

'IGWEBUIKE' AS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

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Abstract

This work is a response to the questions within African philosophy and African traditional religion: the question of the underlying principle in both fields of study. It is a contribution to the ongoing investigations in the areas of African philosophy and African traditional religion in search for the keys to the understanding of both fields. This piece argued, contrary to the positions of Mbiti and Koech, that the key to understanding African traditional religion is Igwebuiké. It also argued, in relation to African philosophy, that Igwebuiké is the intricate web of African philosophy. It has remained constant in the midst of the changes in the history of African philosophy, and has continued to persist through changes. It argued that its sense of harmony, community, complementarity and solidarity have been expressed in virtually all the perspectives of African philosophers, from the time of Tempels to the contemporary era. This position was based on the fact that Igwebuiké is based on or captures the African worldview which shapes African philosophy and religion. The method inquiry employed for the purpose of this investigation is the Igwebuiké approach, which understands reality within the parameters of complementarity.

Keywords: African, Philosophy, Religion, Igwebuiké, Complementarity

Introduction

The concept of a “key to understanding” introduces the image of a door that needs to be opened for the purpose of achieving a breakthrough. It places emphasis on both the result of understanding and the action of understanding. Within the context of this study, it is about discovering the interaction of underlying factors or assumptions that shape the course of African philosophy and religion, that is, a principle that runs through their multiplicities; thus, creating a unity in the midst of diversities.

In relation to African traditional religion, two major views will be studied and criticized. These views are the perspectives of Mbiti and Koech. While Mbiti argues that the key to understanding African traditional religion is an understanding of the African concept of time, Koech argues that mythology is at the heart of the understanding of African traditional religion and metaphysics. These views will be presented and studied within the context of their ability to enhance the understanding of African traditional religion.

Within the parameters of philosophy, the perspectives of African philosophers, dating from the time when the intellectual history of African philosophy attained significant level of systematization, beginning from the time of Tempels to the perspectives of contemporary African philosophers like Asouzu, will be studied to see the web or thread that holds these perspectives together, in spite of the diversities there in. The major question that this research will be responding to, therefore, is: what is the underlying principle or moving spirit of African traditional religion and philosophy?

The Key to Understanding African Traditional Religion

Mbiti (1970) understands African ontology as a religious ontology, which is heavily anthropocentric. In this ontology are God, the spirits, animals and plants, and objects; however, at the centre is the human person. If this ontology would be understood, he argues that there is the need to penetrate its unity. Mbiti, therefore, avers that the African concept of time is the key to understanding the African religious ontology.

The concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation, whether of political, economic, educational or church life. (p. 16).

His idea of African time is built around his research on the Kikamba and Gikuyu languages, in which he analyzed three verbs that speak of the past and the future, covering only a period of six months and not beyond two years at most. He defines the African time as “a composition of events which have occurred, those that are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur” (p. 17). This would mean that Africans set their minds on things that have passed, rather than on the future. He describes the African time as concrete, epochal, and not mathematical. This would mean that when Africans are sitting down idle, they are not wasting time but waiting for time or producing time.

Mbiti's African time, in the perspective of Gbadegesin (1991), is only a communal worldview report which was never evaluated. Gyekye (1975), Kagame (1976) and Izu (2010) see Mbiti's African time as insulting and false, as it does not represent the general concept of time among Africans. Gyekye argues that contrary to Mbiti's African time, the Akan people of Ghana have a future time. From the foregoing, it is obvious that Mbiti's African time is not a consistent principle in African religious and cultural thoughts, and as such cannot be regarded as the unity or the key to understanding African traditional religion.

Koech (1977) speaks of African myths as the key to understanding African traditional religion and metaphysics. He writes that:

Myth expresses the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself. The myth portrays the wishes and the fears of the African man as he gropes to understand the unknown by dissecting and remolding it to fit his frame of reference. In the myth, the African's metaphysics are created and his beliefs constructed. (p. 118).

Koech, thus, concludes that:

The myth is the essence of the African himself in history. The modern African, if he is to find his real identity and to grasp the remnant of his culture, must look for it in myth... The African myth tarried to preserve the last drop of African-ness. It is the encyclopedia engraved in the chambers of the African mind to be passed from generation to generation. (p. 139).

Although myths articulate and preserve the outcome of investigations on the origin of the world, the national god, the origin of humanity, its place in creation, deity, the temple, the cult, etc., it cannot be regarded as the key to understanding African religion or metaphysics, for the simple reason that mythology is not an underlying principle in African traditional religion. Myths vary from one religious culture to another, and the religious meanings that mythological elements present in one culture might not be the same in another. Thus, rather than speak of unity, myths introduce the subject of polarity in African traditional religion.

The key to the understanding of African traditional religion should be based on the nature of the African cosmos or universe. Cosmology, etymologically, is from two Greek words: *cosmos* and *Logos*, meaning 'universe' and 'science' respectively. Put together, it is the 'science of the universe'. Scholars like Wambutda (1986), Ejizu (1986), Achebe (1986), Metuh (1987), Quarcoopome

(1987), Arinze (1970), Madu (2004) and Kanu (2015a) hold that African cosmology is simply the way Africans perceive, conceive and contemplate their universe; the lens through which they see reality, which affects their value systems and attitudinal orientations. Cosmology is, therefore, the search for the meaning of life, and an unconscious but natural tendency to arrive at a unifying base that constitutes a frame of meaning often viewed as *terminus a quo* (origin), and as *terminus ad quem* (end) (Kanu, 2012).

African cosmology is essentially the underlying thought link that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theologies (Kanu, 2015b). *Igwebuiké* as a concept captures the is-ness of the African cosmos; a universe of complementarity and sharedness. *Igwebuiké* is, therefore, African cosmology, and African cosmology is *Igwebuiké*. It is *Igwebuiké* because, in spite of its departmentalization into the worlds of the spirits and human beings (Edeh, 1983; Abanuka, 2004 & Ijiomah, 2005; Kanu, 2017a), it is not a bifurcated world. The spiritual and physical dimensions overlap and harmoniously interact. In this interaction, human beings commune with God, the ancestors, etc., and vice versa. While the ancestors do for human beings what they cannot do for themselves, human beings do for the ancestors what they cannot achieve by themselves. This interactive capacity of the African universe has instilled a strong sense of community in every dimension of the African life, such that to be without belonging is to be annihilated (Kanu, 2017b). This has not only defined the social and political dimensions of the African life, but the spiritual or religious dimension as well. It is in this regard that *Igwebuiké* is employed as the key to understanding African traditional religion. To understand the meaning that *Igwebuiké* conveys is to understand the dynamics of African traditional religion.

The Key to Understanding African Philosophy

This second section of this piece also argues that *Igwebuiké* is the key to understanding African philosophy. Right from the philosophy of Tempels (1959), the *Igwebuiké* spirit of complementarity, solidarity, etc., has permeated the perspectives of African philosophers. It is in this regard that Tempels argues that in Bantu Ontology:

‘Beings forces’ of the universe are not a multiple of independent forces placed in juxtaposition from being to being. All creatures are found in relationship according to the law of hierarchy... Nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement (p. 29).

Kagame (1951) and Jahn (1958) did establish the harmonious character of reality. They agree with Tempels that reality is force. It is not a force independent of other forces.

The nationalistic movements of the 20th century in Africa were linked by their emphasis on belongingness, familyhood, which was the basis for their socialisms. Thus, the social negritude of Senghor (1959, 1964 & 1975) places the family at the centre of the social structure. Nyerere (1968) bases his principle of Ujamaa on familyhood. The choice of socialism over capitalism by Awolowo (1969&1979) and the promotion of Pan-Africanism by Nkrumah (1963) were based on the distinctive complementary character of African ontology.

Edeh (1983), in his work on *Igbo Metaphysics*, continues with the perspective of Mbiti:

Accordingly the Igbo way of life emphasizes 'closeness' but not closedness'. There is a closeness in living because each person 'belongs to' others and in turn, 'is belonged to' by others. By adopting this life of 'closeness' or 'belongingness', an Igbo becomes immersed in the culture's spiritual substance, love; and by love, he acquires a fulfillment as a person beyond mere individuality. (p. 105).

Gyekye (1987), writing on Akan philosophy, avers that the individual depends on the community:

The individual's life depends on identifying oneself with the group. This identification is the basis of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the group. It is also the ground of the overriding emphasis on the individual's obligation to the members of the group. (p. 156).

Iroegbu (1995) describes being in African ontology as belongingness. In response to the questions, 'what makes being, being?', 'what does it mean to be in the *uwa* (world - the true and valid *universum* along the possibilities of thinkables, experientials, perceivables and their commonness to all human beings. That is, the *worldhood* or universal *datum* that provides the "hood" for the perceivers and experiencing thinkers of this inescapable phenomenon)?' Iroegbu argues that it is belongingness, thus *Being* is *Belongingness*. What then is belongingness? He defines it as 'the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness' (p. 374).

Nkemnkia (1999) writes that in African ontology, the self is the other:

The meaning of an individual's life is found in and through his relationship with the Other or Others. In fact it is meaningless to ask oneself "who am I" without having a complete knowledge of the Other, from whom, in the final analysis, one expects the answer. (pp. 111-112).

Wiredu (1995), focusing on the political dimension of the African life, sees complementarity and belongingness as characterizing political decision-making in Africa.

Asouzu (2004, 2007) and Njoku (2018) develop the notion of being within the new ontological horizon of *Ibuanyidanda*. Within the *Ibuanyidanda* context, Asouzu (2007) defines being as "that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality" (p. 103). Thus, being is located within the context of mutual complementarity of all possible relations in the sense of an existent reality (Kanu, 2016a&b).

From Tempels to Asouzu, the *Igwebuiké* principles of harmony, community, solidarity and complementarity have never been lacking, therefore, positioning *Igwebuiké* as the underlying principle of African philosophy.

Conclusion

This work is a contribution to the ongoing investigations in the areas of African philosophy and African traditional religion in search for the keys to the understanding of both areas of study. Contrary to the positions of Mbiti and Koech, this piece argues that the key to understanding African traditional religion is *Igwebuiké*. It also argued, in relation to African philosophy, that *Igwebuiké* is the intricate web of African philosophy. It has remained constant in the midst of the changes in the history of African philosophy, and has continued to persist through changes. Its sense of harmony, community, complementarity and solidarity has been expressed in virtually all the perspectives of African philosophers, from the time of Tempels to the contemporary era. This position is based on the fact that *Igwebuiké* is based on or captures the African worldview which shapes African philosophy.

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