



An Igbo Concept of 'Community'

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Abstract

This paper presented a socio-ontological conception of community from the perspective of Igbo thought. It argued that the concept 'community' expresses the Igbo experience of life and what reality is, to the extent that to be is to be in, with, for, by, of and through a 'community'. In exploring the significance of the concept of community in traditional Igbo ontology, the paper highlighted the transcendental dimension of community with the investigation of the connection between earthly community and the community that exists in the hereafter. It made a contribution to literature on such discourse by shedding new light on the Igbo concept of 'community' and its expression as 'communalism' by which the Igbo is identified. It adopted the method of philosophical analysis.

Key Words: Igbo, Africa, Community, Socio-ontological, Communalism, Society, Nwanne

Introduction

The problem this paper sets out to address is the prevailing influence of Western cultures and religious beliefs that undermine some core Igbo metaphysical conceptions and beliefs. Today, Igbo have replaced the concept 'community' with that of 'society' which, fundamentally, cannot be equated with the concept 'community' (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022).

The term 'community' to the Igbo-African does not just connote social status, but also ontological status. This implies that the consciousness of the real meaning of 'community' has a huge impact on the Igbo concept of existence. The idea guides their physical life just like to still live in community in the hereafter is their hope for hereafter. To live in the community, community of beings both here and in the hereafter, is the driving motivation that guides the Igbo life. From this perspective, the concept expresses (1) the Igbo social life *vis-à-vis* visible beings, (2) the Igbo socio-ontological life *vis-à-vis* the invisible beings (3) the Igbo sense of moral consciousness given that the Igbo knows that meaningful existence in the hereafter depends on their existential and moral consciousness of (1) and (2) above.



Whatever characteristics the community is known for, become the core identity of the people inhabiting it. Summarily, the concept of community explains what existence means and implies to the Igbo-African.

But how has this sense of 'community' been understood today among the Igbo-African amidst the Westernization agenda which encourage the prevalence of Western values over the Igbo-African indigenous cultures, ideologies and beliefs? For the Igbo-African, community implicates the idea of true and productive existence. Suffice it to say therefore that the individual is an embodiment of the family lineage, honour and integrity and s/he is morally obliged to represent his/her family and lineage positively. The Igbo understanding of community goes beyond the social position of African communalists or communitarians like J. S. Mbiti, S. Gbadegesin and C. B. Okolo whose arguments on the community have socio-normative and behavioural roots. The Igbo understanding of community emphasizes the dimension of the hereafter.

The paper defended the claim that 'community' as a concept explains what it means and implies to live meaningfully, in the world and in the hereafter. It opined that 'community' as a concept directs the Igbo life in this world and even becomes the hope of positive existence in the hereafter. To live with others in a community is the Igbo highest point of making life worthwhile.

The paper is structured into three sections. Section one situated the Igbo understanding of 'community' in the broader Afro-communalistic literature. Section two and section three analyzed the Igbo concept of 'community' and highlighted its connection with the sense of morality, in terms of moral principles that guide communal living.

Community, Society and Literature Review

The Concept 'Community' in General

The term 'community' which comes from the old French *comunité* derives from the Latin *communis* which means 'common' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Thus, the term 'common' (commonness) is the essence of 'community'. Essentially, it portrays that sense of common ownership among community-members. 'Common' (commonness) here implicates the idea of 'public spirit' which is an aggregate of social consciousness of community-members of a particular type of being. Characteristically, the human 'community' "may have intent, belief, resources, preferences, needs, and risks in common, affecting the identity of the participants and their degree of cohesiveness" (Melih, 2011: 7). Community could exist based on 'location', 'identity', and even 'organization'; and these stand as pointers to the varieties of its inherent relations like the 'grounded', 'life-style' and even 'projected' community relations.

From the above, it is clear that a community connotes pluralism. This is to say, if 'community' identifies reality in Igbo ontology, then the Igbo have a pluralistic conception of existence (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022). Even as a single individual, the human being is still conceived as a complex being not just from the physiological components but from an ontological viewpoint as an embodiment of both physical and metaphysical components. This ontological claim could also be justified through the biblical account of the origin of human beings where one reads



that a 'we' created human beings and in 'their' image and likeness. By this alone, the human being becomes a complex being, a conglomeration of the contributions of a 'we'. It is thus deductible here that the human person is not only a complex being; that is, a being whose nature expresses community considering his/her different make-up components divided between physical and metaphysical nature, but also, s/he is a product of a community of being expressed by the creator designated as 'we'.

It is from this conceptual analysis that it could be argued that the concept of 'community' has more ontological underpinnings that differentiate it from the concept of 'society' in relation to human existential sphere. But that is not the same meaning and implication with the term 'society'.

'Society' as Differentiated from 'Community'

The term 'society' derives from the 12th century French *société* meaning 'company'. From Latin 'society' is etymologically *societas* which derives from the noun *socius*, implies the idea of 'comrade, friend, ally'. Its adjectival form, *socialis* is "used to describe a bond or interaction between parties that are friendly, or at least civil" (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society>). In other words, it means "a group of individuals involved in persistent social interaction, or at large social group sharing the same spatial or social territory, typically subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations" (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society>).

It is "characterized by patterns of relationships (social relations) between individuals who share a distinctive culture and institutions; a given society may be described as the sum total of such relationships among its constituent members" (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society>). This explains why society could be applied to certain discourses like 'gender', 'kinship', 'ethnicity', 'government and politics', 'trade and economics, and even 'conflict'. This is primarily because (1) the concept of community is more inclined to describe the core social existential structure that defines human beings, and (2) it describes a sense of blood lineage in description to its inhabitants than society could depict. This said, while community portrays that sense of primitiveness in describing human existential situation, society conveys a living setting that describes a people occupying a place regardless of where they come from hence there could be no genealogical trace among inhabitants of a society. As a concept, it differentiates humanity based on levels of inventions in reference to the 'pre-industrial', 'hunting and gathering', 'pastoral', 'horticultural', 'agrarian', 'industrial', and even 'post-industrial' eras. Thus, 'society' could be referred to as "people living together in an ordered community, an organization formed for a particular purpose" or even "the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community" (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society>).

Many scholars have hitherto attempted differentiating between the two concepts in relation to human socialization (Scheler, 1973; Walther, 1923; Zahavi, 2018). Representing these scholars by Scheler's position, primacy of community over society as social descriptive settings is a priority. Suffice it then to say that "there can be no society without life-community (though there can be life-community without society). All possible society is therefore founded through community" (Scheler, 1973: 531). Furthermore, he contends that 'this does not mean that any societal group must necessarily also be bound together as a community.' It only means that



1) individuals who enter into societal relations must previously have participated in a communal life, and 2) that any concrete societal combination of individuals is only possible if the individuals in question are at the same time communal members (though not necessarily members of the same community) ((Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022).

Literature Review on African Notion of Community

The sense of 'community' is the fundamental basis of all that could be said of the Igbo with regard to their conception of reality. The Igbo live in 'community', think, act and speak with, in, for, by and through the 'community'. The ingredients of their lives are in and within a 'community'. Their sense of here and hereafter are all explained in and with the concept of 'community' (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022). In this world, they live in 'community', speak not just for their own personal good and interests but also those of the 'community'. They act in, by, through and for the 'community' to ensure communal strength, welfare and good. As a people, the Igbo reason individually as human beings identified with thinking faculties (minds), but in high consideration of the 'other', the 'community'. The 'other', the 'community' plays a vital complimentary role in the Igbo life, quality of life and welfare.

Many African scholars have delved into the discourse of community in relation to people living in it. For these people, the community is what defines the people living in it to the extent that it makes the people while the people make it. In fact, to some of these scholars, to become a human being is to belong to a community. C. B. Okolo is one of the proponents of such extremist position. He writes: "As a matter of fact, individuals only become real in their relationship with others, in a community or a group. It is the community that makes or produces the individuals such that without the community, the individual has no existence" (Okolo, 1993: 6). For Okolo, the belongingness to community bestows on an individual

humanness, just as Uzukwu would opine when he writes that "one is human because of others, with, and for others, and since we are, therefore I am. I belong, therefore I am" (Uzukwu, 1996: 37). That is how significant the concept is to Okolo as an African scholar whose scholarship majorly centred on the concept of African person. K. A. Opoku's position would rhyme with this position as he argues that one's humanity gets realized in the humanity of the other. In view of this, he asserts that "a man is a man because of others, and life is when you are together, alone you are an animal" (Opoku, 1978: 92). To be truly an African person is, for Okolo, to carry out that attitudinal personality that characterizes the African community which is the attitude of 'being-with'. his opinion is made clear when he writes that "what is easily said about self in African metaphysics is that its horizon is essentially towards others. It is self-in-relation-to-others, a being-with-others" (Okolo, 1993: 5). The concept of 'being-with' is a term Okolo adopted to designate the African concept and attitudinal personality of communalism which he has equally described as the brand of African humanism. Still from same perspective, J. S. Mbiti could be seen arguing that the relationship between the individual and the community in African conception is an existential and fundamental one that being a human is belonging to a community without which the individual truly does not exist. He clarifies with following words:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries...The individual can only say "I am, because we are; and since we



are therefore I am." This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (Mbiti, 1969: 108-9)

Without belonging to the community, the individual does not exist for it is in the community and among the members of the community that one's aspirations and destiny is realized. Protection, motivation, favourable environment for self-realization among other existential necessities, are what one gets in, through and from the community in which one belongs to. C. Agulanna has a lot to say about this:

In other words, it is not in living as an isolated being but in mutually interacting with other members of community that the individual can ever hope to realize his social aspirations in life. Among the Igbo people..., as among other African peoples generally, the obvious curtailment of a person's power to do as he wills is provided by the potent force of what is known as 'the will of the community' (Agulanna, 2010: 282, 88)

The implication from the citation is that community therefore becomes a kind of cloth protecting/sheltering an individual. Without the sheltering, s/he is exposed to some life-threatening conditions which can, in one way or the other, may terminate his/her destiny or hinder the easy attainment of the destiny. In fact, in a more elaborate manner, S. Gbadegesin has more to say about this:

Individual destinies determine the outcome of individual lives. Destiny is the meaning of a person's existence, the purpose of existence... In any case, destiny is itself a community concept, a means for the community to provide its members with meaning. In the final analysis, a person is what she is in virtue of her destiny, her character, and the communal influences on her (Gbadegesin, 2004, 318)

For Gbadegesin, in explaining the human being in relation to his community wherein he lives, the individual and his destiny are owned by the community. It is in an attempt to achieving these aspirations and destinies that some African normativists argue that that it is not enough to just belong to the community so as to be seen as a human being, but it is abiding, compliance with social norms that one would be seen as such. Significant to this condition is the epistemic level in that individual which would now show him/her the necessity of compliance to social norms before qualifying as a human being in the community. I. A. Menkiti on this view argues that "the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by references to the envioning community... (also) in regard to epistemic accessibility" (Menkiti, 1984: 171). As a normativist whose philosophical viewpoint has espoused the concept of personhood in African, he argues that personhood is achieved through social communications rather than ontological bestowment. He concludes it thus contending that "in the African view, it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory.... personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed" (Menkiti, 1984: 172). In that, personhood is therefore "the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations" (Menkiti, 1984: 176). On the same angle, the Ghanaian scholar K. Gyekye contends that obedience to the stipulated social norms makes one a true person, hence true-person is achieved, not by being



just a person in the community. Compliance to social norms and precepts bestows on the individual 'real person' (onipa), in fact, a 'real good person' (onipa pa). The conclusion is that "personhood is fully defined by the community" (Gyekye, 1997: 52). However, unlike the radical communitarians, he searches for the place of what he calls 'ultimate value' or 'primary social value' which struggles for, and defines an 'individual's autonomy' as "having of a will, a rational will of one's own, that enables one to determine at least some of one's own goals and to pursue them, and to control one's destiny" (Gyekye, 1997: 54). On a conclusive note, on the one hand, it could be said that the concept of community portrayed by these scholars is commendable as it shows the complimentary necessity of the community in the meaningfulness of the community inhabitants. Again, it must be noted that the welfare of the individual community members takes a central position in the discourse. On the other hand, the concept of community as explained here takes more abstract perspective in discussion as it goes beyond the physical existence of the inhabitants as portrayed in the conceptual analysis of these scholars, to the metaphysical existential domain of the inhabitants. In that, the concept takes a more ontological understanding as it becomes an existential principle or force that shapes the physical existence of the community-members for the existence beyond here.

Culturally, the severest way to punish any Igbo is to ostracize him/her (ostracism). By this, the ostracized is separated from the root. S/he becomes powerless and alone following the fact that his/her strength found in being with others in community has been taken away from him/her. In ostracism, s/he is already in rejection, aloneness and in the domain of powerlessness. Even when s/he dies in ostracism, s/he still exists alone in the hereafter. This is a pointer to the Igbo position that reconciliation and being-with starts from but transcends the physical world. It also justifies the Igbo objection to the Christian Catholic sacrament of penance where an offender goes to a foreign person who is outside the cause and effect chain of the offence and who would tell the offender that his/her offences are forgiven (Abah and Ugwu, 2021). In fact, this act is highly controversial as it could stand against the teaching of the Bible on one hand (Matt 5:23-4, 1 Tim 2:5, 1 Jn 1:9), but on the other hand, still found in line with Biblical direction (Matt 18:18-20, Jn 20:21-3, James 5:16). Thus, for the Igbo, the real reconciliation between an offender and a victim begins with an offender going to a victim, confessing his/her bad deeds and pleading for forgiveness. Truelove for the Supreme Deity starts with love for fellow human beings here within. When one dies in ostracism, one's spirit keeps wandering. By this, it keeps disassociating from the circle of the community-members in the hereafter. This continues until that spirit either exists into an existential periphery where it will remain eternally powerless thereby having very little and insignificant impact to create from the metaphysical existential realm and becoming almost a nonexistent, or it survive the strength of the community formed by the spirits of the good people and forms an opposition community—and that answers the question of the origin of evil spirit. These evil spirits will now keep reawakening the evil principle in human nature thereby making them more inhumane and wicked thereby obstructing human welfarism.

Speaking about ostracism, we do not mean the various interpretations of some Igbo socio-political and cultural concepts/ideologies like *Osu* the Levites — the priestly family lineage; or *Ohu* slavery; or *Nwa-di-Àlà*, Son-of-the-Soil Mantra; or *Nwa-Nlọta* or *Nwa Mbiambia* (a settler or sojourner); or *Nwa-Nkuta* (Nwa-e-kutara-e-kuta) (the



adopted): or the outcast (one who is cast out from the community because of one's evil or immorality or attitudes that are in discord with the community ethics and norms). We do not also mean one who has gone against the moral principles/dictates of one or two deities, and as a result, has incurred the curse/wrath of the deities thereby being rejected by fellow community-members to avoid catching the curse on one by the deities. The ostracism meant here is being disassociated from the community. No one deeply relates with the ostracized but can simply greet him/her. A reasonable person in the community not only prays never to be ostracized, but also tries all s/he could do avoid going contrary to that which is obtainable in the land against which one could be ostracized. It is one of the harshest punishments among the Igbo, for it equals denying the person the quintessential qualities of existence which is in sharing and interrelationship with others (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022).

Igbo Concept of 'Community' as Transcending the Terrestrial Sphere The Igbo and their Community Hereafter

It is important to stress that the 'hereafter' of the Igbo is quite different from the Western Christian perspective, and precisely Catholic conception of tripartite hereafter. The Catholic creed of Christianity has (1) Heaven (the Paradise) the abode of God and His Son Jesus Christ and all entities comprising both the Christian patriarchs/saints/martyrs and the good spirits (angels), (2) the Purgatory, the abode of those who are still striving to attain total cleansing before gaining entrance to Heaven, and finally, (3) the Hell fire (Hades) perceived as the abode of Satan and evil spirits and spirits of evil doers. This is quite un-Igbo. In the Igbo conception of the hereafter, the concept 'community' explains the hereafter both in a good (positive) sense and in a bad (negative) sense. Being-in/within-community implicates the idea of Igbo paradise but being-out/without-community implicates the idea of Igbo living-outside-community. Put differently, being-in-and-with-the-community of relatives in the hereafter realm-of-existence is the Igbo Heaven while the very opposite pictures what it is like to be in the Christian hell.¹

In Igbo belief system, when a person's earthly life comes to an end, they move into another existential realm, (spiritual). They do not cease to exist; rather they change existential realm from the physical to the metaphysical/spiritual. They still partake in family and community affairs from the spiritual realm of existence. Immediately a person finally and entirely enters into the metaphysical realm of existence, a force descends on his/her spirit and takes it to where it appropriately belongs. This force is linked to the level of a person's moral consciousness and advancement while still alive. It would descend on the spirit of the person and takes it to the community of the relatives of the person; or better still, dead-relatives (fore-parents). Depending on the moral advancement of the person while still alive, if s/he lived a moral life, his/her spirit would be driven, by the force, to the circle/community of relatives called

¹ Anayochukwu K. Ugwu has maintained in a work still under publication, titled *A Philosophical Comparison between African Traditional Religions and Western Religions* (Germany: Galda Verlag) that the Igbo understanding of community has everything to do with the life of the Igbo-African hence to maintain community unity both here and hereafter is a serious force that drives his/her life on earth. When s/he lives worthily here to secure the qualification to still live in or maintain community with relatives and others in the hereafter, then s/he has made heaven.



departed-living (good/virtuous spirits), but if s/he lived otherwise, it would be driven to the circle/community of relatives called departed-non-living (bad/evil spirits).² Significantly, when received/welcome by the former, the welcoming joy transcends the immediate community of the departed-living relatives of the person's spirit to the entire community of beings (all the departed-living) in the hereafter (paradise) where the Supreme Deity reigns highest and heads affairs and grants more ontological capabilities to members of the community. But when received by the latter, the implication is that there would never be real rest or very little positive existential influences from the person's spirit even in the hereafter and on earth.³ This category of spirit-beings is spirits separated from the community of relatives on earth and the departed-living in the hereafter are the spirits of those who did not live a positively effective life.⁴ They played down the conscience and moral consciousness and advancement and lived an unpleasant lifestyle. However, by reason of their ontological status as spirits, they possess unique capabilities, though their capabilities are of a lesser order than the capabilities of the departed-living. This position could be said to be in support of the saying that *o-naghi abara onye aru* expressing the fact that the evil person shall suffer hence evil shall not triumph over good even when it appears that evil is prevailing. This is an ontological implication of community in the attempt to explain African life both here and hereafter.

In traditional Igbo cosmogony, human life is strongly influenced by fate. Even when one lives morally, evil still befalls one in view of the capabilities and influence of the evil spirits and the reality of forces operating for ill and good in the world. Hence, it is believed that there are two principles struggling for control over the destiny of human beings. The good or positive spirits eventually control the destiny of people who live good lives.

The spirits that are located outside the community of (their) relatives are the departed-non-living (dead). Their non-living-ness, or being dead (or dead-ness) does not imply cessation from existence but instead implies moral death, that is, death caused by not living a positively effective life. This moral death is believed to be a proof of moral inadequacy. This calls for the necessity of the nominal designation of good spirits as the 'departed-living', and the designation of the bad spirits as the 'departed-non-living'. On the one hand, the 'departed-living' expresses the idea that though they have departed for the hereafter, their moral consciousness when they were alive still kept them ontologically alive to positively influence their family

² This very point is explained more in the aforementioned work. A force beyond the human spirit is there in the entrance of hereafter to rest each spirit returning home at its appropriate and deserved existential sphere. By 'entrance' the work does not mean spacial but at the point of full embracement of death.

³ This idea is extensively discussed and postulated in the same work which is still in press. The idea behind such position is to maintain that even in the hereafter, 'community' is still valued and to gain from the community value over there is a driving force for positive and fulfilled life in the physical life of the Igbo-African person.

⁴ In as much as to live in the community in the hereafter is a driving force even in the physical world, and the facilitating factor to achieving such life is high moral consciousness, then those spirits that do not make it to experience such community-life in the hereafter are the ones that lived negative lifestyle here on earth.



members. On the other hand, the dead-ness of the 'departed-non-living' expresses their low moral consciousness when they were still alive.⁵

At this point, it is clear that for the Igbo, the Christian biblical paradise/Heaven is living/dwelling in the circle of fellow departed-living in the existential realm of the hereafter while Hades, hell fire of Christianity is, for the Igbo, living outside the community of the departed-living (of mostly, relatives) in the hereafter; that is, being ostracized from their circle; and purgatory has no place in the Igbo ontology. To be Igbo (African in this context) is to be, live and exist in community. Sometimes could be asked: 'hey, I have a Kenyan friend called Uhuru, do you know him?' When asking this question, the person asking the question does not care to know which part of Africa the person who should answer the question comes from. To the person asking the question, the other person is an African; s/he should know all Africans; after all, they are always referred to as a people with similarity of culture cutting across every African part/ethnic group.

At this juncture, it could be argued that 'community' and its inherent living-characteristics describe what it really means to live a communalistic life which describes the Igbo traditional life and socialization. Community-life is characterized by tolerance and some attitudinal disposition that could be described as 'foolish'. This is so because true peace, true love, true humanism, true sacrifices for humanity which underline the life of *e-nebe a-ghara* (overlook because of the involvement of *nwanne* (relatedness of the 'other' or with the 'other')), are the products of that 'foolishness'. The term 'foolishness' here refers to that utmost tolerance to accommodate the other provided a 'community' is lived. It underlines the Igbo aphorism: *enebe aghara* which is all about living out 'community' through 'communalism' among a people by enduring so much to even a fault. To allow 'community', tolerance, to a point of being described as 'foolish' has to be observed, if not, 'society' will always prevail (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022). It is in such a state that the African is described as a being that feels even while thinking. The Igbo is not just the ego, the self, the 'I' who thinks, reasons as is obtainable in the Western philosophy; s/he is also the heart, the extended being that feels, sympathizes. Their reasoning is not identified without empathy/emotion because that makes them reasoning or rationalizing-humanistic beings. This communalistic lifestyle is what this paper means by the 'pristine Igbo-African life', and 'communalism' stands as the best term to describe the life/socialization pattern in pristine Igbo life.

Igbo Morality as tied to Community Lifestyle

The Igbo Concept of Community as a Source of Morality

The ethical principles of 'community' are natural sources of morality (Abah and Ugwu, 2021). They need no formal direction from a human authority to identify rights and wrongs, or what ought to be or not. Understanding them has huge ethical and moral implications following the understanding that to socialize is to primarily and horizontally interact with human beings mainly, and in addition, other visible realities.

⁵ This point is detailed in the work that is still under production by Ugwu. A moral-conscious-lifestyle underlines where one's spirit belongs to, in the hereafter, and the name it will be identified by, and the level of positive and negative ontological influences it can have on both the physical and non-physical beings.



From a vertical angle, socialization extends to the domains of the invisible realities which include both the departed-living and departed-non-living, deities and other spiritual forces and entities and finally the Supreme Deity who heads the affairs of the universe. Whether the activities that make up the socialization process are qualified as good/right or bad/wrong, the reward must be in accordance with the status/quality of the goodness or badness of the activities.

Certain Igbo concepts and ideas cannot be discussed without their moral implications. In the 'community', the elementary feature is community-lifestyle of sharing with one another. This characteristic interrelationship is with and among fellow relatives expressed as *Ụmụ-Nne* and *Ụmụ-Nna*. The Igbo perspective of community and socialization cannot be conceptually engaged without one articulating concepts like *Nwa* (singular, child) or *Ụmụ* (plural, children) because it is upon them that matrilineal and patrilineal relatedness stand. These terms point to 'siblinghood'.⁶ They indicate that every Igbo community member/individual possesses and shares in the status of siblinghood; that is, being children of a particular community. The community now takes a parental identity over them, as they take the status of the representative-children of the community. The undergirding factor is the ethical consciousness of the 'other' as one with whom one shares the same womb. The 'community' that binds every member to the whole now becomes the 'womb' and the 'parent' of all the members (Ugwu and Asuquo, 2022). All members share in the community just as it stands as an ontological binding root of the existence of every member of the community. The community becomes a pool of consciousness, the binding force from and through which every community-member have their being. To sustain the inherent structure of the community for the welfare of each member becomes a priority for all members. Any good or bad action from one person to another in the socialization process has a strong impact. This is because in the Igbo ontology, any action is responded in accordance with the moral content of such an action; thus, consciousness of such ontological chain encourages high moral consciousness among the people.

Thus, the two terms (*Ụmụ-Nne* and *Ụmụ-Nna*) convey the sense of commitment, responsibility and moral consciousness. They represent the interrelationship that characterizes community-living. They are the bedrock of what communalism (community-interrelationship) means and implies to the Igbo. When *Nwa* as in *Nwanne* or *Nwanna* or *Umu* as in *Umunne* or *Umunna* are mentioned, they automatically call to mind one's relationship with one's 'sibling', a person with whom one shares the same mother. The 'motherhood' here is by virtue of being related with the 'other'. This relatedness is by virtue of coming from the same 'community'. The existing bond means that the two individuals are 'siblings' of the same 'mother' (community). This community-relatedness binds all the community-members to a sort of social covenant, commitment and obligation to one another. By implication, procreation is an act of interrelationship; progress and development are all acts of interrelationship; possessing same womb is identical with interrelationship; being in covenant and moral and ethical obligation, and commitment to one another is an act of interrelationship. The instances given here involve more than one person, and so,

⁶ The communal and cultural values behind these terms are influential to the Igbo-African person to the extent that they form the ideals of African personality. By those values, Igbo-Africans have same motherhood (origin and root), and most importantly, identity.



they convey that sense of community and interrelationship by virtue of involving two or more. The community interrelationship explains all that life and existence mean and imply to the Igbo.

Morally speaking, humanistic principles are inherent in the concept of 'community' because one community-member is morally obliged to see for the welfare of the other community member with whom s/he communes in the community. The concept 'community' itself is morally laden, and that subsequently bestows on community-members a sense of responsibility. The concept 'community' entails moral consciousness and moral worth. Those actions that form the communality of the people become the community norms, social codes and mores. Actions like killing a neighbour, obstructing his/her progress or keeping malice or grudges, socially isolating oneself, among others, are abhorred in the context of 'community'. The sense of the welfare of the 'we' and the people's general unity supersede that of personal welfare. In the Igbo-African concept of 'community', there is no externality in origin; that is to say that every action is internally originated. Actions spring from that sense of humanism: humanity (following from the feeling that one is dealing with fellow human beings), and rationality (following from the exercise of reason and common sense).

The concept explains the political, moral, social, economic, developmental, religious and social perspectives of Igbo life and experience. It guides, from the beginning, the Igbo life. All the Igbo do is to maintain the 'community' from childhood to adulthood and even until death. To be in unity, conformity and alliance with the 'community' is the focal point of the Igbo person's actions, speeches and thought. The Igbo try to maintain the 'community', for that is the source of their strength, sense of judgment and morality (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022). To live in, and maintain, harmony through 'community' is the aim of the individual.

The Igbo Understanding of Community *vis-à-vis* Communalism

For the Igbo, human beings live in a 'community' which expresses pluralism, as already articulated. It must be noted that the 'we' which expresses this pluralism is not thought of, without the component singulars, the 'Is' whose conglomeration forms the 'we'. The pluralistic conception of reality by the Igbo expresses 'community', just as this 'community' in turn informs the communalism of the Igbo. Communalism is the primitive style of living practiced in the pristine era. It has no room for individualistic tendencies and questions on personal right. It is different from the Afro-communitarian lifestyle of the Igbo modern era that encourages individualistic tendencies through individual right struggles. In communalism, in the 'we', the individual participates in the right of the 'we' not his own, unlike today that the question of personal right instead of communal right has taken priority under the auspices of Afro-communitarianism. The Igbo uphold the principles of community through their attitudinal disposition of communalism (a life of community-living characterized by utmost accommodation and tolerance over struggle for right, privacy and freedom of a community-member). Instead of these struggles for right, privacy, etc. being located with an individual member of the community, they are all located within a community, unlike the characteristics of communitarianism (Ugwu, 2022). The implication is that the idea of 'community' informs the communalistic consciousness by which the Igbo is identified. The communalistic attitude has to become an integral part of the identity of the Igbo, such that if an Igbo does not



thoughtfully and behaviourally live out the communal lifestyle, s/he is truly in thinking, speech and action, not an Igbo (see Okolo 1993). Chukwudum B. Okolo underlines this view with his concept of 'being-with'. In explaining this concept as an embodiment of philosophic content, Okolo writes "that the African is easily identifiable ontologically or is a being-in-the-African-world. He is not just a being but a 'being-with'...Philosophically, the African is not just a human being but essentially a 'being-with', the very basis of his claim to the title, "African"" (Okolo, 1993: 5). For Okolo, to be African (Igbo), the identity or identifying personality is this attitude of 'being-with' which is the concept he employs to designate the African concept of communalism. It has been argued that this attitude is that by which anyone who claims to be a true African (Igbo) is known for. It is an attitude that is inbuilt even in the Igbo-African subconscious mind, hence it is the African identity.

The community perspective of reality has not only a social import but also a supernatural connotation. This is because to be is to be in community, and the community-members are not composed of only the visible, but also the invisible realities. Still on this, Okolo writes that the African universe includes the visible and the invisible; material and spiritual; time and eternity, all interconnected and mutually interacting... All reality (man inclusive) for the African or in African metaphysics portrays some sort of concord... Every existing thing or event contributes to universal order or harmony or to its destruction. It does mean that both man and other things, visible and invisible, form the great "Chain of Beings" which makes up African universe (Okolo, 1993: 8-9)

The 'community' is therefore the 'community' of the Supreme *Chi*, the intermediaries which include the departed-living and the departed-non-living, deities, spirits and spiritual entities, the human beings, trees/vegetation and even lifeless entities. All these ontologically influence one another.

From a critical comparative perspective, this Igbo identity/personality of 'we'-community is the day-to-day attitude by which the Igbo is identified. It is the Igbo spirit, attitude and breath, and is appropriately identified with the concept of 'communalism'. This lifestyle is the reality of the traditional Igbo. Unfortunately, this pristine identity has been watered down in the modern era, such that the concept 'community' and its unique feature (communalism) have been replaced by the concept of 'society' and its unique feature 'communitarianism'. Hence, it can be argued that the concept of 'communitarianism' is a corrupt version or an unelaborated 'communalism' for communitarianism has as an aspect of itself, individualistic tendencies which raise the question of individual right and privacy. But communalism gives no room for individualistic tendencies hence the question of right is that of the community as a whole, never that of individuals (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022).

To live out 'community' is to be 'communal' and to do or share with, and be shared by all the community-members. Thus, 'community' connotes 'communal participation'; and the central characteristic of 'community participation' is tolerance and accommodation. The above qualities are conceived as communal rather than personal qualities.



These qualities reflect the humanistic orientation of traditional Igbo understanding of community. Okolo articulates the African 'we'-community idea in relation to his notion of 'being-with' and casts them as varieties of African humanism. Identifying the attitudinal disposition of 'being-with', characterized by humanism, as the core personality of the African, Okolo writes:

Being-with... is the humane and socialist attitude to life which is the essential horizon of the African and his mode of being-in-the-world, his concern of man-for-man or an involvement of man-with-and-for-others. It may well be called African brand of humanism... 'being-with' as humanism in African philosophy goes beyond the universe of man (and for the sake of man) to include God, spirits (ancestors inclusive), nature or reality, in its essential existence or dimensions. This sort of humanism has the whole cosmic order or harmony of one creation with the rest as its ultimate goal, not just the concern of man, though a vital one indeed (Okolo, 1993: 16-7)

From the above, it can be asserted that African thought has a humanistic component. The Igbo understanding of community reflects this humanistic component of African thought.

From the foregoing, talking about Igbo conception of 'reality' is talking about 'community' because to be is to be in a community where communal interactions define the essence of being. In communalism, all community-members participate, and the question of personal right, privacy and freedom does not arise. However, the question of the right of the community does arise. The community owns the individual, individuals make and form the community. In its simple Igbo expression, the strong claim of community is expressed thus: *Qha-nwe-Onye* (the community owns the individual). In the question of *Qha*, the sense of community prevails. The individual pride, integrity and dignity, strength and respect lie with and in the *Qha* (the community). In *Qha*, the existential fulfilment and reality of the individual come to fruition. This *Qha* is the 'we' and this 'we' constitutes the strength and existential ingredients of the community-membership. In *Qha* or 'we', which connotes the sense of 'community', a member of the community becomes accommodating to a point of being described as 'foolish' or 'irrational' (Ugwu, Ozoemena and Ngwoke, 2022). These tendencies are those humanistic qualities that express the communalistic lifestyle of the Igbo-African as feeling-thinking beings. The Igbo-African rationalize their feeling and emotionalize their thinking. Suffice it to say that in the act of living out what community truly means, the Igbo think and also feel because they know that thinking that is not neutralized with feeling will be detrimental to the nucleus of communalism that characterizes community-living. They would also neutralize their thinking with feeling because central to community is humanism and human life and welfare come first before any other thing. It is he who is alive that thinks. Thus, in the community, the individual's right is in and with the 'we'. All members of the community own each other, and to a great extent, order each member on what to do or say or act provided the 'we-strength' and welfarism are secured and held high. The consciousness of the 'we' moderates many of the activities of each member of the community. Community members do not disobey the 'we' – *otu-onye-anaghi-esiri-Qha* (one person does not cook (fight) against the 'we') because the pain will be more severe.



Significantly, the 'we'-socio-ontological personality cuts across and corresponds with the Igbo worldview— the existential domains of both the visible and invisible realities— the *Elu-Uwa* (the abode of man, vegetation/trees and lifeless entities/objects), and the *Àlà-Mmụọ* (the abode of spiritual beings— divinities, departed-living, gods, Supreme Being, etc.) (Abah and Ugwu, 2021). Thus, with the concept 'community' as expressed in communalism, the Igbo are defined socially, attitudinally, religiously and ontologically. Stressing this point, Okolo writes that 'we' communication designated with 'being-with'

may [as] well be called African brand of humanism... 'being-with' as humanism in African philosophy goes beyond the universe of man (and for the sake of man) to include God, spirits (ancestors inclusive), nature or reality, in its essential existence or dimensions. This sort of humanism has the whole cosmic order or harmony of one creation with the rest as its ultimate goal, not just the concern of man, though a vital one indeed (Okolo, 1993: 16-7)

Nevertheless, the identification of the Igbo with the attitude of 'being-with-all-that-is', that is, the Igbo communality, posits them in a strategic and moral-burden position where (1) they are ontologically found at the centre of activities of every being, (2) they (representing humanity) are most sacred beings who picture the Maker and the facticity of Creation, (3) they are the creatures upon whose existence, the ontological effectiveness *cum* influences of all beings are proved, and finally, (4) they (representing humanity) are the 'weakest' among all beings.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Critique of the Igbo-African Concept of 'Community' and Possible Responses

As a scholarly paper, the authors recognize some criticisms that have been levelled against the African notion of community. Reading through the paper, some critics may raise the question about the place of reincarnation in this discussion regarding the ontological perception of the term 'community'. This is because, the discussion takes both social and ontological dimensions. From the social dimension, community as a discourse here focuses on the social setting of the Igbo-African people and their communalistic personality. This personality is expressed even subconsciously in the day-to-day lifestyle of the people. But from an ontological dimension, the paper maintains that community exists beyond the physical (social dimension) to ontological where the invisible beings form essential part of the term 'community'. By this, the concept takes an essential part in the stream of consciousness of the people as they live to still maintain living-in-community beyond the physical realm. This becomes their hope, aspiration and motivation to live a healthy life, here on earth. This consciousness inculcates in them the moral awareness to lead a positive life so as to maintain being-in-the-community even beyond the physical dimension of community as presented in the paper. Now the challenge thus is that if reincarnation is real, it will depopulate the community beyond the physical sphere thereby either devaluing the ontological essence of community as portrayed here, or, rendering reincarnation as unreal.

But a response to this, would be that the reality of reincarnation does not scrap out the ontological essence of community as portrayed here. It does not empty the concept of 'community' in the beyond as portrayed here, for it is more of a reality beyond the physical. Further, there have been arguments and counterarguments as



to the number reincarnation could occur in life. This gives an edge to the concept of community beyond physical because when, if reincarnation cycle completes, the spirit reincarnating would forever resort to the sphere beyond here thereby exposing the possibility of a community beyond the physical. Finally, arguments on the factor facilitating reincarnation has been interesting ones. Based on this, it must be recalled that because there are existential categories among forefathers, there are therefore corresponding different communities for them. This could explain why there is reincarnation following the fact that the level of positive or negative life one lived on earth could determine one's possibility of reincarnation and the number one could reincarnate in life. The implication therefore is that the existential community one occupies in the hereafter could be affected by the positive or negative lifestyle one lived while on earth as human beings, and this moral state equally defines them as departed-living or departed-non-living.⁷

To stress it the more, it must be noted that in traditional Igbo ontology, to live in and with the community stands for anything positive both here and in the hereafter. It implies that the being (person) living in 'community' has a high moral consciousness which directs his/her affairs through which s/he socializes with community-members. It could be said that for the Igbo, living outside the community is a taboo and must, from the marrow of the Igbo moral consciousness, be avoided. To live in community implicates the idea of interrelationship with fellow human beings, hence the demand for being humane. Living in the community presupposes that the member is a morally upright being, who accommodates and lives with the 'other'. Generally, in this paper, it is argued that the concept of community stands very significant in the Igbo life. It has equally been shown how the concept pictures the Igbo life here within and stands as a source of morality to guide and shape the Igbo life towards a better life in the hereafter. It has been demonstrated how the Igbo concept of community fundamentally differs from the concept of society. From an ontological perceptual analysis, 'community' is stands the nucleus of what it means and implies to truly exist both in the physical and metaphysical realms.

Furthermore, we are equally aware that some people have maintained that a sense of belonging together is not peculiar to Africans alone. This is because every community is built on family ties and there is no person that does not emerge from a family. Since every family grows into extended family and from there to nuclear communities, therefore the sensitivity of relatedness cannot be peculiar to only Igbo-Africans. The height of this criticism could be attained with the position maintained by Ogbozo (2023) where he questions the claim of Igbo-Africans as community-oriented people but their males dominate over and discriminate against their women, freely enthrone bad governance of a few over the rest, encourage widespread of corruption

⁷ Ugwu has argued in the unpublished work mentioned earlier that the most appropriate terms to depict sainthood and evil or bad spirit to represent the idea of non-sainthood are 'departed-living' and 'departed-non-living'. Common to these terms is the concept of 'departed' which points to the 'fact of being dead'. The concept of 'living' or the 'livingness' of these dead points to their positive influences which shows their activeness depending on the ontological empowerment by the 'good' or goodness itself having lived a morally conscious life when alive. The concept of 'non-living' or the 'non-livingness' is the very opposite of the living/ness explained above.



on all levels and practise delayed or denied justice. For Ogbozo, the African sense of humanism is highly conditioned – a conditioned intersubjectivity.

Be that as it may, it has to be noted that the attitudinal disposition of community-members, be it at any existential level, does not discard the reality of 'community' but can affect the ontological efficacy of any community. Positive or negative lifestyle of community-members is quite different from the concept and reality of 'community' as portrayed here. Thus, it could be concluded that the concept of community remains the driving force behind the survival efforts of the Igbo-African people and to maintain an ontologically positively influenced community even beyond here on earth, could be said to be the wish of any Igbo-African.

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