THE PLACE OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract
The idea of African communalism is well-known in the academic circle, as it were. The concept of communalism suggests that Africans emphasize community living. It is also often understood to suggest that the individual is swallowed up in the community and has no distinct life. This then raises the question of the place of the individual in the traditional African society. Is the individual suppressed in the society? Are his rights and privileges sacrificed at the altar of communalism? These and similar questions form the concern of this study.

This work evaluates the place of the individual in a typical African society from the background of the Igbo traditional society. It does this by subjecting to critical analyses various literature on the Igbo/African society with regard to the place of the individual. The conclusion is that, contrary to contemporary arguments to the effect that communalism stifled individual growth, communalism added to the quality of life of the individual in the traditional society. Hence, so many contemporary threats to life and security in the contemporary society could be overcome if the crass individualism of contemporary time could be tempered with elements of traditional communalism.

Keywords: African Communalism, academic circle, community, Igbo traditional society and sacrifice

Introduction
It is axiomatic that he who does not learn from history soon becomes history. History is studied, therefore, not as a nostalgic mulling over the past, but as a way of picking up lessons from the days gone by. In the pre-colonial times, the Igbo society was communalistic. In such a society, life, with its joys and sorrows, was shared in common. The problem of the community was the problem of every member of the community, and the problem of any member of the community was the problem of the community. Individualism, if it existed, was at the barest minimum.

All these changed with the coming of the colonial masters. The traditional society began to break up as individualism gradually took over the communalist spirit. This paper examines the glorious past with a view to bringing out attributes of the traditional society which could add more value to life in the contemporary society.

Definition of terms
The Igbo: The Igbo is used here to refer to a people living in the South-eastern part of Nigeria. They extend also to the mid-Western and delta regions of Nigeria. They have common boundaries with the Bini and Warri people on the West; the Idoma and Igala on the North; and the Ogoni and Ijaw on the South (Edeh, 1985). Hence the reference to the Igbo here does not necessarily imply a language group.
Traditional society: By traditional society here is meant the society as it existed before the advent of the white colonial masters. It refers to the pre-colonial society.

The Igbo Community Life in Perspective
The traditional Igbo people lived together in groups called communities. These communities were the bedrock of existence in Africa. They lived together as descendants of common ancestors. The community was not just a conglomeration of people living together in a particular space. It was rather a union of people living together in a common space, and sharing their lives together. Edede describes the Igbo community as “a societal set-up in which there is an intimate face-to-face interaction. Relationship is on a personal, human basis as distinguished from the predominantly impersonal relationship that exists in today’s urban society where everyone minds his or her own business” (56). He sees the sharing of the basic conditions of a common life as the bedrock of the Igbo community. The typical Igbo community comprises many families and kindred forming one village. The people of a particular community share the same language as well as cultural and thought pattern. The community, from the perspective of the Igbo people is a big family. According to Ekei, “one of the greatest unifying factors among Igbo, of various segments, is common notion of family, extended family, kindred and clan units as extensions of people with common ancestors” (24). The community is therefore a very large family. The nuclear family is the centre or the nucleus from where the community is nurtured. From the nuclear family it moves to the extended family, and then to the kindred and village level. There are also the various age grades within which the community life is nurtured.

The traditional Igbo community had the pattern of an egalitarian society. This does not mean that there were no established ranks. There were ranks and positions or titles of honour. But everybody related freely with every other person without any bureaucratic procedures. Every member of the community was accorded due respect and treated as a blood brother or sister. The implication is that the rights of each person were respected. Every individual also had responsibilities to the community. Positions or titles were mainly attained through hard work.

In the traditional Igbo community, mutual care and concern were the bedrock of existence. The African idea of a community includes within it the idea of sharing a common life as a result of a common heritage. In the Igbo community, what concerned one concerned the other, directly or indirectly. Hence the mutual show of concern which could be as a result of feeling for the other or just the knowledge that what happens to one member of the community would eventually affect me. This is attested to by Ezedike who paraphrases K. C. Anyanwu thus: “there is nothing like a solitary individual in the African (Igbo) cultural scheme of reality owing to the belief that all forces are perpetually in interaction with one another and interpenetrating each other” (246). J. S. Mbiti seems to suggest this when he asserts the African understanding of life in community as “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am” (108). This type of relationship is referred to by African scholars as communalism, as distinct from communism. Hence, C. B. Nze affirms that “traditional African society has a great asset in its practice of a mode of life called communalism. This used to be the bedrock and the result of the wonderful relationship prevalent in the community as well as purpose of the existence of the community of the African man” (1).

This traditional community, though acting as a unit, was made up of individuals. It was individuals that made the community possible. In what follows we shall look at the place of these individuals in the community.

The Individual as Being-With
The traditional Igbo society was communalistic in structure. According to Odimegwu, “communalism is the socio-political theory that upholds the priority of the community over the individual” (5). Furthermore, communalism is “essentially the spiritual communion of a society; the spirit of being one community, of being one with one’s community, of belonging fundamentally to one another and to the community; the consciousness that instinctively orients my search for meaning in life to the appreciation or valuation of the community” (Odimegwu7). Writing on a more general level, Agbakwuo submits that “for the Africans, to be is to-be-with and the purpose of existing, that being-with, is to ensure a continuous enhancement of life and its optimal transmission” (16). Communion, he insists, belongs essentially to this type of relationship, which he also refers to as communalism. It is this communion that gives this being-with its meaning. This type of relationship has its peculiarities in “the physical proximity, the enduring character of their social relationships, the relative similarity of activities and status of its members” (Edede57).

The underlying truth here is that the community is made up of various individuals who share a common life and heritage. However, the community is prioritized in the sense that the needs of the community supersedes and is ranked above the needs of the individuals. The individuals are the actors in the community. However, “while the individual strives to actualize his personal goals and optimize his abilities, he nevertheless, orders
all his efforts and aspirations in the light of the whole” (Ezedike246). In the traditional Igbo society these individuals were very enterprising, doing their best to push the community forward. This fact is corroborated by Olaudah Equiano, the eighteenth century Igbo slave, in his book Equiano’s Travels: “everyone contributes something to the common stock and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars” (qtd. in Uwalaka32).

There was an apparent oneness of heart and mind. An individual’s worth depended on his achievements and his relationships. The axiom “no man is an island” was well understood by the Igbo people in their traditional society. A similar sentiment is expressed by “onye lie onweya, otu aka yaaputan’elu” (if a person buries him/herself, one of his/her hands will hang above the grave). This implies that no one individual was so wealthy that he did not need the help of the others. In this connection, tasks such as farm work, building of houses, to mention a few, were accomplished with the help of age grades. Similarly, what befell one family or one individual befell the whole community. Hence in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, when the wife of Ogbuefi Udo of Umuofia was murdered by the people of Mbalon, the people of Umuofia took it upon themselves to exert justice which consisted in either compensation or an outright war. This is what the Igbo people express in the saying, “igwebuikwe” (unity is strength). Values were adopted only if they were seen to be capable of contributing to communal interests more than selfish individual interests. As a result, “values based exclusively on individual self-interest, as is prevalent in modern urban society, are out of place here. The interest of the community of being supersedes that of the individual” (Edeh59).

In a similar vein, the Igbo people understood that no one individual can stand against the community without being crushed. Hence the saying “otumkpuruakarutaminmanuogwuoh/a” (if one finger touches oil it soils the others). Hence, there was concerted effort to nip every evil growth at the bud. The child of one individual member of the community was the child of every member of the community. Everybody, as it were, reserved the right to punish any deviant behaviour in a child, irrespective of whose child it was or, alternatively, to report the child to his/her parents. This is because when an individual travels outside the community, he is not just there as an individual. He represents his community to the outsider, and so he must be a good ambassador of his community. And in circumstances where the individual misbehaves, the shame goes to his townspeople because “nwannemmaduina-agbuaajoegwuikunya a na-akoyaoko” (when your brother/sister is dancing badly, your eyelids will be itching).

Individuality and Mutual Concern
The Igbo man in the traditional society had great concern for his brother. Brother here does not necessarily mean the son of my father or mother just as sister does not necessarily imply the daughter of my father or mother. Every member of the community was regarded as a brother or sister. Accordingly, Odimegwu avers that “just as in the family, every member is a blood relation so in communalism every member of the community was treated as brother or sister who had natural rights of belonging”(3). For this reason, the problem of one member of the community was the problem of another, especially if it had to do with an outsider. This does not suggest a lack of dispute or dissension among members of the same community. It only suggests that even if at home they quarrelled and fought, they united to fight an external aggression.

The concern for each individual also finds its foundation in the Igbo belief that “otumkpuruakarutaminmanuogwuoh/a” (if one finger touches oil it soils the others). Hence, there was concerted effort to nip every evil growth at the bud. The child of one individual member of the community was the child of every member of the community. Everybody, as it were, reserved the right to punish any deviant behaviour in a child, irrespective of whose child it was or, alternatively, to report the child to his/her parents. This is because when an individual travels outside the community, he is not just there as an individual. He represents his community to the outsider, and so he must be a good ambassador of his community. And in circumstances where the individual misbehaves, the shame goes to his townspeople because “nwannemmaduna-agbuaajoegwuikunya a na-akoyaoko” (when your brother/sister is dancing badly, your eyelids will be itching).

Communalism versus Individual Obligations and Rights
From the foregoing considerations, can one then conclude that the individual was swallowed up by the community, and so had no rights whatsoever? Was the individual only there to serve the interests of the community to the detriment of his own interests? The individual was not absolutely swallowed up by the community. The individual still maintained his individuality, and consequently, his rights as well as obligations. The traditional community recognized individual worth and input. To this effect, Ezedike argues that “it would be an unbalanced and naïve assessment to portray communalism as practiced in the African traditional society as a totalitarian communitarianism in which the individual is a mere pawn within the rigid and ruthless authoritarian social structure”(249).

In this regard, while we agree with Edeh that “the life and purpose of the community come, in certain matters, before the individual interests of the members”(57), we must state categorically that the individual still had his rights preserved so long as they did not jeopardize community interests. An individual was persuaded to give up his personal interests only when it conflicted with communal interests. In such cases
the individual was made to recognize, as Odimegwu puts it, that “ultimately, the claim for the individual is a claim in the society just as a claim for the community is ultimately a claim by the individual” (5). Going further he argues that “if the individual should seek to pursue the individuating tendency absolutely, he shall find that individuation in human personhood is made possible by the existence in community, by the presence of the other” (5). In a situation like this the individual cannot really be said to have been marginalized since in serving the community, he was still serving himself. After all, “the community is basically the coming together and being together of individual persons” (Odimegwu5).

**Individual Freedom in a Communalistic Society**

The question here is, if in a communalistic society individual choices are often subsumed in the communal interests, is the individual, as a member of the community, free? The individual is indeed free. In fact, it would be wrong to interpret the concentration on common goals and the primacy of the common interest as a matter of suppression of the personality from the outside, of constraint on the part of an authority. Social conformity and the discouragement of deviation from the common norms of behaviour are not the same thing as the repressive curbing of individual freedom. Social freedom is in the final analysis related to legality and this is commonly expressed as the principle of the greatest good of the greatest number. (Obiechina202-203)

Of course the individual is encouraged to develop his gifts and talents to the utmost. The individual is expected to distinguish himself and not to be anonymous. The individual freedom is recognized as freedom within the community but not freedom from the community. We can boldly say that the traditional African was as free as the contemporary westerner. The difference seems to lie in the fact that the African was more conscious of the fact that one person’s freedom ends where the other person’s freedom begins. This is because, basically, “Africans (the Igbo) do not see themselves as individuals living independently, but rather as people living in a community interdependently, with communal responsibilities” (Agbakwuo162). Of course, to deny individual freedom in African communalism is to portray it as a totalitarian communism. In this line of argument, Ezedike insists that “the Igbo individual….is not a blind unquestioning bond-slave to his community with neither individual will nor freedom of action and responsibility” (249). He further quotes the position of Esomonu according to which “there is large scope for free action and free expression of individuality” (249) to corroborate his position.

**Evaluation**

In the above passages we have been able to review the place of the individual in the traditional Igbo society. This society was communalistic in nature. Such a relationship, as we saw, emphasizes the common interests over and above, but not to the detriment of individual interests. The individual reserved his rights and had his freedom but was conscious of the fact that communal interests superseded personal interests. The individual was given enough room to be the best he could be but in keeping with communal interests. This type of arrangement discouraged selfishness and encouraged selfless service. There was the common conviction that one individual cannot grow beyond his community. This is not to suggest in any way that there were no deviants.

The individual in the traditional society, rather than being anonymous, was encouraged to stand out. Healthy competitions were encouraged in such areas as wrestling, farming, hunting, and so forth. There were various titles that awaited individual accomplishments at various levels. These titles were not bought but were merited. Bribery was at its minimal level, and was believed to be punished by the gods. Hence there was transparency in the award of honours. The individual had to stand out by means of his own sweat. Nevertheless, over-ambition was tempered by the communal spirit which always reminded the individual that “he cannot work that (his) destiny outside the framework of his community” (Ezedike250).

The African encounter with colonialism did a lot of damage to the psyche and culture of the African society. The Igbo society is no exception to this. It is evident then as Ezedike affirms that “the colonial experience and the neo-colonial doctrine of globalization have brought about a transmutation in the traditional African communalism” (251). This transmutation has affected the individual’s understanding of himself and his relationship with the community in the contemporary Igbo society.

The contemporary Igbo man has capitalized on the colonial experience and the post-colonial exposure to western individualism to destabilize the Igbo communalistic relationship. Hence, the dictum “Igbo enweeze” (The Igbo have no kings) is celebrated as the basis of, and the justification for grass individualism. This is reinforced by such expressions as “Igbo-ama-onye-ukwu” (the Igbo do not revere great people), I na-enye m nri? (do you feed me?). These portray the western brand of individualism which was expressly
discouraged by the Igbo communal spirit. Whereas no one individual dictated for all, age and achievements were honoured insofar as the achievements were beneficial to the community.

The individualism embraced by the contemporary African, in general, and Igbo man, in particular destroys the basis of the corporate existence of the society. All sorts of contemporary evil perpetrated by human beings are attributable to the contemporary wave of individualism. Kidnapping, for whatever reason it was introduced in Nigeria, is perpetrated today by individuals who want to become influential at all costs. Armed robbery is an attempt by self-seeking individuals to reap without sowing. Obtaining by trick (419), embezzlement, and other forms of corrupt practices are perpetrated by individuals who no longer think about the long and short term effects of their actions on the community. The manufacture and peddling of fake and sub-standard products, abandoned projects, and similar experiences are all products of individualistic tendencies that no longer take cognizance of the fact that what affects the other person affects me.

Moreover, in the traditional society, ownership of land was communal. People also lived in homesteads that were secured by low fences. Often families, which in traditional Africa were necessarily extended, lived together in large compounds and shared so many things in common. In contemporary society the ownership of land has become private, and an individual can acquire as much land as he has money to purchase or even seize from the less privileged lot. And because of such levels of selfishness, there is widespread insecurity and mutual suspicion. Consequently, according to Odimegwu, “the individual fences in his house in high walls with equally intimidating gates and ‘beware of dogs’ signals to complete the shutting off of the community from the world of the individual” (6). The individual thus makes himself a stranger to his own people.

In addition, the family system has collapsed. The watchword is now the biblical “to your tents o Israel” as everybody now minds his own nuclear family. Even individuals of the same parents tend to become so individualistic that they can hardly help one another.

Conclusion

The Igbo society has evolved from the pre-colonial traditional society to a post-colonial contemporary society. This evolution entails an evolution from a communalistic society to an individualistic one. The unfortunate thing for the Igbo society is that while we celebrate a globalized world where everybody lives next door, as it were, in a global village, we have become more and more estranged to one another. The communal spirit has flown out of the window, leaving the room for ultra-individualism.

Granted that the communalism of the traditional Igbo society seemed to stifle individual growth, the individualism of the contemporary society has detracted much from the value of life. While one was expected to carry along one’s family as one grows in wealth, such concern did not really stifle individual growth in most circumstances. One rather finds out that when others are made comfortable one can live a secure life free from unnecessary anxiety. Contrarily, in contemporary society where the secret of success appears to lie in exploiting others, the individual who has thus enriched himself feels insecure even before his own blood relations. Hence the recommendation that the contemporary Igbo society should go back to history and pick up important fragments of the traditional Igbo communal spirit with which to tinge the wild raging contemporary individualism.

References


