the other is already implicated in the discourse of the self.

Other philosophers built on Heidegger's ontology and developed their understanding of relationality. Gadamer's (1976, 1989) dialogical dimension of hermeneutics, Ricoeur's (1992) dialectics of selfhood and otherness, as well as Levinas' otherness or alterity exemplify this. Due to want of space, only Levinas' elaboration of relationality in his works will be discussed in what follows.

At the centre of Levinas' notion of human subjectivity is the essential intersubjectivity and interrelationality in which ethical responsibility reverberates ceaselessly. One is primordially, naturally, and essentially in solidarity with the other-than-onself. According to Levinas (1985), the mere presence of the other irresistibly and unavoidably makes me responsible for the other. This is an intrinsic relationality, where the other's presence calls me to responsibility. This responsibility, Levinas argues, is inescapable and is without anticipation of reciprocity or compensation either in this world or in the thereafter. “I am responsible for the other,” he notes, “without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it” (p. 98). I am thus not for myself, but for the other, who calls me to responsibility. It is a responsibility that precedes my freedom. The call to responsibility from the other is recognized not through words from the other but by his or her presence. So, responsibility for the other is therefore part of subjectivity and not its simple attribute, as if subjectivity pre-exists it (p. 96).

Levinas (1998) sees the other's face not merely as an object, but as an untainted expression, the epiphany of which affects me before ever I become conscious of it. In

the face-to-face encounter, the face of the other appeals to my responsibility. The other's epiphany affects me, in spite of myself. The other first chooses me before ever I welcome the choice made of me (p. 122). I become responsible to the other without my choice of becoming so. I am already made responsible before the question of choice comes to the fore. This does not diminish my freedom, but instead relieves me from the burden and the overwhelming weight of my having to make this initial choice. This is not coercion but way of being. According to Buggrave (2008), what this means is that before ever I become conscious of myself, my responsibility to the other is already established. I am involved in, and responsible, to the other before I become aware of it or before I actively and consciously become involved and responsible. It happens before I actively contract any form of relationship. In other words, I am already held by the other's fate prior to choosing to allow myself to be held by it. Freedom is therefore preceded by fraternity (p. 4-5).

Apart from beckoning on me or summoning me to responsibility, the other's presence, in its nudity and defencelessness, Levinas notes, also commands me; a command that is impossible to evade (1969, p. 34). According to him, in its defencelessness or vulnerability, the face of the other commands me not to kill (1985, p. 86); that is, as Buggrave notes (2008), it commands me not to forsake, humiliate, reject, disdain, or oppress, but rather to recognize and to encourage the other, as well as take its well-being seriously. Nevertheless, I am ethically free to either respond to the appeal, summon, or command, or no to, to acknowledge or to ignore it, or to pretend not to be aware of it (p. 9-10).

In *Otherwise Than Being* (1978), Levinas stretches the responsibility of the self for the other to such an extent that the self seems to exist for no reason other than for the other. The self is thus subjected to the other as well as held hostage by its responsibility for the other, even to the point of complete denial of the self (p. 114). The "I" does not choose to be held hostage by the other. It cannot but be, because that is its condition of being, and it is in supporting the other, in spending itself for the other that it finds its independence (p. 136).

Relationality in Psychoanalysis

Many recent researches in psychoanalysis have focused on how psychoanalysis is basically constituted by relational and mutual exchange between the analyst and the analysand. This relational approach highlights the significance of the relational matrix in which we are inextricably implicated and how it can help to explain intra-subjective psychic experiences (Aron, 1996). According to Aron, unlike the traditional psychoanalysis, like the Freudian, that offers biological explanation to the origin of motivations, thus stressing the role of the unconscious drives in determining

our motivations, relational psychoanalysis stresses the importance of real experiences, interactions, and interpersonal relations in shaping our motivations. Here intersubjectivity, and not a unidirectional analysis, is always involved in any investigation of the mind. The analyst is not understood as merely interpreting the mind of the analysand/patient in a one-way fashion. Instead, there is mutuality and reciprocity of influence in psychoanalytical relationship.

Stephen Mitchell (1988), one of the foremost scholars of relational psychoanalysis, believes that the human mind is basically and naturally social. According to him, humans cannot but be inevitably drawn to, and involved with, one another, because it is an inescapable, fundamental, psychological reality (p. 21). As regards infants, he observes that “Relatedness is not a means to some other end (tension reduction, pleasure or security); the very nature of the infant draws him into relationship” (p. 24). For Lewis Kirshner (2017), the best way of understanding analytic relationship is to see it as a semiotic process involving a dialogical exchange of signs between two subjects. For him, concentration on the actual content of the exchange between analysts and the analysands, more than the contents of the patient's mind, is the best way to work with a patient.

Relationality in Christian Theology

The Christian faith is basically a trinitarian faith. It is a faith in God that is one and triune; God characterized by the communion and relation of the three divine persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who are substantially one (Medley 2002, p. 1-2). According to Okonkwo (2003) the mystery of the Blessed Trinity affirms one God who is not solitary but a community; a community of three persons who are eternally distinct, but also eternally consubstantial and co-essential. So, God is one in Trinity and Trinity in one. While by their relations, three persons can be named, by their nature or substance, only one God can be identified. Further, in the communion of the three divine persons, in the intra-trinitarian life, there is compenetration, interpenetration, and co-inherence of one another in such a way that each of the divine persons is wholly and fully in the others – divine *perichoresis*. Some biblical passages, like John 10:30; 10:33; I Cor 2:10, shed light on this incontrovertible reality (p. 161-163). The Holy Spirit is the principle of this communion, this compenetration among the divine persons in their threefold hypostatic existence.

But the relationality of God is not limited to the intra-trinitarian life of the three divine persons. His extra-trinitarian life equally attests to this in unmistakable fashion. This is first manifest in God's creative activity in the Book of Genesis that reaches its apex in His creation of the human being in His own image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27). As Okonkwo asserts, “The creation of human beings is the first movement

of God towards the invitation of the other than Himself to share his inner divine life” (p. 167). By the creation of the human being, God establishes a relationship with humanity. In Christ, who is the highest revelation of God to humanity, the salvific work of God for us was accomplished, and in the Holy Spirit, He continues to sanctify humanity so as to extend this salvific work in the world. In other words, God's extra-trinitarian life is also basically characterized by relationship.

For human beings to be created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*) is to invite them to manifest, so to speak, the intra-trinitarian life of God among themselves in their limited uniqueness as humans. To bear the image of God is to bear the image that not only shows the unity of the Godhead, but also the communitarian, relational, and compenetrating characteristic of the divine persons. Thus, *imago Dei* becomes *imago Trinitatis*, which, as Medley (2003) rightly notes, “indicates openness, transcendentality, alterity, participation, and relatedness. Hence, human beings are created for loving communion and interconnection with the Divine, with one another, and with all creation” (p. 2). It has to do with our relation with God, His with us, ours with ourselves, and between us and other created realities. As the bearers of the image of the triune God, we are challenged to acknowledge the incompatibility with our nature of solipsism and individualism, and the invaluable significance of interdependence. Medley claims that, once this is well understood, we would realize that “The human person is not a static self with fixed boundaries but a fluctuating confluence of relationships with perforated boundaries. Since our 'I-ness' is constituted in our 'we-ness' human persons are connected in order to become a self-in-relation” (p. 3).

The trinitarian theology of LaCugna also points to the inevitability of the Christian experience of the Trinity indicating the essential intersubjective and interpersonal understanding of personhood. For LaCugna (1991), to exist as a person is to exist as a relational being in complete self-reference to others (p. 289). She argues that we are not created as closed units but with openness to all realities, and to be saved as a Christian is to live in communion with others. According to her, this is the ideal to which our Christian faith and life should be directed (p. 292).

The ontological interdependence and/or relationality among humans is also attested to by the declaration of God in the Bible that “It is not good for the human [*’āḏām*] to be alone” (Gen 2:18). Thus, He created Eve, with whom Adam could enter into a relationship. According to Westermann (1987), this creation account in the second chapter of Genesis “acknowledges that people do not find the true meaning of life in the mere fact of existence.... But people find the meaning of life only in human community; it is only this that makes true humanity” (p. 222). The oneness of humanity, our unrelenting relatedness to one another is also symbolized in the

creation of Eve from the rib of Adam, which made Adam exclaim, “This time she is the flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones” (Gen 2:23). John Paul II (2006) refers to this as “*somatic homogeneity*” that reveals their common human identity (p. 161).

The Human Person in Igbo Thought: Religio-Philosophical Enquiry

The knowledge of peoples' language provides a medium for understanding their mode of thinking. The way they think about things and situations is manifest in the words they use to describe those things and situations, because of the interdependence of language and thought (Nwankwo, 2018; Shmidt 1995, p. 52). That is why it is expedient and appropriate to begin the enquiry into the concept of the human person in Igbo thought by first examining the Igbo word for it – *mmadu* (some people use *madu* with the elision of the first “m”). There is a variety of opinions among scholars regarding the etymology of *mmadu*. For Edeh (1985), it is a derivative of the combination of two words: *mma*, meaning “good,” “a good,” “the good,” or “goodness” and *di*. *Di* is derived from the infinitive *idi*, meaning, “to be.” *Mmadu*, therefore, means the “good that is” (p. 100). Thus, *di* is used in the affirmative sense. Nevertheless, the goodness expressed in the identity of *mmadu* is understood by the Igbo as merely a participated goodness consequent upon our creation by God, who alone is thought of by them as good *in se*, the highest good. The peculiar participation of human beings in the goodness of God places them in a unique position among other creatures in relation to God (Edeh, 97; See also Metuh, 1985, p. 96; Obiego, 1984, p. 65-66; Udeani, 2007, p. 32-33).

Obiego (p. 65) and Arazu (1978, p. 112-116) have a nuanced view regarding the meaning of *du* in *mmadu*. According to them, *du* should be understood as an imperative form of the English infinitive “to be.” In this sense, *mmadu* would mean “let there be goodness.” For Isiguzo, Ukagba, and Otakpor (2004, p. 233), and Okafor (1982, p. 99), *mmadu* is a derivative of a combination of *mma* and *ndu* (life). Literally, *mmadu* would mean the beauty of life, the goodness of life, or the ultimate point of life. Even though Isiguzo et al. appraises Edeh's account of *mmadu* as the “good that is,” due to the fact that, according to them, “the basic ingredient is present,” they describe as “unfortunate” his change of *du* in *mmadu* to *di* and *idi* (p. 235). They seem to forget that they also employed some modifications to the word in order to arrive at their own conclusions, by introducing the letter “n”, which is not in *mmadu*, in order to arrive at *ndu* (life). Besides, they failed to explain the origin of the “n” and why it was introduced.

In sum, *mma*, as used in *mmadu*, can either mean “beauty,” “good,” or “goodness.” Since *mmadu* is a generic, non-gendered term, referring to all humans, it means that both men and women are fundamentally good and are the crown of the

beauty of all created realities. The participation of *mmadu* in the goodness of God therefore orients him or her in the relationship he or she has with God, the creator. He or she is expected to exhibit this goodness in relation to God and other created realities among whom he stands out as the hallmark. And the goodness of *mmadu* embraces such attributes as love, peace, patience, humility, kindness, etc., that make people able to live as one with one another.

Spiritual and Corporeal Aspects of *Mmadu*

Mmadu has both corporeal and spiritual aspects, *ahụ* and *mmụọ*. *Ahụ* is the body, the physical way of human existence and presence in the world (Nwala 1985, p. 43). *Ahụ* can be physically located because it occupies space and is temporal in existence. It is an avenue through which the person is expressed. Through it, the spiritual is revealed in its embodied form. *Ahụ* expresses the human person in his or her maleness or femaleness, as the case may be, and the reciprocity and communion in the relation of the two sexes to each other. *Ahụ* reveals the finitude or perishability and vulnerability of humans, their weaknesses, their interdependence on one another and dependence on higher, spiritual beings in the Igbo universe.

For Okere (1996), however, *ahụ* is an ambiguous term, expressing both the tangible and the intangible aspects of *mmadu*, depending on the context. According to him, whenever the Igbo specifically want to express the tangible aspect of *ahụ*, they usually employ *anụ ahụ* (p. 154-155). But Okere appears to have missed the point here. It does not look as if there is such ambiguity, as he posits. In Igbo, the word, *anụ*, could mean either an animal or meat. *Anụohia* (combination of *anụ* and *ohia*, where *ohia* means forest or bush) means wild animal, while *anụulo* (combination of *anụ* and *ulo*, where *ulo* means home or house) denotes tamed animal. The Igbo use of *anụ ahụ* is simply to lay more emphasis on the corporeal or physical nature of *ahụ*, and nothing more.

Mmadu shares this material aspect of his existence with other animals (*anụohia* and *anụulo*) and other created realities with similar attributes in the Igbo universe. He or she touches, feels, smells, tastes, hears through the medium of *ahụ*. *Mmadu* communicates his or her inner convictions and dispositions through *ahụ* because of its visibility, physicality, tangibility, and palpability.

Mmadu shares the spiritual or immaterial aspect of his or her existence with one another and with other spiritual realities in the Igbo universe. The spiritual aspect of *mmadu* connects him or her with God, deities, spirits, and ancestors. Even though *mmadu* possesses these two aspects, in Igbo traditional anthropology, *mmadu* is not thought of in a dichotomous fashion, as it has been with some schools of thought in the western tradition where humans are said to be made up of two conflicting

principles of body and soul. For the Igbo, the human person is a unit. According to Metuh (1981, p. 85-86; 1985, p. 96), when a person is still alive, he or she is thought of by the Igbo as existing in a material bodily form; at death, he or she assumes a spiritual form, yet without being thought of as having been split.

The spiritual aspect of *mmadu*, that is, *mmuo*, is understood to be composed of some principles. In some accounts, three of these principles of *mmuo* are identified: *Obi*, *Eke* or *Agu* and *Chi*; in other accounts, a fourth is added – *mmuo* or *onyinyo*. Thus, *mmuo* can be understood in two ways – as the spiritual aspect of human existence (see above) and as a principle in the spiritual aspect of his or her existence. According to Metuh (1985), depending on the context, one “can operate in one or more of these” (p. 96). Other African societies have varying number of these spiritual principles. The Bambara of Mali, for instance, have four pairs (eight) of them in each person. For the Asante of Ghana, they are seven (Uzokwu, 1996, p. 36).

Obi can be roughly translated as “breath,” and is believed to be inherent in the human heart, which also goes by the name, *obi*. It is perceived as the heart's spiritual component, the seat of emotions, free will, and morality (Metuh 1985, 97; Okere 1996, p.154). It is also regarded as a person's life-force that connects him or her with other celestial forces. It is believed that, with magic, witchcraft or other rituals, *obi* can either be weakened or strengthened and does not survive death (Metuh 1981, 87-88; 1985, 97).

Eke is the principle associated with the Igbo traditional concept of reincarnation. It connects one with his or her ancestors or kindred. Metuh (1981, p. 88) refers to it as “an ancestral shade incarnate in each newly born baby.” *Eke* is usually assigned to each person at birth by God. A person's *eke* usually comes from either the spirit of a departed family member, someone close to the family, or a deity. A diviner identifies which *eke* has reincarnated in an individual. In the traditional religion, some rituals are usually performed at the grave of the person whose *eke* it is that reincarnates in the newly born, in order to give it a befitting welcome. The Igbo believe that the physical features or behaviour of any Igbo child usually resembles that of his or her *eke*. It is, as Metuh (1981; 1985) describes it, the ontological and spiritual bond that connects a person with the life-force of his or her ancestral lineage, thus, interlinking together people of the same descent. This guarantees an unbroken line of succession from parents to their offspring, generation after generation. It is in this sense that *eke* is thought of as assisting in the creative activity of God.

Mmuo – spirit or shadow, Metuh (1981) demonstrates, represents the shadowy manifestation of a person before birth, after birth and after death. According to him, it seems to be “the real self” directly made by God in the first stage of his creative act before ever the self is assigned its specific *chi* and *eke*. During a person's life on earth, his or her *mmuo* is thought of as his or her full person, though in a shadowy form (p.

87-90). Uzukwu (1996) has noted the existence of myths in several societies in West Africa, including the Igbo, confirming the pre-existence of every human person in the form of a spirit (*mmuo*) before birth (p. 36). The Igbo also believe that dreams result from the roaming about of a person's *mmuo* while he or she is asleep (Nwala, 1985, p. 40).

Okere (1996) regards *mmuo* as “the spiritual and most intimate manifestation of the self” (p.160). As regards its function in humans, he describes it as “the cause or principle of life” (p.153). The Igbo believe that people are able to communicate with spiritual beings in the Igbo universe through their *mmuo*. That is why the traditional diviners, priests, fortune tellers, elders and other religious functionaries, who are believed to communicate and associate with the spiritual beings regularly and in peculiar ways, are often described as *ndi oje na mmuo*, that is, those who operate at the realm of *mmuo*. *Mmuo* is also believed to incorporate elements of passions, conscience, and emotional states of a person (Nwala, 1985, p. 31-32,34). When a person dies, it is said of him or her that *mmuo ya ahapugo ya* – his or her *mmuo* has left him or her. It survives the death of the person. In fact, once dead, one exists as *mmuo*. That is why, according to Metuh (1985), the dead are conceptualised as existing in “a sort of unquantified body, imagined to be like shadow of a man on a sunny day... Hence it is the full individual person not a part of him or his soul which survives after death” (p. 96). *Mmuo* does not represent the Christian soul, as Isiguzo et al. (2004) would like us to believe. When the spirit – *mmuo* – of an ancestor appears among the living, Nwala (1985) notes, the people usually see it taking the particular “form in which the ancestor died as a human being” (p. 37).

The fourth principle, *chi*, is believed to be a spark of God in the human person, given to each by *Chukwu* (the Supreme Being) at the point of creation. The British Anthropologist, Percy Talbort (1926) describes it as “a kind of transcendental self... the Over-Soul” (p. 276). Others describe it variously as one's “other identity in spiritland – his *spirit being* complementing his terrestrial *human being*” (Achebe 1975, p. 93), a person's “particular portion of the divine being” (Ilogu 1974, p. 34), a “part of God in man, or a divine part of man” (Okere 1996, p. 156, Ikenga-Metuh 1976, p. 10). It also bears such functional meanings as one's destiny – *akaraaka* (Okpala, 2002; Achebe p. 97; Ejizu, 1992 p. 386), or one's personal guard or providence (Metuh, 1981, p. 69; Isichei 1976, p.25).

In a sense, the concept of *chi* is based on the Igbo principle of duality; a principle grounded on the conviction that nothing stands alone (*ihe kwuru ihe a kwudobe ya*); that everything physical has a spiritual counterpart. Each individual and his or her *chi* are so inseparably related that no human person can exist on earth without his or her *chi* (Achebe, 1975, p. 93-94). Ejizu (1992) argues that, though one's *chi*, being the

closest ally of a person, complements him or her throughout his or her terrestrial life, it still retains its spiritual nature and dwelling. It interacts closely with other spiritual beings, deities, ancestors, and forces in the Igbo universe, interceding on behalf of its human counterpart for a more fulfilling life on earth.

Relationality in the Igbo Understanding of the Human Person

According to Uzukwu (1996) relationality is a shared feature behind the conception of the human person in West Africa. As he states, it is the ontological constituent of the subject and not just an avenue through which the subject realizes itself. This extends to other parts of Africa. To buttress this, Uzukwu refers to a proverb of the Sotho people of Southern Africa that says that a person “is human because of others, with others, and for others” (p. 37). The famous African maxim: “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am” (Mbiti 1969, p.109) captures this well. Thus, it is impossible to conceive a person as an isolated entity shorn of connections with other beings in the universe. Udeani (2007) puts it this way: “the African individual is not an individual purely and exclusively in contrast to the others but is principally relational: one is in an individual-communal/interdependent relationship with the rest in an ontological as well as in a spiritual sense of the word” (p. 64).

This is especially the case with the Igbo. The preceding examination of Igbo understanding of the human person clearly bears witness to the Igbo conviction that a human person is constituted by a network of relationships. Through *mmuo*, a person is connected with other spiritual beings; through *chi*, he or she is linked in a special way to *Chukwu*, the Supreme Being; *eke* ontologically links him or her to his or her lineage and the ancestors, while his or her *obi* connects him or her with other life-forces in the Igbo universe. In this sense, then, no person can basically be thought of in isolation from the complexity of relationships, be they physical, spiritual, human or non-human in which he or she is inseparably involved. The “I” does not first exist as an isolated entity and then gets involved in relationships. On the contrary, to exist is to be involved in relationships. It is a constituent part of the self. There is no other available option. To exist is to coexist; it is to exist in a community populated by other humans and a host of spiritual beings that are inevitably involved in a convoluted relationship with one another. It is the primary way in which one exists in the world. It is only within this community setting that one is able to achieve his or her life aspirations.

A person is, therefore, fully understood in terms of his or her belongingness to others, and not otherwise. That is why, according to Metuh (1985) it is rare in the traditional Igbo village to see people asking others, “who are you?” The usual question would be, “whose son or daughter are you?” Alternatively, “which kindred

or clan are you from?” (p. 99). A person's destiny is believed to unfold within this community-oriented context. He or she needs the support of the human community as well as the spiritual beings, especially his or her *chi*, the deities, and the ancestors. Failure to take this seriously may antagonise him or her with the whole community, which can lead to huge problems (Ndukaihe 2006, p. 244-245).

The life of each member of the community is seen as a continuation of a single life received from a common ancestor, and ultimately from one God. Examining the implications of this among Africans in general, Ndukaihe (2006) notes:

They do not consider the outward differences human beings have. The important thing for the Africans is this unitive factor, which is the single life rewarded to the first created parents... One can say that life unites the family in its primary and extended form and makes humankind to be equal (p. 249).

In this sense, a person is understood fundamentally as “subsistent relationship;” hence, to be is to be with, to live with and to belong to (Uzokuwu, 1996, p. 42-43). Though the Igbo understand full well that it is individuals that make up the community, they also know that individuals cannot exist without or outside the community, comprising both the living and the dead. Okere (1996) notes in this regard that “the self is a congenitally communitarian self, incapable of being, existing and really unthinkable – except in the complex of relations of the community” (p. 160). Indeed, by the very constitution of personhood, a person is already a “community” of relationships, so to say, among the different principles of which he or she is ontologically constituted – *chi*, *eke*, *obi*, and *mmuo* – an intra-ontological relationality within the individuality of the self that is further irresistibly relational and interdependent in relation to other-than-self.

Some Igbo proverbs and wise sayings capture well this relationality. These are explored below.

Otu Onye Adighi Akari Oha

The above Igbo saying encapsulates an aspect of Igbo relationality implied in the individual-community relationship. It expresses the superiority of the community over the individuals who make up the community. It is true that it is the individuals who come together to form a community of relationships, no single individual, no matter how great he or she may claim to be, can ever be greater than the community of which he or she forms part. Achebe (1964) in his novel, *Arrow of God*, puts it this way, “no man however great was greater than his people... no one ever won judgment against his clan” (p.230). For the Igbo, not to belong is equivalent to nonexistence. It is in the light of this that one can understand their traditional use of ostracism to punish those who commit serious and abominable crimes in the society.

Otu Mkpịsị Aka Rụta Mmanụ O Zuo Ọha Ọnụ

Literally, the above proverb can be rendered in English thus: when one finger is dipped in oil, the oil touches the rest of the fingers. The proverb could be understood as an ethical affirmation of communal dimension of personal sin or it could be an ontological affirmation. In either case, the basic thrust of the saying is the expression of the implication of the interdependence of human existence, wherein one's existence, wellbeing, successes, and failures are intimately implicated in the failures, successes, wellbeing, and existence of the community. In this sense, one should not just be concerned about his or her own affairs but also consider how his or her actions and/or inactions affect others, for it is in the survival of the whole that his or her own survival depends.

From the positive dimension, this could probably explain why in Igbo society people who are specially gifted in one form or another are usually expected to look for ways of contributing to the growth of their respective communities, otherwise they would not be regarded by the community as worthy sons and daughters of the land. If, for instance, someone is known to be very wealthy abroad but his or her wealth is not felt by his people back home, they would most certainly regard the person as one who is not in his or her right senses – a lost citizen, so to say (Uchendu p. 34,37). Herskovits observes this character of the Igbo people even among the Igbo slaves transported to Haiti at the time of slave trade.

With regard to evil (*ajọ ihe*) and punishment, the above proverb points to the Igbo belief that an evil does not just affect an individual, but could also have serious social and spiritual consequences for the entire community. An evil (*ajọ ihe*) could be either physical or moral. It could also be offenses against the supernatural forces that upset the relationship between them and human beings – *nsọ*, the most grievous of which is *nsọ Ala* that is committed against the Earth Deity. *Nsọ Ala* disrupts natural and societal order. There is also a class of offences called *arụ* or abomination, like abortion, murder, theft of yam. This is the most grievous of offences committed against nature (Metuh 1981, p. 110). Such abominations (*arụ*) pollute the land, as well as offend the supernatural forces in the Igbo universe. To restore normalcy in the relationship between the spiritual forces and human beings, the community does ritual cleansing and/or expiation (*ikpu arụ*) to appease the supernatural forces, and thus avert the consequences of such *arụ* on the community. If this is not done, the supernatural forces offended are believed to visit the community with varying degrees of punishments.

Aka Nri Kwoo Aka Ekpe, Aka Ekpe Akwoo Aka Nri

A literal translation of the above proverb goes this way: if the right hand washes the left hand, the left should also wash the right. This emphasizes mutual help and reciprocity that is expected in any relationship among the people. It portrays our need for one another, for no one can go it alone but in collaboration with others. In certain instances, one needs the assistance of others, and in others instances, others would need one's. Both humans and spirits need one another for proper harmony of the whole system. Hence, among the Igbo, a loner and a secretive person is deeply detested and avoided by the people. As Uchendu (1965) observes, "A relationship that is one-sided, either in its obligation or in its reward system, does not last long among them" (p.15).

Igwebuike

The philosophical maxim, *igwebuike* – community is strength or number is strength – also embodies this principle of relationality, a relationality that finds its realization in the community spirit and its strength. According to Kanu (2017), *Igwebuike* emphasizes the significance of group solidarity, and how powerful a force their togetherness could be, each complementing the other. Kanu describes it as Igbo way of expressing relatedness and harmony as constituting the essence of our humanity, that one's humanity is implicated in the other, thus the need to treat the other with dignity, and be willing to share and help the other. This breeds solidarity, which Onwubiko (1991) has described as: such a vital value that individuals cannot but work and identify themselves with it. The rights and duties of individuals appear as elements of corporate rights and duties so that the solidarity of the unity is stressed but not at the expense of the individual's private interests or loyalties that ultimately do not disrupt the community (p.15).

This ensures communal living and togetherness; values which, though already weakened by the combined forces of modernisation, urbanisation, globalisation and capitalism, have resiliently managed to survive.

Conclusion

It has been made clear in this paper the significance of the recent turn to relationality among scholars in the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and theology, and how the Igbo traditional thought, especially with regard to the concept of the human person, has ever been relational. This means that, in Igbo thought, there is no such relational turn, because the Igbo have ever thought about the human person in relational terms. It is a way of thinking that has been embedded in their traditional wisdom and philosophy for ages. For them, relationality has, from time immemorial, been an unnegotiable ontological reality.

Relationality helps us to think of the human person not in the absolutizing, solipsistic, and isolation manner, but as one involved in an intricate and unavoidable relation to and with others. So, if the Igbo people should come to terms with the implications of the interconnectedness of all human beings in the society, especially the basic equality and unity it embodies, women as well as men will not be, or feel, alienated in any way. If one understands that he or she exists because of and for the other, and that his or her existence and wellbeing is implicated in the wellbeing and existence of the other, then, he or she would refrain from treating the other with disdain, since it entails the maltreatment of oneself, so to say. It also affects the very basis of his or her personhood, which is anchored on the interconnectedness of all. Besides, since living in isolation from others is strange to the Igbo, there is no reason any section or segment of the population should consciously be isolated from most of the opportunities and privileges within the society based on any social variable.

If to exist is to belong, then, to exclude is to deny one the right to exist, so to speak. To treat anyone as not fully belonging to the community is, in the least, a way of saying they do not fully exist. If we are all created by one God, and share in His being by way of personal *chi*, as well as belong to one single family, then, love, equality, mutual help, and respect should pervade all our undertakings. There should be no room for segregation and oppression that is witnessed on daily basis in Igbo society.

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