

Suffering in Igbo-African Ontology

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Abstract

Suffering in a broad sense, is an individual's basic affective experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with harm or threat of harm. Suffering may be physical or mental. It occurs in the lives of sentient beings in numerous manners, and often dramatically. As a result, many fields of human activity are concerned, from their own points of view, with the meaning of suffering. Considerations include the nature of suffering, its processes, its origin and causes, its meaning and significance, its related personal, social, and cultural behaviours, its remedies, management, and uses. This paper studies the contribution of the Igbo-African world to the ongoing discourse on human suffering. "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. This would involve the study of the different Igbo-African perspectives regarding human suffering in the world. This will include the Igbo Cosmological optimistic view which believes that man is the cause of his suffering and not God. The personal god and destiny view which sees human suffering as the product of a person's personal god. There is also a middle course view, which sees human suffering as the product of both views already expressed. This paper discovers that with all these understandings of evil and its dimensions, evil still remains a puzzle to the Igbo-African.

Keywords: Suffering, African, Igbo, Ontology, god, destiny, Nigeria, World, middle-course, experience.

1. Introduction

Suffering is a perennial and universal issue. According to Thompson (2003), it is a very complex reality and yet deep rooted in human experience. No minority or creed can escape from it, just as none can claim sole right of it. Ezenweke and Kanu (2012) aver that it has its hand on every pie of the world, from the smallest sociological unit to the largest. Its tentacles are well spread and its nest well laid. Down through the ages, there have been numerous philosophical and theological attempts to respond to the problem of suffering. And Sparks (1993) in his article, "Suffering" has tried to articulate these perspectives as seven approaches.

He spoke of the dualistic approach, which holds that there are two opposing forces at work in the world – light and darkness, good and evil. The good God, in this view, is responsible for every good thing in the world, while the evil god is responsible for evil and suffering. There is the classical, freewill or Augustinian approach, which understands evil and suffering as coming as a result of the free choice of human beings, beginning with Adam and Eve (Original Sin). There is also the retaliatory approach which understands evil and suffering as God's punishment. The fourth approach, the redemptive, sees suffering as redemptive. Thus human suffering is but an expiatory payment on a debt, whether one's own or that of others. The fifth approach, the process or evolutionary approach view suffering and evil as realities that are inevitable in an unfinished world that is evolving towards its fulfilment and so is in the process of growth. There is also the remedial approach which understands suffering as remedial, that is, God uses them as tests. In other words, God allows suffering and evil to test our moral and spiritual strength, and to purify us as we go through life.

These perspectives notwithstanding, in Africa, the flame of evil and human suffering keeps burning wild and wild, and its alarming growth only comparable to a wild horse galloping down the slope. It is a reality experienced within concrete historical circumstances. The slave trade, colonialism, racism, poverty, corruption, disease, hunger etc are among the many experiences of suffering among the African people. Little wonder then, it has become a recurrent issue in theological and philosophical discourses in Africa and beyond. As suffering continue to multiply in Africa, situations have arisen when it has become imperative to once again examine the meaning of suffering, at least from the dimension of the Igbo-African ontology.

2. Historical-Cultural Root of the Igbo

A fundamental step in our study of Igbo-African perspective on 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 imprecise 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, Kanu (2012) avers that the Igbo people are 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, according to 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 culture area, helps to identify the cultural horizon for the study on human suffering in Igbo-African ontology.

3. Origin of Suffering in Igbo-African Thought

As far back as the 6th century BC, answers to fundamental questions about reality, man and the cosmos were asked and answers to them were sought through mythology; therefore mythological answers to questions about reality, man and the cosmos were offered. It is not different when it comes to questions bothering on evil and human suffering. According to obi (2001), the anthropo-phenomenological reality of suffering have posed questions that have attracted responses from diverse cultures and epochs with the aim of finding out its origin and instructing people on how best to confront it. Like other cultures, the Igbo people have tried to understand the source or origin of human suffering. This is well explained in an Igbo myth narrated by Mbaegbu (2012). He wrote that there was a time the sky lay just above the earth. Thus, human beings could reach Chukwu (God) through a rope which hung down from the sky. There was no death at the time God created the world and human beings. Human beings never lacked anything, as God was involved in their affairs: associated with them and provided for all their needs. In that world, the spirits and human beings were one. However, it happened one day that a woman spat into the eyes of God. He picked offence and thus withdrew into the sky where he now dwells. The result is that human beings were punished and could now die. Since then suffering came into the world, and evil and sin spread throughout the world. The association of God with the sky has earned Him names in this direction. He is called Eze Igwe (King of the Sky) or Igwe ka Ala (the sky greater than the earth).

4. The Igbo-African Concept of Human Suffering

Obiezu (2008) observes that suffering and evil are so interchangeably used in discussions that one is often assumed when the other is used. However, Griffin (2002) asserts that suffering is only a dimension of evil connected to and experienced by human beings and other creatures. It is indeed the relation of cause and effect. However, suffering as defined by Stoeber (2005), is “the experience of emotional pain- a mode of consciousness that can arise from sensation of intense physical pain, but which need not at all be associated with it... a painful state of consciousness that we wish we do not have to experience” (p. 20). This definition agrees with those of

Hick (1966) and Cassell (1991) who identified suffering with an emotional consciousness that one would not ordinarily want to desire. A definition like this underscores the reality of suffering which surrounds us in various forms, such as financial worries, poverty, hunger, family concerns, personal stress, racism, misogyny, inequality, the heavy blows dealt to mother earth by war, violence and terrorism. The complexity of the nature of suffering has driven many to search for some meaning in the burdens of life.

From the Igbo perspective, suffering is expressed in the Igbo word *ahuhu*, which means an unfavourable situation which ought not to be. The word can be applied in a strict sense and in a broad sense. In a strict sense, *ahuhu* connotes a gravely difficult, painful and dishonourable situation which a person undergoes as punishment for offences committed against the deities, humanity or the created order. This definition agrees with the Igbo unified view of reality, which sees the world as having an ontological link. It is in this regard that Madu (2004) avers that "There is an ontological link of the different spheres of the cosmic order, to the extent that what affects one sphere invariably will affect the other" (p. 21). Thus, from the Igbo perspective, suffering is retributive and proportionate to the abomination committed. It is in this regard that the Igbo would say *Isi kote ebu ogbaa ya* (the head that pushes the beehive receives the sting) and *ihe onye metara, no n'isi ya* (whatever a man sows that he would reap). Thus Ezeanya (1994) avers that "Suffering of every kind – epidemic, sickness of all sorts, accidents, fire outbreak, natural disasters like flood, and earthquakes were all attributed to the influence of the powers above man, both good and evil showing their displeasure at human offence" (p. 19). This explains why the Igbo would say *awo anaghi agba oso ehie na nkiti* (a toad does not run in the day time for nothing, for either it is pursuing something or something is pursuing it). Suffering is believed to be perpetrated by bad spirits *ndi ajo nmuo* and sometimes the ancestors could also inflict suffering. There were also human collaborators known as *ndi ajo nmadu*. They collaborate with bad spirits to inflict suffering on fellow human beings.

In a loose sense, the Igbo understand suffering as any kind of painful or difficult experience resulting from situations or painstaking efforts to achieve difficult objectives. It is in this regard that suffering is understood in terms of *opipia*, that is, penance, usually done to achieve spiritual heights, or *olu ike* or *olu siri ike*, that is, hard work, as in the case of a man who works at a cement industry, daily carrying about 500 bags of cement from one point to another, it is considered *ahuhu*, but for the purpose of raising money to take care of his family. In this case it also refers to *igba mbo* (making serious effort). This kind of suffering brings hope and does not lead to despair or destruction. The Igbo would say: *mmiri nmadu kwosara onwe ya adighi atu ya oyi* (the water a person pours upon himself does not bring him or her cold). Hard work is at the centre of the Igbo spirit. Thus the Igbo would say: *onye obula choro ihe mara mma ga adi nkwoobe ikuchara ya okpofu n'ihu na o dighi ije oma na-ada ne'lu* (one who desires great things must be ready to work hard for them), in another proverb, the Igbo would say: *o bu naani ukwu gbara apiti na eri ihe guru ya* (It is only the leg that is soiled with mud that enjoys whatever it likes). This kind of suffering is not a curse but attracts blessings from the gods. Greatness is achieved through hard work.

5. The Igbo-African Broadview's of Suffering

Mbaegbu (2012) in his discourse on the problem of evil from the Igbo perspective brought out three approaches towards the understanding of evil and human suffering: the Igbo cosmological optimistic view, the personal god and destiny view and the middle-course view. The section of this research will focus on his tripartite analysis with a view to discovering if they adequately answer the question of the problem of human suffering.

5.1. Cosmological Optimistic Perspective

Mbaegbu (2012) avers that this perspective regarding human suffering believes that it is traceable to human beings, that is, some moral evil committed by human beings. It asserts that God as a creative principle is good in Himself and that his creation is intrinsically good. Support for this view is built upon the Igbo myth as regards the separation of God from human beings and the subsequent coming of evil into the world, and sometimes proverbs such as *Madu bu njo ala* (man makes the world evil) and *Uwa ezu oke* which means that it is the insatiability of human wants is the cause of imperfection. It is in this regard that Nwala (1985) opines that "There is belief in the unity among beings, belief in original cosmic (universal) harmony and order which unfortunately the action of the human being upsets" (p. 29). Okafor (1992) further places human beings at the fore of the origin of evil. He argued that "The physical world is ontologically good. It is a perfect world in structure and a beautiful world whose architect is a subject of admiration... the apparent evil and imperfection in the world cosmic order are usually caused by the actions of men" (pp. 13-14).

This understanding of evil and human suffering places the human person at the centre of it. Since man is finite and limited in perfection and can never be otherwise, he continues to cause suffering in the world. This suffering may not be caused by the human person existing in the present, but by a person's ancestors, those who have lived before you. Thus, in Igbo traditional thought, the evil that men and women do live after them, in the sense

that it has effect on their kit and kin. This is why divination is very significant in the Igbo world, because it helps the living to know the source of their problems.

This notwithstanding, this perspective relates intimately with the Christian view on the origin of evil and suffering. In the book of Genesis, God created the world and said that it was good. But human beings, through sin, brought sickness, death and other disorders into the universe. According to Mbaegbu (2012), this perspective preserves the goodness and omnipotence of God in a way that leaves more questions unanswered: why can God prevent human beings from causing evil?

5.2. Human Destiny Perspective

This perspective links the suffering of human beings to a person's personal god who determines a person's destiny at the time he or she is coming into the world. In the African world, it is believed that the destiny of people as regards success and failure has been apportioned to them by God before birth. Thus, their life course has been charted and fixed by God. When something happens in a person's life, especially among the Igbos, it is traced to his Akala aka: his destined lot (Gregory, 2009). The Igbos belief in what is called the Chi, which each human being derives from the great Chukwu, who is the creator of all. This explains why the Igbo would say: Chukwu-nwe-ike (all power belongs to God); ife oma nine di Chukwu na aka (all good things are in the hand of God); madu nwa oke ya, ndiozo dili Chukwu (when a man has done his best, the rest is left to God). There are names that serve as the traditional rational grounds for holding this perspective: Nkechiyere (lot given by the personal God), Chibuoke (personal God determines one's lot), Chibude (personal God makes one famous), Onatara Chi (received from God), Ifesinachi (good and bad fortunes come from personal God).

At the point of creation, Ilogu (1974) avers that Chukwu gives the human person the Chi, which is a part of his divine nature. From this perspective, whatever abilities, good or bad fortune, success, failure, weakness etc., possessed by a person is attributed to the person's Chi. Every individual in a family has his or her own Chi, explaining why there are differences among people, and when a person dies, his or her personal God goes back to God to give an account of his life. A lucky person is said to be onye chi oma (a person with a good personal god) and an unlucky person is said to be onye chi ojoo (a person with a bad personal god). Explaining this perspective further, Mbaegbu (2012) wrote,

The summary point of it all is that the concept of personal God and destiny help to impute personal accountability in ethical behaviours as well as furnishing explanations for underserved and unavoidable evils, namely, why are some people intelligent, rich, gifted, enjoy life, healthy and have good fortune while others may be born blind, deformed, foolish, become orphans, die young and end up barren (p. 317).

While this perspective moves the blame from human beings to divinities, thus sparing God again from having any involvement with evil, it still leaves questions as regards God's goodness, justice and power unanswered. Criticizing this perspective, Gregory (2009) avers that the African has sold his freedom to act to supernatural forces. If man is not free, it means that he should not be blamed for any failure or mishap in the course of his life journey. Equally, guilt to crimes committed should also not be punished as man wouldn't be responsible for his actions.

5.3. Eclectic Perspective

The eclectic perspective is a synthesis of the above views. According to Mbaegbu (2012), this perspective holds that man and his personal god or some other known or unknown spirits, particularly those that specialize in mischief are the sources of evil and human suffering in the world. Thus, evil and suffering are not intrinsic to the world but rather emerge through the negation of the cosmic order by human beings and spirits. Edeh (1985) holds this perspective, and wrote, "... judging from our treatment of the cause of evil... the three proximate causes of evil are the evil spirits, the element gods and human beings" (p. 109). In this analysis, Chukwu is still exempted from being part of the causes of evil. Although this perspective is born out of common sense and has little objections, it still does not adequately answer the question of the problem of evil and human suffering in the world. Like the other perspectives, it still leaves God out of the problem of evil with an attempt not to detract from his goodness and omnipotence. But again, if we really understand element gods or divinities as the deans of God and carry out his instructions, it then really means that indirectly, God is involved in the problem of evil and human suffering.

6. The Missing Link and the Mystery Perspective as the Bridge

Having studied these different perspectives, and seeing their limitations or inadequacies as regards answering the question of the problem of evil and human suffering in the world, I would like to propose a fourth perspective called the Mystery Perspective. Of all the three perspectives we have studied, it is observable that scholars from the camps of Igbo traditional religionists and scholars of modern Igbo traditional thought have left God out of all their analysis of evil? A strong contributing factor is the fact that God is a mystery to the Igbo human person.

This explains why the Igbo would say: Onyema Chukwu (who knows God), Onyema uche chi (who knows the mind of God). One cannot know him let alone to arrogate faults to him. He is further and fundamentally referred to as Amama-amasi-amasi (known but not fully known).

Since God cannot be fully known, he is a mystery and human suffering is associated with the mysteriousness of God, this is because through suffering the incomprehensibility of God is revealed. It is because he cannot be known that human suffering cannot be fully explained. Thus human suffering is a mystery. And what is a mystery? It is a hidden reality or secret. The Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary defines it as "that which is beyond human knowledge to explain." Etymologically, the word mystery comes from the Greek word *mysterion* which has its root in the Aramaic *raz* that means a 'secret thing', and corresponds to the classical Hebrew word *sod* (Xavier, 1970). Thus, suffering is a mystery – a hidden reality that goes beyond human comprehension, and intimately connected to the mystery of God. It is in this regard that Rahner (1983) wrote:

The incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the incomprehensibility of God. Not in the sense that we could deduce it as necessary and thus inevitable as clarified from something else that we already know of God. If this were so it would not be at all incomprehensible. But the very fact that it is really and eternally incomprehensible means that suffering is truly a manifestation of God's incomprehensibility in his nature and in his freedom. In his nature because, despite what might be described as the terrible amorality of suffering (at least on the part of children and innocent people), we have to acknowledge the pure goodness of God, which needs no acquittal before our tribunal. In his freedom, because this, too, if it wills the suffering of the creature, is incomprehensible, since it could achieve without suffering the sacred aims of the freedom that wills suffering. Suffering then is the form ... in which the incomprehensibility of God himself appears. (p. 206).

Thus, to accept that God is the intractable mystery is to accept too the inexplicability and unanswerability of suffering, since they are one and the same event.

Still more, Rahner (1983) argues that when in our present state we accept suffering in view of the incomprehensibility of God and His freedom, we in a concrete form accept God in Himself and allow Him to be God. Anything short of this acceptance would amount to the affirmation of our own idea of God rather than the affirmation of God in Himself. Hence, he concludes: "There is no blessed light to illumine the dark abyss of suffering other than God himself. And we find him only when we lovingly assent to the incomprehensibility of God himself, without which he would not be God." (p. 208).

7. Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the problem of evil from the Igbo-African perspective. It began with an attempt to understand the historical-cultural root of the Igbo as a background. It further studied the Igbo myth of the origin of evil and human suffering and the Igbo concept of suffering. The Igbo concept of suffering is further expressed in the three Igbo-African broad-views: the Igbo cosmological optimistic view, the personal god and destiny perspective and the middle-course view. This study has revealed that the Igbo perspective on human suffering can be categorized into several approaches. It could be considered a dualistic approach since it presents God as the source of good and evil spirits as the causes of evil. It also falls into the classical or freewill approach since evil, as is evident in the myth about the origin of evil, was born out of the human action which is free. It is also a retaliatory approach since it sometimes sees evil and human suffering as punishment from divinities. However, whatever approach it falls into, it is evident that the three principal Igbo approaches still leave questions unanswered, thus a vacuum in the Igbo human person. It is in this regard that this piece proposes the mystery approach as a bridge to fill up the missing link in the Igbo-African quest to understand evil.

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