

Suicide in Igbo-African Ontology

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Abstract

Suicide is the act of intentionally causing one's own death, often committed out of despair. The cause is frequently attributed to depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, alcoholism, or drug abuse. It is alleged that around 800,000 to a million people die by suicide every year, making it the 10th leading cause of death worldwide. In this paper, the researcher studies the problem of suicide from an Igbo-African perspective. "Igbo" is a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. It is referred to as Igbo-African because it is an ethnic group in Africa and relates culturally to other ethnic groups in Africa. The paper investigates the African concept of life, which sees life as the highest good, as given and sustained by God, as belongingness, as a stage, as a circle and as everlastingness. For the Igbo-African, life is a sacred thing, thus a meta-empirical reality and not a mere biological thing. These understandings of life vis-a-vis suicide would bring about an African perspective of suicide. This understanding of suicide from an Igbo-African perspective is believed will help enhance the value of human life and thus save the world from being plunged into a silent crisis of the value of life.

Keywords: Suicide, African, Igbo, Ontology, Life, Suicide, God, Everlastingness, Metaphysical, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Suicide as understood in this piece aligns with the definition of Gonsalves (1986) as "the direct killing of oneself on one's own authority" (p. 246). Halbwachs (1930), further defines it as "all those cases of death resulting from action taken by the victim themselves, and with the intention and prospect of killing oneself" (p. 24). As such, killing is not suicide unless it is done on one's own authority. In Nigeria, both religious and cultural values have divided perspectives on suicide. In Northern Nigeria, with the wave of Islamic fundamentalism, expressed in the ideology of the sect popularly known as *Boko Haram* or "Western civilization is forbidden", the event of suicide has become recurrent and backed by religion. Although Obiezu (2013) and Strenski (2003) have tried to describe their actions in religious laden words and symbols as martyrdom and sacrifice, thus raising it above profane calculation of individual cost-benefit analysis to a so-called level of higher good, it still does not change the suicidal dimension of the acts. In Northern Nigeria, for religious purposes, there is an ardent desire in young men to enlist as suicide bombers. According to Hassan (2001), they practically go on their knees begging, and are ready to do anything just to get an opportunity to be sent as attackers. Apart from the religious determination, there is a cultural determination anchored on a simplistic concept of life expressed in Hausa sayings such as: *me duniya? What is life? Duniya runfan kara*. Life is a roof made of the stem of maize. This reduces the depth of the value life possesses.

In Western Nigeria, among the Yorubas precisely, a group that inhabit the South-Western part of Nigeria, and the eastern parts of Benin Republic, formerly Dahomey, and the western part of Togo. Suicide has been reflected in their thought as *iku ya j'esin* (death is preferable to shame, dishonour and indignity). Thus, according to Asiata (2010), dignity plays a significant role in the choice of suicide. Here, death (*iku*) is conceived as a better option than shame (*esin*). Mazrui (1965) explains further the Yoruba rationale for suicide when he wrote, "suicide becomes respectable when the life which it ends had at once aspired to great heights and is now descended to such depths" (p. 30). Asiata (2010) avers that such a life in essence lacks quality and value, devoid of the features of a good life and thus not worth living. The Yoruba, beliefs that a life worth living is described thus: *aye alaafia, irorun ati idera* (a healthy life devoid of pain and suffering). For the Yoruba, when it comes to the issue of autonomy and competence as regards deciding on suicide, they would metaphorically claim that *bose wuni lase imole eni* (one determines one's faith the way one deems fit). This understanding of life creates room for suicide.

In the eastern part of Nigeria are the Igbo people. The concept Igbo-African is employed by the researcher because the Igbo are an ethnic group in Africa and relate culturally to other ethnic groups in Africa. This piece centres on the analysis of the Igbo concept of suicide. In this study, the historical, expository and critical methods of enquiry are employed, to study the historical cultural roots of the Igbo, their worldview, their concept of life and thus suicide. This perspective is further weighed against other backgrounds.

2. Historical-Cultural Root of the Igbo

A fundamental step in our study of Igbo-African perspective on suicide is the identification of the spatio-cultural horizon of the Igbo cultural space. According to Onuh (1991), by way of definition, "Igbo" is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. There is however an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term 'Igbo'. In the contention of Ekwuru (2009), the difficulty of arriving at a precise etymological and semantic clarity of the word "Igbo" has its trace in the unprecise nature of the history of the Igbo people. For Afigbo (1975a), compared to the state of research as regards origin in relation to other tribes in Nigeria, the Igbo history can without much exaggeration be described as *terra incognita*. However, Afigbo (1975b) further observes that the Igbos are not indifferent to this crisis of identity. Their experience of colonialism, and even the Biafran War has sparked off in them the quest for a historical identity. It is such that Isichei (1976) avers that no historical question arouses more interest among the present day Igbo people than the enquiry "where did the Igbo come from?"

As regards the territorial identity of the Igbos, Uzozie (1991:4) observes that "To date, there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of territory". Ekwuru (2009) states that any attempt to introduce who the Igbo is poses a lot of problems in all aspects of its academic conceptualizations. This notwithstanding, Hatch (1967) describes the Igbo people as a single people even though fragmented and scattered, inhabiting a geographical area stretching from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta. They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions; they believe in a common Supreme Being known as Chukwu or Chineke. Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, *the Northern Centre Theory* which Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermetic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the *Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland*. According to Jones (cited by Isichei 1976), the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.

Geographically speaking, Njoku (1990) posits that Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. According to Uchendu (1965), in its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westwards, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis.

Socio-politically, unlike the other tribes in Nigeria, who evolved a molithic centralized system of government, the Igbo distinguish themselves with a complicated socio-political structure which has been qualified as *republican*. The Igbo ethnic group is divided into clans, each clan is made up of towns; and each town is comprised of villages. The village is the primary social unit constituted of families or kindred. The family is the nucleus of society. Politically, the lineage system is the matrix of the social units or organization and provides grounds for political and religious structures. The traditional concepts of political power and authority is structured and determined by their concept of *umunna* and the membership of the association based on elaborate title system. Economically, Aligwekwe (1991), avers that the traditional Igbo people were sedentary agriculturists. This delimitation of Igbo land as a cultural area, helps to identify the cultural horizon for the study on the place of Igbo myths in Igbo-African philosophy.

3. The Resilient Character of Igbo Paradigm and the Issue of Suicide

People who try to commit suicide are often trying to get away from a life situation that seems impossible to deal with. Many who make a suicide attempt are seeking relief from feeling ashamed, guilty, or like a burden to others, feeling like a victim, feelings of rejection, loss, or loneliness, sometimes again, Aging (the elderly have the highest rate of suicide), death of a loved one, dependence on drugs or alcohol, emotional trauma, serious physical illness, unemployment or money problems. For the Igbo person, suicide is not accepted in any form and at any age as a solution to any problem regardless of the complexities of life. This is anchored on the resilient character of the Igbo paradigm.

The idea of Igbo paradigm speaks of the Igbo social construction of reality. In the contention of Kuhn (1970), “It is the entire constellation of belief, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a give community” (p. 175). In more precise term, Grenz (1966) maintains that “It is a belief system that prevails in a given scientific community at a given time in history” (pp. 54-55). This idea of paradigm is akin *mutatis mutandis* to what is referred to as worldview. Thus, Kalu (1978) describes worldview as “a unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concepts which order the natural and social rhythms and the place of the individual and communities in them” (p. 39). Explaining further, Oguejiofor (2010) avers that a worldview will include ideas about reality both material and spiritual and their relative importance, the origin and destiny of humanity, the end of life and what is conducive to this end.

Among the Igbos of Nigeria, the life of a human person is circumscribed within the *uwa* the world, which is composed of the physical and the spiritual, the abode of humans and spirits. In the contention of Oguejiofor (2010), these dimensions of the world are not separated or divided by chasm, but rather “there is interconnectedness between the two enabling contact between the deities and spirits, and human beings. This unitary conception of reality pervades the Igbo world in a remarkable way” (p. 21). In this world, man *mmadu* takes the centre stage as the centre of the universe. This drives perception into an anthropocentric frame. Thus the powers or forces around man, including the spiritual are relevant to the measure they influence man. The human person is composed of ahu body, obi heart and mmnuo spirit. Although these elements are present in the human person, Uzukwu (1983) avers that “these do not contradict his basic unity” (p. 9). Thus Oguejiofor (2010) maintains that “mmadu in Igbo belief is not a composite” (p. 21). Therefore, the spirit of a person is not thought of as a separate living entity that inhabits the body in the Platonic sense, nor is it thought of as the form of the body in the Aristotelian sense. Rather, the body and spirit of a person are inseparable. And this inseparability of the spirit and body, to the extent that the spirit is the person himself, springs from the inseparability of the spiritual and material worlds of the Igbo.

While circumscribed to the *uwa*, the human person is faced by difficulties and frustrations usually not disconnected with the transgression of the moral order, thus, the ontological goodness of the human person is of great significance. Diseases like small pox, aids, leprosy, malaria etc are present vying for a central place in the human person. This makes survival in a tolerable way a major concern for the Igbo, and for Oguejiofor (2010), it to a large extent determines their attitude to life. This explains why Nwala (1998) avows that the desire for *ndu* life and its preservation in Igbo ontology is the *summum bonum* (the supreme good), and every other thing is expected to serve its realization. According to Kanu (2012) the prominent appearance of *ndu* in Igbo proverbs, parables and personal names projects the height of the value the Igbo race places on life. For instance, the Igbo would say,

Ndubisi: life is the first. From this perspective, life for the Igbo, is the prime necessity. Life should be pursued before and above every other thing or value.

Ndukaku: life is greater than wealth. This is a little bit related to the first. If life is greater than wealth, then, wealth must not be pursuit at the expense of life.

Ndubuizu: life is ethos of consensus. That people are able to come together and discuss and even agree on something is because they have life.

Ndulue: If life stretches out. The plans about the future in the present can only be actualized if life extends into the future.

Ndukwe: If life agrees. This is related to the preceding. The actualization of future plans depends on if life agrees that we be in that future.

Nduka: Life is greater.

Nduamaka: Life is good.

Because of the prime place that life occupies in Igbo philosophy, Obi (2009) maintains that everything that the Igbo does is geared towards the preservation of life. Eating, drinking, sacrifices, rituals and rites, kinship, taboos and other moral provisions, worship and even the existence of sacred specialists is for the preservation of life. Nothing is done without a bearing to life. The Igbo does everything in his or her power to preserve this life. Suicide is not an option.

If the Igbo must qualify to live in the world of the ancestors, he needs to achieve personal success, which is economic, social, moral and biological (long life). Failure in any of these implies exclusion from the community of life, both earthly and otherworldly. This explains why the Igbo adapt themselves to any condition no matter how difficult to achieve their aim. Thus, the Igbo person sees life as a struggle in which he must put all he has in order to live a successful life. If the Igbo is seen working hard, competing and admire personal achievement, Oguejiofor (2010) argues that it is because these have great weight on his eschatological destiny. It is in this regard that Tempels (1952) writes, "No live code of behaviour is possible unless the meaning of life is sensed. There can be no will to determine life unless the ends of life are conceived. No one can pursue the way to redemption who has no philosophy of salvation" (p. 10). Given that this achievement must be personal, not based on those of your father or brothers, the Igbo develops a social and political ethos that is distinguished by egalitarianism and competitiveness. The spirit of the Igbo person was captured by Basden (1966) when he described Igbo immigrants to the west of the 1920s, "Whatever the condition, the Igbo immigrants adapt themselves to meet them, and it is not long before they make their presence felt in the localities where they settle" (p. ix).

4. The Sacredness of Life in Igbo Ontology

A very significant concept of *ndu* among the Igbos is the idea that *ndu* is from God. This makes the human person a theomorphic being and thus the human life as a sacred thing. This explains why the Igbos say, *ndu sin a chi* (life is from God). When a child is born it is taken to be a gift from God. The life of children is not attributed to mere biological fact of conception because every child has existed in an antecedent world of a divine master. It is thus not surprising that the Igbo would name their child,

Chi-nyere ndu: God gave life

Nke-chi-yere: the one God has given

Chi-n'eye ndu: God gives life

Chi-di-ogo: God is generous

Chi-nwe- ndu: God owns life

Chi-ekwe: God has agreed

Chi-ji-ndu: God owns life

However, God does not only give a child, he also guides and protects the child all through its existence; this is why the Igbo would say *ndu di n'aka chi* (life is in the hand of God). Even though life is in the hand of God, it is still for the Igbo a paradox: meaning that it is unpredictable. It is often interrupted by death. One wonders indefinitely at such enigma, inconsistency, mystery and puzzles of premature death, the absurdity and ambiguity of life and death. It is in this regard that Onunwa (1990) echoes that, "Among the unfriendly agents that threaten life here on earth (for the Igbo) is illness. The other enemy which the Igbo hates is death" (p. 81). Even in the face of death, the Igbo still looks towards God who gives and maintains life, for even in the worst of situations, he believes that God can still intervene. And so he offers sacrifices.

Although death is conceived as a transition to the world of the ancestors, it still does not change the fact that it is an enigma. It is thus not surprising that the Igbo would name their child: *onwu di njo* (death is bad). *Onwubuche* (death is my worry). *Onwubiko* (death I implore you). *Onwu kam ike* (death is more powerful than I am). *Onwuasoanya* (death is no respecter of persons). *Onwuamaeze* (death does not recognize a king or a great man). In spite of the human person's wisdom and technological know-how, death still defies prediction. Even in the face of death, the Igbo perseveres, crying *Onwubiko* until his last effort is overcome by death.

5. The Quality of Death through Suicide

In Igbo ontology, there is a distinction between good and bad death. A person who reached old ripe age and attained a life of accomplishment before dying is believed to have died a good death. Thus old age is a *conditio sine qua non* for good death. The accomplishments of the person should include marriage, begotten children which gives the person in question the opportunity to participate in life circle, accomplished through reincarnation. At death such a person joins the ancestors, though after the full funeral rites that ushers the person into the world of the ancestors. Death at an old age is regarded as a blessing and is celebrated with feasting. In *Things Fall Apart*, when Ogbuefi Ezeudu died, the people of Umuofia celebrated his death with lots of food, drinking, and dancing. The nine representatives of the ancestral spirits, the *egwugwu*, and various types of masquerades came to pay their last respect. There were gun salutes, the beating of drums and the brandishing and clanging of machetes. He was given a befitting burial because he was one of the oldest men in Umuofia.

When a person dies young, for the Igbo it is a bad death. Thus they are not given full funeral rites. There is no happiness accompanying the burial. It is worst when a person commits suicide. There is no fitting funeral ceremony for someone who commits suicide, even at an old age. No one is allowed to cry or weep publicly for the deceased. There is no cooking or drinking. Finally, cleansing ceremonies are performed by the deceased's family so that such an evil will not happen again. The elders would offer sacrifices for peace in the land, and for the extinction of such thought and illness from the land. It is seen as the most evil thing a person can do. It is referred to as *alu* an abomination and as *nso ani* a sin against the earth. Thus, in the case of suicide, not only loved ones are offended, the divine is involved, as *Ala* the earth goddess is offended because the land is desecrated.

In the *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1998) brought out the seriousness of the crime of suicide among the Igbo people. Okonkwo was a great warrior and wrestler, and took the *ozo* title in Umuofia, fought very hard to preserve his tradition and ended up committing suicide, the most horrendous of all offenses against the earth goddess. His clansmen as a result of his crime could neither touch his corpse nor bury him with all the rites due a great warrior and an *ozo* as they did when Ogbuefi Ezeudu died. Rather, the elders would offer sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated ground which Okonkwo had polluted. Achebe recounted the conversation between Obierika, Okonkwo's clansman and friend, and the District Commissioner:

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead.

"Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him," said Obierika. "We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming".

"Why can't you take him down yourselves?" he (i.e. the District Commissioner) asked.

"It is against our custom," said one of the men. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers".

"Will you bury him like any other man?" asked the Commissioner.

"We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land".

Obierika turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog ..." (pp. 207-208).

To further highlight the seriousness of this crime among the Igbos, Ukwu and Ikebudu (2013) explain that if suicide was committed by hanging from a tree, not everyone was permitted to touch or to bring the corpse down from the tree. When the corpse is finally brought down, able-bodied men in the community will cut that tree down, first, as a precaution to prevent another person from committing suicide on the same tree, secondly, because the tree is regarded as an "evil" or "bad" tree.

If suicide was committed inside the house, the house is destroyed along with everything in it to prevent another suicidal attempt by someone else, and the body is taken to an evil forest where it is buried.

If suicide was committed inside a yam barn, all the arms will be destroyed. Little wonder then, a servant who is maltreated by a master may retaliate by committing suicide between the entrance to the animal house and the yam barn. In this case everything would be destroyed in the master's barn and farm house. If the suicide takes place in a farm land, the grave is dug directly under the spot where the victim hangs, so that when the rope is cut, the corpse falls directly into the grave. When suicide is committed by drowning in a well, the well is filled up with sand and closed for forever. This reveals the unpopular place suicide enjoys among the Igbo people.

6. Igbo-African Philosophy of Belongingness as an Antidote to Suicide

Pantaleon (1994) 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. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo *uwa* world. The communal character of the Igbo world 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. According to Uchendu (1965), 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 own contribution to the group.

Achebe (2008) in his work *Things Fall Apart* expressed the essence of the Igbo philosophy of belongingness:

We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him. (p. 132).

With a different shade of insight, he further wrote about the *umunna*:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon.

Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. (p. 133).

Mbiti (1970) 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 Pantaleon, therefore gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community. Thus in the Igbo world, to be is to belong, and when one ceases to belong, the path towards annihilation is opened wide.

According to Azeez (2005), “When the sense of belonging is lost, mutual trust betrayed, we-feeling is destroyed and kinship bond broken, then the individual sees no meaning in living. He feels nothing to live for and as such no desire to go on living” (p. 256). In the Igbo society, everybody is somebody, everyone has commitment towards the other, and shares in the experience of the other. The community gives each person belongingness and cultural identity for self-fulfilment and social security. In the contention of Ehusani (1991), the feeling that one matters to the extent that others care about his or her welfare carries every individual through the vicissitudes of life, makes life worth living and renders the thought of suicide remote.

7. Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the issue of suicide from an Igbo African perspective. It began with the analysis of suicide from the perspectives of the two other major ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Hausa and Yoruba as a background into the Igbo-African perspective on suicide. Added to this background is the study of the Igbo historical cultural roots. It further delved into the resilient character of the Igbo paradigm, the Igbo concept of life as sacred and its understanding of death through suicide as a bad death. With the emergence and expansion of westernization and thus individualism which has further shot up the figure of suicide in Africa, even though still nothing comparable to the western indices, this piece proposes the Igbo-African philosophy of belongingness as an antidote to the menace of suicide. It has discovered that although the Igbo-African is circumscribed to the uwa, where he or she is faced by difficulties and frustrations rather than take to suicide, the Igbo struggles on. *Ndu* life and its preservation is his or her *summum bonum* (the supreme good). Shame, difficulties and sickness are perceived by the Igbo as part of the vicissitudes of life which can be conquered if there is life.

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