

## **BELONGINGNESS AND IGWEBUIKE: TOWARDS AN AFRICAN METAPHYSICS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNAL RELATIONSHIP**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper appreciates Belongingness and Igwebuike as the African-Igbo metaphysics of effective communal relationship. The researcher, through the method of critical analysis discovered that every being is part of a whole and no being can be identified except in the whole, that is what a being is and in proper sense, a being belongs. The being is therefore the basis of the 'Igwe'. 'Igwebuike' (strength in complementarity) can only be possible if we truly belong to our community, can be identified in our society, are responsible, can give and accept all expressions of love. Since a tree cannot make a forest, let us come together in perfect integration and get ourselves identified by understanding that we are nothing except in the whole of which we are part of.*

**Keywords:** Belongingness, Igwebuike, African Communalist Metaphysics

### **Introduction**

The individual is not self sufficient but has many needs which he cannot supply to himself. Hence, human beings agreed to submit voluntarily to a system and were bound to live in unison and solidarity. Through deep experiences as creatures, human beings realized their insufficiency and dependency. They discovered that they need each other to live a contented life. These experiences of life gave recourse to the idea of complementarity as a measure to survive the challenges posed by other vicissitudes of life. Inter-dependency, inter-relationship, collectivism and mutual co-existence form the basis for Igbo life pattern as expressed in Igwebuike and Belongingness: the metaphysics of effective communal relationship.

Being means the existence of a thing. Anything that exists has being. Anything that partakes in being is also a being. Being is a concept encompassing objective and subjective features of reality and existence (Wikipedia). Before these individual persons can come together to form a community as in "Igwe", they must exist, which is 'to be'. They must exist possibly in a nuclear family, which

automatically makes them the members of an extended family, kindred, a clan and a community. The individuals, therefore, form the basis of Igwe. They must belong.

Belongingness is a fundamental quality in understanding being. No being can be understood in terms of its completeness but in its relation to other beings. Every being is defined by a relation to something or with an attribute of engaging in something. This fact of '*beingness*', which is a form of relation, is a form of belonging to, belonging with, and belonging in. Relation therefore, becomes a kind of state by which being realizes itself among others and others within it. This relation spells out a place where being realizes itself, a place of social reality, a kind of integrated universe, in John Donne's word: "...A piece of the continent, a part of the main..." This relational form or way of belonging as an integral universe is not a differential one but a fundamental or ontological integration. And for this particular being in itself, it is through this fact of belongingness that it integrates itself in reality (Onebunne, 2019, p. 29-30).

This is to say that being belongs and this belongingness is a fundamental condition for a thing to be considered a reality. To this end, being and belongingness are said to be ontological. Reality therefore, is better known and understood by the concept of belongingness. In other words, reality or being, in its total manifestation, is a process involving belongingness. In this form of belongingness, reality is a given entity that needs continuous existential understanding and development. Without belongingness, there would be no discussion on being. Whatever is part of reality belongs to something. To understand being as belongingness, it must be understood in its relation to others. Belongingness however, overshadows these existential facts of operations. This notion of belongingness is clearly reflected in John Donne's (1996) poem:

No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

Being's identity, therefore is in belongingness. Belongingness identifies being as such. Being's nature is in belonging. Its role is in belonging. Its mode and operations are in belonging. Belongingness, as such, is the ontological value of being. By belongingness being, is related to other beings by relationship of what it is or does. In understanding being as belongingness on the onto-relational

level, there should be, as Iroegbu (1995, p.374), opines solidarity of belongingness in being and solidarity of being in belongingness, in the manner in which we exist and relate in the reality of being and belongingness: complementarity

Belongingness holds that our existence as human beings, as well as our integral participation in the society in which we find ourselves, are to be defined by our being given the sense and substance of belongingness.

Being as belongingness is necessitated while comprehending being as expressing itself, thereby, rolling into belongingness in its general and fundamental character and attribute. Often, the question is, can being be without belongingness? Echoing Jean-Paul Sartre, there is no being which is not the being of a certain mode of belonging, a certain mode of existence.

Igbo communalism is expressed in living together and sharing responsibilities. The traditional Igbo society has a great asset in its practice of a mode of life called communalism. This is the bedrock and the result of a wonderful relationship prevalent in the Igbo-African community as well as the purpose of the existence of the Igbo community in particular and Africa in general. In the light of the above and in recognition of the ontological and trajectory relationship of living together and sharing responsibilities, the Igwebuiké philosophy was developed as an authentic traditional Igbo life pattern which is practiced till date. The concept of Igwebuiké has its nearest English equivalent to the idea of communalism expressed in the sense of Njikoka (togetherness is greatest), Ibuanyidanda [No load is insurmountable for the ant (danda)], Ahamefula (My name should not be lost), Onye aghala nwanne ya (Be your brother's keeper), Egbe bere ugo bere (Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch).

#### Concept of Belongingness

Belongingness is the human emotional need to be an acceptable member of a group. Whether it is family, friends, co-workers, a religion, or something else, people tend to have an inherent desire to belong and to be an important part of something. This is a relationship that is greater than simple acquaintance or familiarity. The need to belong is the need to give and receive attention to and from others.

Belongingness is a strong and inevitable feeling that exists in human nature. Without belongingness, one cannot identify himself. Renowned philosophers

have argued that belongingness is such a fundamental human motivation that we feel severe consequences of not belonging. The desire is so universal that the need to belong is found across all cultures and amidst different types of people (Wikipedia).

Belonging simply means to fit in, to feel right and to be in the right place. It means to be identified, to be appreciated, to be responsible, to be loved and to love.

### **Concept of Igwebuike**

Igwebuike can be transliterated as “Strength in complementarity”. Literarily, this means that there is a force that is associated with number. Even the Bible asserts to this that one shall chase a thousand and two put ten thousand... (Deuteronomy 32:30). The Igwebuike philosophy according to Kanu, (2017, p. 1-2). is based on the Igbo-African complementarity, that is, the manner of being in African ontology. It is a worldview in which individuating differences must work towards a corporate existence where the ‘I’ does not stand as the ‘I’. This kind, difference does not divide neither does it constitute a threat, but rather unites and gives hope that future existence would have meaning. In a cosmogony of this kind, while the ontology of the person is founded on the particularity of the individual, implying that it is the metaphysics of the particular that founds identity, it is the community that gives meaning to such an existence and grounds such identity.

### **Meaning of Human Relationship**

Communal relationships are those where an individual assumes responsibility for the welfare of another. In these relationships, when the other has a specific need, wants support in striving towards a goal, would enjoy being included in an activity, or simply could use the reassurance of care, another strives to be responsive. Importantly, they do so with no strings attached. In each case, the benefit enhances or maintains the welfare of the recipient, and the recipient incurs no debt. Communal relationships can be either strong or weak.

In strong communal relationships, one assumes a great deal of responsibility for the other and would do almost anything, unconditionally, to promote his or her welfare. Parents often have very strong communal relationships with their children, putting their child’s welfare above their own welfare and spending years providing emotional and tangible support.

In very weak communal relationships, one assumes just a small amount of responsibility for another's welfare, yet within the bounds of that small sense of responsibility, the person is unconditionally responsive to the other person. Most communal relationships fall somewhere in between these extremes of very high and quite low communal strength.

People have implicit hierarchies of communal relationships ordered according to the degree of communal responsibility they feel for others. At the base are the many strangers and passing acquaintances for whom small courtesies may be provided without expecting a specific, precisely equal repayment. Higher in the hierarchy are relationship with colleagues and casual friends, higher yet are relationships with closer friends and a variety of relations. For many people, relationship with best friends, immediate family members and romantic partners are near or at the top. The needs of those higher in the hierarchy take precedence over the needs of those lower in the hierarchy.

Although some communal relationships may be universal and even dictated by biology or social dictates, others are voluntary. The exact nature of hierarchies will from person to person and, certainly, from culture to culture.

### **Belongingness and Igwebuiké expressed as Njikoka**

Njikoka is the African-Igbo philosophy of integrative humanism. Integrative humanism is the philosophical orientation that sees reality as having both physical and spiritual dimensions, past and present; as well as harmonized framework in which seemingly opposed variables unite without contradiction to achieve progress and epistemic wholeness. Njikoka is the act of coming together and integrating ourselves into a whole. It is having a place in one's heart where every other person dwells, for when you are in that place in me, and I am in that place in you, we are knitted by a strong bond into a whole. In like manner you share my pain and I share yours. Belongingness and Igwebuiké expressed in Njikoka conforms to the philosophy of "Ubuntu" (I am because we are). The Igbo express it by seeing yourself in me and I seeing myself in you. Because I see myself in you, I will value you as much as I value myself bearing in mind that whatever affects you, affects me. In Njikoka, the community is placed first before the self and the interest of others before one's personal interest. The essence of integrative humanism is to show that through insights we can provide answers to most of the questions that confront us in our daily lives by means of collective responsibility (Chimakonam, 2011).

Integrative humanism is grounded on the Igbo cultural injunction “Njikokamma” which translates “To integrate is better than to disintegrate”. It is a human centered theory which derives its insights from the Igbo culture. This is expressed in the Igbo axiom of “Anyuko nwamiri onu ogboo ufufu” which is translated as “Unity is strength” bearing in mind that a tree cannot make a forest (Ofu osisi adighi emebe ofia). We need other human beings in order to be human. An Igbo man will always convey by his words and action the philosophy of “Somadina” translated as “May I never be alone” approving that loneliness is undesirable, but collectivity is the greatest (Chimakonam, 2011).

It also involves the act of subjecting oneself to the authority and responsibility of others in total simplicity. The persons act together by virtue of a structure of directed obligations. Being part of a community affects our daily life, attitude and character and greatly increases our power to act. Individuals receive great benefits from community membership. Those increased benefits and power comes with increasing responsibilities. Community has greater capacity to correct large-scale social problems; they checkmate some negative tendencies found in the life of individual members.

### **Belongingness and Igwebuiké expressed as Ibuanyidanda**

The permanent feature or behaviour pattern of Igbo social life is based on a logical system of thought and a complete positive philosophy expressed in Ibuanyidanda. The fact that the world is incomplete (Uwa ezu-oke) and nobody is complete (Onweghi onye ozuru) necessitates collectivism in action. Belongingness, Igwebuiké and Ibuanyidanda are Igbo philosophies which express collectivity. Collectively, we can surmount any obstacle, no matter how big or strong. Asouzu (2004,p.105). describes Igbo social life as complementarity which is a concretely lived experience of everyday life. According to him;

This idea derives from the general and fundamental human feeling of insufficiency and experience of relativity and fragmentation of historical process. From here arise the human fundamental inclination to solidarity, togetherness and community. In the same way arises all tendencies guiding such ideas as mutual co-existence, co-dependability, co-responsibility ... etc.

The essential nature of traditional Igbo social life is conveniently expressed in the above quote. It emerged as a result of the realization that the community is better able to wrest on themselves, the means of developing, sustaining and re-

producing themselves. Ibuanyidanda in this context is fundamentally a social relation of execution. It is the act of doing things together; the spirit of corporate existence, mutual assistance in work by all and the spirit of collective effort found among traditional Igbo people. The life of the Igbo is group participation in which each individual participates according to his natural ability. This explains the complementarity. For the traditional Igbo, Asouzu (1999) cited in Egwutuora (2013) says:

Without complementarity, human life would be unbearable isolated struggles that easily lead to self abandonment. We can now understand why the traditional Igbo never cease to sound the clarion call to complementarity and solidarity in times of crisis.

There are factors which tie or bound the people incomplementarity, such as blood relation. In fact, a community in Igbo land means “People of one blood” kinsmen, or brethren-Umunna. Other factors that favour complementarity include territorial location (habitation) and physical proximity of members of the community which bring them into personal face-to-face relation. These factors that favour complementarity illustrate vividly the Igbo belief that (Agbata-obi onye bụ nwanne ya) one’s neighbor is his relation.

### **Belongingness and Igwebuike expressed as Ahamefula**

No entity has an identity except in the whole. Being human is not about being an individual at all; it is about belonging to a particular group of individual. Who we are is defined by the social networks and communities to which we belong. When asked to describe ourselves, we do so by talking about our relationship with people and places. Through membership within groups we express who we are, our belief and value system. These beliefs and values are embedded in the activities and practices that characterize the group (The Automobile Association, 2007).

A sense of belonging to a greater community improves your motivation, health and happiness. When you see you are connected to others, you know that in the struggles of life, you cannot be left alone. The knowledge that you are not alone gives you assurance and security. The knowledge of not being alone creates a sense of belonging and that you are part of another’s suffering is a call for responsibility. To belong therefore means to be responsible; to contribute one’s skill, knowledge, talent, time and resources for the good of another because you belong, because you are part of the whole with the spirit of identity.

Belongingness means knowing what we own and are responsible for. Ahamefula expressed in Belongingness and Igwebuiké is a philosophy of identity which appreciates the individuality in the “Igwe” bearing in mind the non-existence of the Igwe without the individual beings. It is also a philosophy of responsibility which articulates that these beings are members of the ‘Igwe’ who have the collective task of contributing their own quota with a spirit of devotion and commitment to the good of the ‘Igwe’ (Community).

### **Belongingness and Igwebuiké expressed as Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya**

Onye aghala nwanne ya is an Igbo philosophy which means ‘Be your brother’s keeper’. It is the philosophy of love and acceptance. Onye aghala nwanne ya expressed in Belongingness and Igwebuiké suggests that for us to belong and express the strength in collectivism, we must love and accept one another unconditionally. Through loving and serving one another, being kind, having fellowship, offering hospitality, carrying one another’s burden and encouraging one another, the Igbo man expressed being the brother’s keeper.

The philosophy of love is defined by ancient philosophers as ‘Love as feeling’ and ‘Love as intention’. But in Onye aghala nwanne ya love is expressed as both intention and feeling. Love as intention begets the feeling. Love as intention is active, autonomous and agape. It encompasses a will that is strong enough to be translated into action. Because it stems from one’s will, it is said to be autonomous in nature. Peck defines the philosophy of love as an act of will both in intention and action that implies choice (Peck, 1978, p. 83). Love as intention gives rise to the action that actually induces love as a feeling. The intention is seen in the action and the action begets the feeling.

The action of this love and service is expressed in our community through dynamic service to all and in all other acts of edification. This love emanating from the individual beings that belongs is seen in the acceptance of one another. Not as you want them but as they are in themselves.

### **Belongingness and Igwebuiké expressed as Egbe Bere Ugo Bere**

Egbe bere ugo bere (EBUB) is an Igbo maxim which means ‘Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch. Etymologically, the kite (Egbe) is rumoured to be jealous of the eagle (Ugo) because even the smallest sized eagle is known to have a more direct, faster flight, relatively longer and more evenly broad wings than the kite. The philosophy of EBUB is a call to put jealousy to rest and ask both species to

live and let the other live. Belongingness and Igwebuike expressed as EBUB is trying to communicate that if we must live together and belong forming proactive 'Igwe', we must shun jealousy and intimidation.

Naturally, the kite and the eagle do not fly nor live together. However, they are permitted to perch together and in this act of perching, we see a kind of relationship of respect and regard, acceptance and accommodation which is possible because they belong to a common world of animals and operate within one human world. Iroegbu (1995) however, sees this fundamental aspect of being in belonging as communality relationship. Belonging orchestra-sized perching, however, became a principle of operation and *modus operandi* and *modus vivendum* for community interaction, for existential relation and interaction. Iroegbu (1995, p. 351), sees belongingness as a character of relation in existence. Hence, for him, "The synthesis of belongingness expressing community and autonomy expressing individuality is in integrity". This relational activity manifesting in belongingness is real. It affects every action and it is the basis of interaction in any given communal relationship.

Thus, Maurier refers to it as 'Relation' and 'Subjectivity' in community – individuality concept that necessitates a form of being by belonging. This will however, take us to the popular usage of Iroegbu (1995, p. 351), of an Igbo full expression of the real and ideal synthesis of community – individuality in the old but famous proverb thus: Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, if one says the other should not perch let that one's wing break.

We must acknowledge that this proverb is primarily a principle of justice. Nevertheless, Iroegbu's analysis of this proverb points to the fact that belongingness entails not only a fact of being but a fundamental relational activity as well. 'Bere' (perching) here connotes being as a way of belonging. This coincidentally, is the Igbo cultural emblem and the Igbo version of the concept of 'UBUNTU', which is common among many other African groups. This implies that there is room enough for all. The existence of one being is not a threat to the other. This view underlies the way Igbos respond to non-Igbos in their homes. Igbo philosophies demand that strangers and aliens be treated with utmost care, respect and courtesy. It is the summary of Igbo philosophy of co-existence; Live and let live. (Nwachukwu, 2018).

Therefore, in African communal ontological existence, the Egbe and Ugo, represent different individuals and the act of perching that presupposes a locus

of operation form a relationship that fundamentally starts with belonging as perching: a form of contact with the other; a contact that spells belonging. The concept of contact is a backdrop of a person's realization of his belonging as a being immersed in one's community, (Onebunne, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

As humans, we need to belong; to one another, to our friends, our family, our culture, our country and to our world. Belonging is primal and fundamental to our sense of happiness and well-being. Our interests, motivation, health and happiness are inextricably tied to the feeling that we belong to a greater community that may share common interests and aspirations. Isolation, loneliness and low social status can harm a person's subjective sense of well-being, as well as his intellectual achievement, immune function and health.

Our personal resilience is interwoven into resilience of the communities to which we belong. It is from the web of our relationships and connections with the people that we draw our strength. Such communities can lift us when we are down and give us the capacity to deal with whatever challenges that come our way.

However, creating and maintaining happy relationships and belonging to positive communities is not straightforward. The two major challenges in maintaining relationships are not putting time into the relationship and not dealing constructively with conflict. If you belong to a community take time to improve it by giving time as a volunteer, taking on a supportive role and assuming a leadership position, being proactive in your personal relationships and attending to them is the key to keep them happy, supportive and personally satisfying. By being more involved in communities, as well as making a difference, you also become the beneficiary as you make supportive connections with people.

The more closely we are connected to the people we love, the happier we feel and the more personal satisfaction we have in our lives. People rate moments of connection and shared enjoyment with their loved ones as their most important life experiences.

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