

THE DYNAMICS OF THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE AMONGST THE IGALA PEOPLE: ITS IMPLICATION FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

The concept of tribe has evolved significantly throughout history; it is during the nineteenth century that it was shaped negatively through the racial theories that portrayed many non-Western societies as primitive or inferior. In contemporary African contexts, however, the term often carries positive meanings associated with identity, pride, ancestry, and belonging. This study presents an analysis of the dynamics of the concept of tribe among the Igala people of Nigeria through the indigenous notion of ichi, which encompasses tribe, language, and culturally approved patterns of behaviour. Within Igala worldview, ichi functions as a marker of collective identity and moral orientation, reinforcing strong in-group solidarity rooted in shared ancestry and the symbolic fatherhood of the Attah Igala. At the same time, the concept expresses ethnocentric tendencies, manifested in positive valuation of the in-group and negative characterizations of out-groups, a phenomenon widely recognized as a universal social tendency in ethnocentrism studies. The study analyzes how these ethnocentric elements intersect with the idea of intercultural competence. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from anthropology, psychology, and intercultural communication, the paper evaluates four major dimensions of intercultural competence: the expatriate, immigration, inclusive local and inclusive global perspectives. It argues that although ethnocentric attitudes are embedded in the Igala concept of ichi, the culture also contains internal mechanisms that encourage intercultural engagement. The paper concludes that the Igala understanding of tribe is dynamic rather than rigidly exclusionary. While it promotes pride in a positive sense, honour, and in-group cohesion, it does not necessarily prevent intercultural competence. Instead, when balanced by principles such as udama, it can coexist with openness to other cultures and facilitate peaceful coexistence and intercultural dialogue. Analytic research methodology was used in carrying out this research. The study therefore challenges the derogatory Western conception of tribe and highlights the potential for indigenous cultural frameworks to contribute to intercultural competence in a pluralistic world.

KEYWORDS: Ethnocentrism, Tribe, Intercultural, *Ichi*, *Udama*, Identity

INTRODUCTION

The concept of tribe has generated substantial debate in academic discourse, particularly

within the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Historically, the term gained prominence during the nineteenth century at the time when evolutionary and racial theories dominated Western scholarship. Within this intellectual atmosphere, many African, Asian, and Latin American societies were labelled as “tribal,” a categorization often accompanied by derogatory assumptions that depicted such societies as primitive, inferior, and less civilized. Accordingly, the concept of tribe came to be connected with colonial ideology and racial hierarchy, leading many scholars to question its analytical usefulness and to prefer alternative terms such as ethnic group or people. Notwithstanding this critique, the term has continued to exist in many non-Western contexts where it does not necessarily carry the negative connotations imposed by colonial interpretations.

In many African societies, the notion of tribe represents a powerful marker of identity, ancestry, solidarity, and cultural belonging. Instead of signifying primitiveness or social backwardness imposed by the Western view, it often denotes a sense of pride in the positive sense, honour, and historical continuity among a people who share common language, culture, and genealogical ties. Among the Igala people of Nigeria, the concept of tribe is deeply embedded in their cultural worldview and is expressed through the indigenous concept of *ichi*. The term *ichi* is not limited to the idea of tribe alone; it also consists of language, cultural identity, and morally approved patterns of behaviour. Through this concept, the Igala people define their collective identity, regulate social conduct, and reinforce a sense of communal solidarity rooted in shared ancestry and historical tradition.

Like many cultural identity markers across the world, the Igala conception of tribe also reflects elements of ethnocentrism. The strong sense of in-group identity embedded in *ichi* often encourages pride in Igala cultural values while simultaneously producing stereotypical perceptions of other groups. While ethnocentrism is frequently criticized for promoting exclusion and cultural superiority, scholars have also recognized it as a universal social tendency that plays a role in strengthening group cohesion and cultural continuity. Understanding how such ethnocentric tendencies operate within a particular cultural framework is therefore important for examining their implications for intercultural relations.

In an increasingly interconnected world characterized by cultural diversity and interaction, the ability to relate effectively across cultural boundaries has become an essential social skill. This capacity, often referred to as intercultural competence, involves the knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills necessary for meaningful and respectful engagement with people from different cultural backgrounds. The study of intercultural competence therefore raises important questions about how strong cultural identities and ethnocentric tendencies influence the capacity for cross-cultural understanding and cooperation.

Against this background, this paper examines the dynamics of the concept of tribe among the Igala people and its implications for intercultural competence. It explores the meaning and cultural significance of the concept of *ichi*, the ethnocentric elements embedded within it, and the ways in which these elements interact with the broader demands of intercultural engagement. The paper argues that although the Igala conception of tribe reflects certain

ethnocentric tendencies, it also contains dynamic features—particularly through the related concept of *udama* (togetherness)—that support openness, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence with other cultural groups. By analyzing these dynamics, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how indigenous cultural concepts can simultaneously sustain group identity and facilitate intercultural competence in a pluralistic society.

EXPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE

The word tribe is defined as “a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader” (Newby, 57). The contemporary usage of the concept of tribe has its major development during the nineteenth century upsurge of evolutionary and racist theories that labelled the Africans, Asians, Latin Americans and other non-Caucasian people as primitive, inferior or less civilized sets of people that are yet to evolve from their primal state. However the use of the concept of tribe differs amongst scholars from different fields of studies like philosophy, sociology and anthropology ranges from common language, culture, rulers, lineages or government. According to Olien, (464) “the term tribe has never satisfied anthropologists, because of its many uses and connotations. Societies that are classified as tribal seem to be very diverse in their organization, having little in common...” The concept of tribe is therefore entrenched in an ill-defined and derogatory usage in the western world. To this end, the term became obsolete in many continents, its synonym was preferred and accepted.

Despite the negative connotation attributed to tribe, in the usage of English in Africa, Latin America and in Asia, the concept tribe has no derogatory connotation, “it is used with pride as a marker of nobility. Belonging to a tribe means to be of distinguished and old ancestry, to belonging to genuine people, to be dependable. As tribal one is bound by a network of primordial obligations on the solid basis of well-structured genealogical ties” (Glatzer 265). It is in this regard that the concept tribe is used in this article. Tribe as used in this regard connotes pride, honour and belongingness, it is therefore free from all forms of connotations of simplicity, primitiveness, exoticism, or periphery. Tribe in this context is applicable to highly complex and technically developed societies. With this understanding, tribe may be defined as a social segment based on a genealogical concept of social structure which are constituted by people's notion of being distinct from others through sharing closer common ancestry or language, culture, and name. (Glatzer 266). It is the distinct nature that distinguish Igala concept of tribe from others that we focus on in this work.

THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE AMONGST THE IGALA PEOPLE

The concept of tribe is rightly equivalent to the Igala word 'ichi' which do not only mean tribe, it also means language and attitude based on the conception of self-attribution of qualities worthy of emulation as core Igala attributes and other qualities that ought to be discarded as something not of Igala. In this regard, there is a common question among the Igala people concerning an attitude that is not worthy of emulation or an immoral act; “*ichi nwu d?*” it literally means what 'type of tribe is this?' this question entails the idea that one's tribe determines his attitude, hence Igala being a superior tribe devoid of such

erroneous attitude cannot put on an attitude not worthy of emulation. The concept of *ichi* therefore defines the major aspects of ethnocentrism in igala culture. It is worth noting that such manifestations of ethnocentrism abounds amongst different cultures of the world but the dynamic of this idea among the Igala culture is its connection to a common root that unite the Igala nation. To this end, attitude demanding the above questions existing among the Igala people are regarded as a demonstration of prodigality. The second meaning of the term *ichi* with regards to tribe encompasses different tribes and cultures of the world and igala is seen as one of them with a dynamic character.

One of the common connections among the igala people that portray their uniqueness is the place of the king of all the igalas. The overall king is referred to as 'Attah Igala', this title literally means the father of igala. Several kings have proven their fatherhood by heroic acts, one of the common heroic acts is the sacrifice of princes Inikpi for the establishment independent of the igala kingdom. Hence the ascription of fatherhood to the overall king of the igala people is one of the characteristics that makes igala unique amongst other tribes, however the uniqueness is better understood by the necessary connection the ascription has with other social relationship terms among the igala people. The place of the overall king as the father of the people presupposes a strong relationship that exist among this tribe. It is not surprising that most igala people would regard all those under the jurisdiction of the attah as their kinsmen without considering their location and name of their town. This approach may be applicable to other tribes but among the igala, it does not exist as a mere description but has one of its major connection to the common regard for the overall king in igala nation based on their heroic acts.

With regards to the concept *ichi* as referring to other tribes, the approach of the igala people is laden with ethnocentric views.

The ethnocentric expressions of the igala people was shown by Apeh (65-6) in his PhD dissertation. Some of the closest tribes by location have their colloquial names given by the igala people, for example Bassa-Nkomo and Bassa-Nge are regarded as 'amene efoko' and 'amekpabie' meaning primitive and lazy people respectively. Dirty (wrong ways for disposing of feces), Snail-eaters - (*ajigbii*, *amachechu ifyugba*), The igbo tribes are regarded as 'oli' (stick) - very stingy - will not spend their money. Tiv people are regarded as 'ajela' that is meat-eaters. Surprisingly, the ethnocentric approach to other tribes is also seen in their approaches to each other on the basis of the little differences that exist amongst the dialects within the same tribe. An admirable views existing in a typical igala traditional atmosphere is described by Egbunu (35-6) in different ramifications of relationships, these admirable views expressed unity among the igala people; your husband is our husband, your wife is our wife, your daughter is our daughter, your son is our son, your father is our father, your mother is our mother, your farm is our farm, your problem is our problem, your joy is our joy, your pain is our pain, your promotion is our promotion and your demotion is our demotion. Who hurts you hurts us, who fights you fights us, who derides you derides us, who insults you insults us, who bewitches you bewitches us and who pursues you pursues us. Our wife therefore must be cared for whether you are alive or dead, our children must be catered for whether you are dead or alive and our elders must be loved and protected whether you are alive or dead. The reference to everyone within the igala kingdom as a

kinsman in the presence of people of different tribes entails the manifestation of the above admirable attitude towards such persons. Hence, the common fatherhood therefore strengthens the above attitude towards each other and attitude that does not encompasses the above views towards other igala people are not encouraged. It is worth noting that the reference of one's husband, wife, son, daughter as belonging to all does not encompasses illicit behaviour towards them.

ETHNOCENTRIC CHARACTER OF THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE IN IGALA WORLDVIEW:

The origin of the concept of ethnocentrism is often traced to 1906 writings of William Summer by many scholars, however this popular view is antithetical to an earlier writings of McGee in 1900 who held that non-industrial societies are generally ethnocentric, an earlier ethnocentric system was born of the primeval egocentric cosmos of inchoate thinking, hence in nonindustrial societies the egocentric and ethnocentric view are ever-present and always-dominant factors of both mentation and action. To this end, McGee linked ethnocentrism to egocentrism which to an extent are outcome of ignorant about the external world often displayed by tribesmen that regard their groups as the standard to which all other things revolve (quoted in Bizumic & Duckitt 889). McGee's view of ethnocentrism is therefore characterized by egocentrism, ignorance, tribesmen and mentality of the ideal standard of judgment.

The popularity of Summer's 1906 study of the concept of ethnocentrism is primarily inherent in his introduction of the terms 'in-group' and 'outgroup.' He defined ethnocentrism as;

This view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn" (13)

The above definition of ethnocentrism which entails egocentrism as also upheld by McGee, however the term 'in-group' and 'outgroup' became popular terms expressing the crux of ethnocentrism study in different ramifications.

In summarizing the psychologist view of Donald Campbell and his associates Triandis showed that ethnocentric tendencies are not limited to a particular ethnic group but common with all peoples. In view of this assertions, the following tendencies were identified; the ascription of one's cultural practices as natural or correct and that of others as unnatural and incorrect, the perception of an in-group customs as the standard, believe that cooperating with an in-group member is natural, act in ways that favour the in-group, to feel proud of our in-group, and to be distrustful and even hostile towards the out-groups (Triandis 251-2). Several reasons abounds as to why ethnocentrism is not a characteristics of a particular culture but universal; "ethnocentrism is universal, probably because it aids

survival by increasing people's attachment to their own group and their willingness to work on its behalf" (Wade and Tavis 351). The universality of the ethnocentric tendencies is exemplified in Chinese view embedded in the name China which means the center of the world thereby regarding the other parts of the world as suburbs, certain groups within China even regard themselves as 'the people'. From this example, it is therefore evident that the ethnocentric view of the igala people embedded primarily in the concept of 'ichi' is not universal but has its unique features in its manifestations among the igala people.

Three characteristics summed all the features inherent in different definition and description above; that ethnocentrism entails the superiority of one's group over others in different ramifications, the positive approach to the in-group which are to an extent culture-bound and the negative approach to the out-group. These characteristics are embedded in the igala concept of tribe; the attribution of so many good things as of igala origin carries the superiority connotation, the colloquial names to different tribes also carries the connotation of negative approach to out-group and the empathic feeling of belonging as shown in the expression of your problem is our problem, your joy our joys, your sons and daughters our sons and daughters carries the connotation of positive approach to the in-group. These characteristics of the igala worldview of the concept of tribe has its implication for intercultural competence which can be better understood by reference to the various aspects of the intercultural competence. Intercultural competence entails ability to overcome the in-group superiority views with the ascriptions of standard of judgment associated with it and the ability to see the positivity in the out-group for a cordial relationship and a peaceful co-existence.

The dynamic of the concept of tribe in igala worldview despite its ethnocentric character is to be found in the representation of the word 'ichi' that means language, tribe and attitude. In order to understand this dynamism, reference is needed to other cultures with similar connotation; the word China literally means the world, entrenched in this name is the ethnocentric idea of the superiority of their existence without regard to others. If China means the world, what of other part of Asian continent or other continents, are they not part of the world? The dynamism of the igala concept of tribe 'ichi' necessarily buttresses similarly rhetorical question; is it only the igala people that good attitudes portray? Ethnocentric views are not necessarily dynamic but certain words could be termed dynamic when it is ethnocentrically entrenched in a manner that it is not common.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural competence entails the interplay that exist between the diversities of cultures, communication and competence; competence in relation to culture hinges on the embodied meaning inherent in the components of communication which can either be signs, symbols or language. Terms such as values, norm, rules, behavior, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, symbols, knowledge, ideas, meanings and thoughts are psychological terms often used to define national culture, in summing up these defining terms of culture Reisinger and Turner

(12) defined culture as patterns of human behavior and people's values that determines their action. In accordance with this definition, it is therefore certain that for someone to be interculturally competent a knowledge of values that determines actions are required. On the basis of this background the level of the required knowledge differs, ranging from individual intercultural competence to intercultural competence of institutions and intercultural competence of different cultural groups.

The concept of competence is defined in terms of “skills, abilities and preparedness. It can also mean the authority which comes from mastering something” (Salo-Lee 130). Associated with the concept of competence is the term effectiveness which to a large extent determines how competent a person or groups or institution could be. With the existence of plethora of definitions of intercultural competence, it is worth noting that the criterion for defining it is contextual. Some scholars defined it in terms of cultural awareness, motivation, knowledge, behavioral skills and their likes, others focused on team effectiveness, intercultural empathy, cultural sensitivity and other similar terms. For Deardorff (241), “Intercultural competence is the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions.” Since this definition encompasses much of the terms given by other scholars, we shall adopt it as our working definition.

ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The association of competence with effectiveness is a tool in intercultural competence that defines the scope of the course. The four major aspects of intercultural competence are as follows;

THE EXPATRIATE ASPECT:

This aspect is also termed 'We there', this aspect is championed by Daniel Kealey who defined intercultural effectiveness as an ability to live and work effectively in an overseas assignment in an intercultural environment. In his view, effectiveness consist of professional expertise, interaction and adaptation.(quoted in Salo-Lee 131) He also regarded organizational and environmental issues as factors that enhance the constituent of effectiveness. Kealey's understanding of intercultural competence is reflected in Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person (IEP) produced by groups of international group of researchers that defines interculturally effective person based on three attributes; Salo-Lee(131-2) presents these attributes as follows;

- An ability to communicate with people in a way that earns their respect and trust, thereby encouraging a cooperative and productive workplace that is conducive to the achievements of professional or assignment goals;
- The capacity to adapt his/her professional skills (both technical and managerial) to fit local conditions and constraints; and
- The capacity to adjust personally so that s/he is content and generally at ease in the host culture.

THE IMMIGRATION ASPECT:

This aspect of intercultural competence is also called the 'They Here' perspective, it is contrary to the expatriates aspect because the relocation involve in this process is not temporal but permanent. One of the major proponents of this aspect, Young Yun Kim did not only study this aspect but lived her life by this aspect. This aspect is influenced by environmental factors like receptivity of the host, their conformity to pressure; predisposition factors that entail the proximity of the ethnic group, their preparedness for change and communication factors (Salo-Lee 133). This aspect calls for more research on the part of the host community.

THE INCLUSIVE LOCALASPECT:

This aspect is also called 'We All Here', it is not based on either temporal or permanent relocation but dwells on the consciousness of multiplicities of cultures by seeking a consensus on how to live together in the midst of contracting culture in the local society. It demands an understanding and an open-mindedness for a consensus to be reached, to this end knowledge, understanding and open-mindedness are necessary factors for the local inclusive aspect of intercultural competence.

THE INCLUSIVE GLOBALASPECT:

The focus of this aspect is not on the local society but on the global human society, it is also called 'We All Here and There' it entails mutual influence, it does not focus on cultural imperialism but on cultural synergy that facilitate participative competence in international knowledge transfer. This aspect of intercultural competence also focuses on intercultural dialogue for the purpose of mutual understanding. To this end, cultural sensitivity defined as “the motivation to accept and respect intercultural differences” (Croucher 122) which is of higher importance to this aspect than other aspects.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Generally, the derogatory perception of tribe does not portray intercultural competence because if a group of persons under the edges of a particular tribe are termed primitive, inferior or uncivilized, the possibility of being interculturally competent under such condition does not exist to a large extent since those description of tribe are antithetical to intercultural competence. Based on the positive connotation given on the basis of pride, honour and belongingness, the possibility of being competent under such notion abounds. Following the Chinese concept of its name as meaning the world but expresses her competence through the concept of ti-yong that imbed the western learning for practical use into the fundamental principles of Chinese culture. In similar mode, the concept of tribe called 'ichi' among the igala tribe does not nullify the concept of 'udama' which means togetherness on the basis of common course. In contemporary world, the 'udama' concept is not limited to the people of igala but has the basic principle of togetherness as a means of achieving a common goal when group work is required.

The various aspects of intercultural competence shown above does not necessarily buttressed a holistic notion of competence. The expatriate and the immigrant perspective to an extent has a limited connotation of being competent since the relocation involved are most times based on the superiority of the relocating professional. The colonial intrusion to an extent has this connotation because the ideas of the colonial masters were not based on the view of seeing the good aspects of the culture, it is on this note that the concept of tribe is associated with derogatory views among the countries involved in colonialism. The implication of such views would necessarily consider the igala not competent. The existence of the concept of 'udama' is an evidence of the fallacious nature of such views. However, the level of competence ineludibly differs from group notion to that of the individual. The pride, honour and belongingness that the concept portrays are subject to heroic acts that could accommodate or adapt to the good attitudes worthy of emulation from other tribes. The evidence of such adaptation among the igalas is the presence of different tribes living in different towns and villages without intimidation. This act to an extent portray open-mindedness required for the inclusive aspect of the intercultural competence. The exclusive aspect embedded in the expatriate and immigrant aspects are common in almost in all cultures of the world as a means of exhausting themselves above others.

In all, the derogatory concept of tribe espoused by most western scholars does not portray the possibility of being competent, however the culture of being interculturally competent is embedded in one way or the other in different aspects of Igala culture in theory and practice. The existence of ethnocentric notions in a culture ought not to be taken in an extreme way less the concepts that portrays competence would be downplayed. If the concept of 'ichi' is taken in extreme manner, it would neglect the existence of the concept of 'udama' the apogee of intercultural competence with in-group and out-group.

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