

Igbo-African Philosophy of Being and Categories of Being

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Abstract

Metaphysics as a branch of philosophy, concerns itself with the determination of the nature of being- the meaning, structure and principles of whatever is insofar as it is. Thus, the fundamental question within the parameters of enquiry in metaphysics has been on the nature of being right from the Pre-Socratic Period through the Medieval and Modern Epochs to the Contemporary Era. This research focuses on the concept of being. However, while there are several articles on the meaning of being, it distinguishes itself by its discourse on the nature of being in Igbo-African ontology, unveiling how in recent times, African thinkers have tried to redefine being, moving away from the elusive and unsubstantive concepts employed by their Western counterparts. For this paper, the hermeneutic, analytical and critical methods of inquiry were employed. The paper submits that there is a distinct Igbo-African concept of being, which is fundamental for the understanding of African metaphysics.

Keywords: Being, Categories, Igbo, African, Philosophy

Introduction

The concept of *metaphysics*, a word first used by Andronicus of Rhodes, the editor of Aristotle's works around 70 B. C., according to Whitehead (1929), concerns itself with the determination of the nature of being- the meaning, structure and principles of whatever is insofar as it is. Thus Kanu (2012a) avers that the fundamental question within the parameters of enquiry in metaphysics has been on the nature of being. In the contention of Andre (2005), it has remained evergreen right from the pre-Socratic period to the Contemporary Era. This enquiry, as observed by Bertrand (1975), was set in an articulated motion by Parmenides when he argued that whatever is, is being. He further said that being is one, eternal and unchanging, meaning that whatever changes is not being. This notwithstanding, Heraclitus of Ephesus was chiefly famous in antiquity for his doctrine that everything is in a state of flux, as such, being is characterised by flux. Plato, while disagreeing with Heraclitus on his doctrine of flux, agrees with Parmenides that reality is eternal and unchanging, however differs from Parmenides in arguing that being is multiple rather than one; and these are the forms in the Platonic World of Forms. Aristotle who

defines Metaphysics as the study of 'being qua being' identifies being with God. Thus Kanu (2013) avers that it is not surprising that in Aristotle, Metaphysics becomes theology.

The emergence of the Medieval Epoch, in the contention of Izu (2009), did not alter the centrepiece of metaphysical enquiry. St Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle in identifying being with God, an argument which Duns Scotus rejects and proposes that creatures are beings in the real sense of the word and not in an analogical sense as Aquinas had taught. During the Modern Period, the problem of being did not feature prominently as philosophers were more concerned with the problem of substance. The problem, however, according to Omoregbe (2002) emerged in Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel, in whom being became a mystery.

These notwithstanding, in recent times, African thinkers have tried to redefine being, moving away from the elusive and unsubstantive concepts employed by their Western counterparts. In this process, they have employed categories common to the experience of the Africans. This piece would be concerned with an analysis of the Igbo-African perspective on being and the categories of being.

Purpose of Study

The main purpose of studying being and categories of being in African philosophy is to gain a deeper understanding of the African reality, informing various aspects of human inquiry and enriching the appreciation of existence. Therefore, the research aims at:

1. Understanding the African reality and to grasp the fundamental nature of existence, what exists, and how things relate to each other.
2. Exploring the meaning of being and what constitutes existence, addressing questions like: What does it mean to exist from an African perspective?
3. Categorizing the African reality, which involves classifying entities, properties, and relations, providing a framework for understanding the world.
4. Informing other disciplines and influencing fields like science, theology, and artificial intelligence, shaping our understanding of reality and its implications.
5. Addressing fundamental questions such as: What is the nature of reality? What is the relationship between mind and body? What is the nature of time and space?

Methodology

Philosophy, just like other fields of human endeavor has its ordered ways through which it carries out its systematic enquiry and study. Two methods will be employed for the purpose of this study. The first is the analytic method. It is a style of philosophy that became dominant in the Western world at the beginning of the 20th Century. It is characterized by

an emphasis on argumentative clarity, conceptual analysis and precision. The analytic method focuses on words and meanings. The second approach is the hermeneutic approach. Etymologically, hermeneutics is from the Greek word, *hermeneuo*, meaning “translate” or “interpret”. It was launched into philosophy first in the classical work of the ancient philosopher, Aristotle. The term hermeneutics relates etymologically to Hermes, the mythological Greek deity whose role is that of a messenger of the gods. The hermeneutic principle entails that thought must be derived from language according to the same law which regulates the expression of thought in language, the process alone being inverted. While the analytical approach is important given that concepts used in conveying meanings require analysis, clarity, and precision. The hermeneutic method is fundamental in the face of concepts that require interpretation.

The Igbo-African People of Nigeria

The Igbo are found in the Southeastern geographical zone of Nigeria, which is made up of five states. However, Igbo people are overflowing from the major Igbo states and living in neighbouring states like Delta, Rivers, Benue and Kogi States. They are bounded by the North Central Region to the north and by the South-South Region to the west and south. The zone has a population of over 40 million people, spread across 30,991.1 km² (Nnakamm, 2008). The area lies in the tropical rainforest zone characterized by high rainfall density, which is more pronounced in the southern part (Nwaiwu, et al., 2013; Afigbo, 1981).



Figure 1: Map of Igboland

Source: Ogochukwu (2010)

Historical Development of the Concept of Being

In his work, *La Philosophie Bantou* Published in 1945, Placide Tempels set out to help European missionaries understand the thought pattern or worldview of the Bantu people. This he thought, according to Imbo (1998), would make the work of evangelization easier for the European missionaries, and also help them to avoid misunderstanding the people and their culture. In the process of his research, Tempels arrives at a fundamental and underlining factor in Bantu philosophy, which he calls force. While for the Westerner it could be considered as an attribute of being, for the Bantu, it is identical with being in Bantu ontology.

Tempels (1945) wrote:

I believe that we should most faithfully render the Bantu thought in the European language by saying that the Bantu speak, act, and live as if, for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of being; force is the nature of being, force is being, and being is force. (p. 431).

Having described being as force, Tempels goes ahead to differentiate the degree of force in the hierarchy of being. God, Spirits of ancestors, Human Beings, Animals, Plants and inanimate objects. God thus has a greater force, followed by the Spirit of the Ancestors, than human beings. However, the created universe of the Bantu people is centred on the human force, for everything in the universe is understood only in relation to man. From this perspective, we gather that in Bantu ontology, as in other African worldviews, the cosmos is anthropocentric.

Alexis Kagame, in his work *Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de L'Etre*, shows that he was one among the African philosophers who tried to develop further Tempel's philosophy of force. He worked among the people of Rwanda who were called Kinyarwanda and tried to develop their thought through a linguistic ethno-philosophy. According to Njoku (2010), he discovered that *Ntu* is the category of being or the generic meaning of something. This he classified into four: *Umntu* (human beings); *Ikintu* (non-human beings); *Ahantu* (place and time); *Ukuntu* (Aristotelian category of quantity). *Ntu* is the unifying notion among all these, even though God does not belong to it. There is an interaction between all these: *Umntu* being a being with intelligence has the consciousness that allows it to use other objects that do not have the same capacity. Thus, *Ikuntu* is at the disposal of *Umntu* for self-actualization. The absence of a place for God in Kagame's project of being reveals the limitation of the philosophy.

Emmanuel Edeh, in his work *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, was one of the earliest Nigerian thinkers from the Igbo-speaking area who tried to articulate Igbo metaphysics, in

which he tried to define being, using Igbo categories. Edeh posits a notion of being that is derived from a dual *loci*: from the Igbo language and the Igbo concept of the human person. Edeh says that it is born from the fact that human beings are the principal focus of the Igbo physical world, basically comprising the human and non-human. He first employed the concept of *onye* in the Igbo language to test-denote the concept of being. But he discovers that *the onye* hypothesis applies to human beings only. Having understood the limitations of *onye*, Edeh (1985) in his indefatigable spirit moves on to make further investigations on a more appropriate concept for being. In his investigation, he arrives at *ife*. According to Edeh, “the Igbo word *ife* primarily means thing, anything material or immaterial. It is used to refer to a happening, an event, an occurrence. *Ife* can also be affixed to any adjective to mean specific things” (Edeh 1985, p.95). For instance, *ife obuna* (anything), *ife ebube* (thing of wonder), *ife ojoo* (bad thing), *ife oma* (good thing). After a wide and profound investigation, he realizes that there is no word in the Igbo language outside *ife* that approximates the Igbo concept of being. Having arrived at the *ife* hypothesis, Edeh (1985) realised that *ife* as a concept does not bring out all that being means. To find a solution to this problem, Edeh (1985) combines *ife* and *idi* to get *ife-idi*. *Idi* is the Igbo verb *to be*. It can be used as an adjective and can also be suffixed to anything to show that it exists. For example, *okwute di* (the stone that exists), *Nkita di* (the dog that exists), *Kanu di* (Kanu who exists).

Iroegbu (1995), a Nigerian Igbo Philosopher, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy* avers that *to be* is *to belong*, thus for him, borrowing from Igbo ontology, *Being is Belongingness*. He defines belongingness as ‘the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness’ (p. 374). Iroegbu believes that the Igbo world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. Without any choice of its own, with neither interrogations nor dialogue, the child is made to be an Igbo in its prolixities. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world. The communal individuality of the Igbo is expressed in proverbs such as *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs. The community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. He also realizes the necessity of making his contribution to the group. From this Igbo

worldview that is community-oriented, Iroegbu arrives at the concept of being as belongingness.

Okere (1983), Abanuka (2003) and Njoku (2010) have proposed *chi* as an alternative concept for being. The idea of *chi* has created more problems than it set out to address. Njoku argues that *chi* is preferable because everything in Igbo, whether animate or inanimate has a *chi*. Njoku forgets here that what we are looking for in Igbo metaphysics is not a name for a thing that is contained in everything in the Igbo world. *Chi* would better serve as an underlying principle in Igbo metaphysics than as a name for being in Igbo. The idea of *chi* takes us back to the arguments of the Ionian Philosophers who speak of water, air and fire as the underlying principle in every reality. There isn't enough ground to conclude from here that reality is water or air or fire. It is difficult to conclude that because a thing, say 'A', possesses another thing inside of itself, say 'B', that 'B' is now 'A'. For instance, as human beings possess blood in their veins, it is not a sufficient reason to conclude that because every human being has blood therefore every human being can be called blood. *Chi* cannot stand as a concept for being. That 'all things possess *Chi*' does not easily translate into 'all things can be called *chi*'.

Rethinking the Conceptions of Being in African Ontology

Great efforts have been made by African philosophers to understand the African concept of being. Temples attempted is a pioneering effort that requires great credit. However, his idea of force speaks more of the underlying principle of being and not of being itself. This is a confusion that would run through the ideas of being as expressed in the views of subsequent African philosophers. A more advanced effort we see in Kagame's Ntu, however, there is a vacuum, in the sense that Ntu encompasses all that exists except for God; a wonderful analysis of being, but incomplete in its extension capacity.

Over the years, many African thinkers have made attempts to criticize Edeh's work on metaphysics and his concept of being in particular. Critiques like Iroegbu argue that the designation of Edeh's philosophical reflection as Igbo Metaphysics is wrong, and that it should rather be called Edeh's Metaphysics. He sees Edeh as a man who was not courageous enough to own his metaphysics and, as such, feels more comfortable designating it to a people. Contrary to this opinion, the researcher sees Edeh's step as a courageous one, because it is easier to own a thing to oneself than to attribute it to a whole people. As an individual, it is easier to sort out oneself than to achieve that as a group. The reverse is the case here: Edeh is more a philosopher with courage than Iroegbu who had developed his metaphysics of being. Surprising is that Iroegbu who speaks of being as belongingness should have a problem with someone who developed a philosophy that speaks of where he belongs. Edeh saw himself as a being who belongs to a totality of people, and as a person

who belongs, he developed the philosophy of the people to whom he belongs. Moreover, the fact that it was Edeh who wrote the metaphysics does not mean it has to be called Edeh's metaphysics. Edeh is not saying that he is not aware that he wrote it by himself. All he is saying is that it represents the philosophy of the Igbo people. We read different works by different philosophers from the West and we call them Western philosophy. What problem do we have calling Edeh's articulation Igbo Metaphysics?

A cursory glance at the philosophical positions proposed as a replacement for Edeh's concept of being as *ife*, reveals that they have not solved the problem of seeking a concept for being; so far, they have created new ones. What African philosophers should be looking for is a concept that would designate every reality, and not concepts that speak of what every reality possesses like the *chi* of T. Okere, B. Abanaku and F. O. C. Njoku or Iroegbu's *belongingness* which is just an attribute of being, or better put the modality of being and not the name of being. Being exists first before it can have a *chi* or before it can belong. So far, the concept of being by Edeh as *ife-di*, with all its defects is still the most appropriate and defensible concept of being in African metaphysics. While Edeh's perspective is appreciable, it is also incomplete, and thus the need for further research on the African concept of being.

Being as *Idi* in Igbo-African Ontology

The operative word in *Idi* (to be) is *di* (be) and it comes from the word *odi* (it is) which is the third person of the singular *idi* which means 'to exist' or 'to be'. It is an adjective and can be suffixed to anything to show that it exists. For instance, *Okwute di* (stone exists), *Nkita di* (dog exists), *Kanu di* (Kanu exists), *Uwa di* (the world exists). As a concept, it goes beyond the limitations of the notions of being already analysed, and in fact, it is the missing link of the different conceptions of being already analysed.

More so, everything that is, is because it has *ike-ndu*, that is 'force' and the quality and quantity of this force determines the nature of a being. The force of a being cannot be separated from the being itself, and as such, the force is the being. It is in this regard that Tempels (1959) wrote about the Bantu: "Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force" (p. 24). Everything that the Igbo-African does is towards the preservation of this force: when he prays to Chukwu or the ancestors, when he offers sacrifices to gods, spirits, ancestors etc. when he pours libation, rites and rituals are all for the preservation of this force, which is life. Ogugua (2003) wrote,

Little wonder, the Igbo people work towards acquiring life, strengthening this life even if it entails doing too difficult things 'iga aguu asaa, igwu mmiri asaa' - passing through seven thick forests invested with danger and swimming seven deep and deadly oceans. (p. 60).

Force therefore is necessarily and essentially an attribute of being in Igbo-African ontology. The appreciation of this reality of being, according to Ogugua (2006), is the springboard of the Igbo-African belief in the intimate relatedness, connectedness and interwovenness of reality. Thus Tempels (1959) wrote, "The world of forces is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network" (p. 60). The existence-in-relation to the other or being-with-the other creates constancy in interaction and influence.

Igbo-African Categories of Being

Although every reality has a force, not all realities have the same force. The variety of the degree of forces is at the base of the categorization of being. In the hierarchy of forces, those with a greater force come first, with God at the apex as the source of all force. In Igbo-African ontology, reality will be subsumed into the following categories:

1. Muo (Spirit): Muo as a force has categories of forces. It includes God, the divinities and spirits. God is at the apex of the Muo category as the source of all force, Tempels (1959) wrote, "Above all force is God... It is he who has force, power, in himself. He gives existence, power of survival and increase, to other forces. In relation to other forces, he is he who increases force" (p. 29). He wrote further, "He knows all forces, their orderings, their dependence, their potential and their mutual interactions" (p. 34). His existential cause is within himself and sustains resultant forces the subsistence and annihilation of other forces are within his power alone. While other creatures can paralyse, diminish or stop the operation of another being's vital force, they cannot stop it to exist entirely, only God can.

After the Supreme Being are divinities. They are intermediaries and share aspects of the divine status. They emanate from God; as such, it is incorrect to say that they were created by him, but more correct to speak of them as offspring of the Supreme Being. They are responsible to God for whatever act they perform in their relationship with human beings. They are not an end in themselves but a means to an end, and everything they do is dependent upon God's approval. They are functionaries in the theocratic governance of God, sometimes referred to as his messengers and at other times as his sons. Awolalu and Dopamu (1978) refer to them as the executive heads of various divine departments in the Supreme Being's monarchical government. They are a lesser force compared to the Supreme Being, but generally, they are a great force.

There are also myriads of spirits that occupy the African universe. Death is not the end of man. After death, the soul *nkpulobi* goes back to *Chukwu*. The afterlife for the Africans is a life of continuing relationships with the living dead. After death, two groups of spirits emerge the benevolent spirit, known as the ancestors. The ancestors have a greater force

than human beings. They bind men to God and exercise influence on the living, Tempels (1959) wrote that “The strengthening of life, the preservation and respect for life, are by the very nature of creation the business of the ancestors” (p. 57). He further wrote, “They must not be injured or scorned, nor must they be threatened with a breaking off of relationships, for this would mean simply death for the living. When a disaster falls upon the clan, there must be no question of reproaching the ancestors, but simply of testifying from out of mourning to be re-established filial attachment to secure a new alignment with the vital influence of the forebears” (p. 69). Apart from the ancestors, there are malevolent spirits, known as bad spirits.

2. *Mmadu (Human Being)*: The human person (*Muntu*) is a vital force endowed with intelligence and will. Although God is the source of vital force, man is the sovereign vital force in the world, ruling the land and all that abides in it, however, “his fullness of being consists in his participation to a greater or lesser extent in the force of God” (p. 47) who possess the supreme force. He also shares an ontological relationship with his patrimony, relations and land. He has a will to choose between good and evil, which might be life-giving or life-destroying. Man is the centre of the universe, including the world of the dead. Tempels wrote that “man is the supreme force, the most powerful among created beings” (p. 46). He can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures. He wrote, “Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man” (p. 22).

In the category of human beings, there are the elders, who bind the ancestors with their descendants. According to Tempels (1959) “Ontologically and juridically, the elders who hold the ascendancy are the only ones to know fully, in the last resort. Their wisdom exceeds that of other men” (p. 35). They are said to be closer to their ancestors. This explains why they serve as priests in their communities and clans, especially when it comes to the offering of sacrifices to the ancestors.

3. *Anu (Animal, tame and wild)*: This category of being comprises forces not endowed with reason. They are ruled by instincts. They are all under the force of man and exist for man. According to Tempels, “In fact, even inferior beings, such as inanimate beings and minerals, are forces which by reason of their nature have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces, or of men’s vital forces” (p. 31). In another text, he wrote, “These lower beings exist, by Divine decree, only for the assistance of the higher created being” (p. 46). They are used to feed human beings and also for offering sacrifices to God, divinities and ancestors.

4. *Ifè (things)*: Edeh (1985) avers that “the Igbo word *ife* primarily means thing, anything material or immaterial. It is used to refer to a happening, an event, an occurrence.

Ife can also be affixed to any adjective to mean specific things” (p. 95). For instance, *ife obuna* (anything), *ife ebube* (thing of wonder), *ife ojoo* (bad thing), *ife oma* (good thing). *Ife* as a force cannot act for itself, and thus can only become active when a greater force like God, divinities, spirits and man act on them. They have no will of their own and thus depend on the will of a greater force.

5. *Ebe (Space)*: Space talks about place. It is the relation of distance between any two bodies or points. It responds to the question of where. For instance, where did you see Emeka? Where did you pick up Nnamdi? Where was the sacrifice offered? According to Ijiomah (2005), space in Igbo ontology consists of three levels: they are the sky, the earth and the underworld: “The sky is where God *Chukwu* or *Chineke* and angels reside; the earth where man, animals, natural resources, some devils and some physical observable realities abide; and the underworld where ancestors and some bad spirits live” (p. 84). Ekwealor (1990), corroborated Ijiomah’s perspective when he categorized the Igbo-African universe into three spheres: *Elu-Igwe* or sky, *Alammadu* or the world of the living and *Alammuo* or the land of the spirits. The idea of space is known through sight, touch and supra-sensory insight.

6. *Oge (Time)*: Time responds to questions such as: when did you see Emeka? When did you pick up Nnamdi? When was the sacrifice offered? Mbiti (1970) defines the African concept of time as “the composition of events which have occurred, those that are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur” (p. 17). Thus the African concept of time is concrete and substantive. It is epochal, as it is wrapped around events and activities. Iroegbu (1995) avers that it is in time that an African performs or fails to perform and that his future and destiny are based on his use of time.

7. *Uzo (Modality, manner or style)*: Modality of being talks about the manner of being. And in Igbo-African ontology, *Igwebuike* is the manner of being. Everything is in relation to the other: existence-in-relation to the other or being-with-the other. Every being is by belonging. This is expressed in various Igbo-African proverbs, such as *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs. Mbiti has classically proverbialized the community-determining role of the individual when he wrote, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am” (p. 108). The community, according to Iroegbu (1995), therefore gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful but also possible only in a community. Tempels (1959) wrote that “The world of forces is held like a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (p. 60). The existence-in-relation to the other or being-

with-the other creates constancy in interaction and influence. This interaction of beings is the modality of being in Igbo-African ontology.

Conclusion

Navigating from the Western concept of being, which is abstract and unsubstantive, to the African understanding of beings which is substantive and concrete, this piece has studied different African perspectives of being. After an analysis of these perspectives, it arrives at the Igbo-African conception of being as *idi* as a concept that brings out the meaning and nature of being. It further studied the categories of being in Igbo-African ontology. It submits that the hierarchy of being reveals the hierarchy of forces. God is the source of force; the ancestors who bind men with God, have a greater force than men, followed by the elders who bind men with the ancestors, then other men, who have a greater force than animals, plants and minerals. The greater a force, the greater its causal power in relation to other forces. Thus, the hierarchy of forces determines the laws of vital causality.

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