

# **Igbo Philosophy of Life: Antidote to Culture of Death And Catalyst for Promoting Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

In recent times, there has been increase in the rate at which incessant violence in the form of terrorism, community clashes, armed banditry, herdsmen menace, Bokoharam insurgency as well as suicide bombing has become a common phenomenon in the world and Nigeria in Particular. These incidences of violence have resulted in wanton loss of human lives. It thus brings the question, what is the worth of human life? Based on this rate of killings and deaths arising from terrorism and insurgency in Nigeria where the state seem to be powerless in protecting the value of life within its pluralist society. This appears to show that life seems to be worthless. This thus demands the need for a philosophy that presents life as valuable and capable of vitalizing the socio-political sphere. This paper argues that the Igbo philosophy of life advances the sacrosanctity of life as sacred and divine. They see those who trample on human life as babarians who have wronged the divine majesty- “Chukwu” (God) and have desecrated the purity of humanity. It is therefore, on this Igbo philosophy of life that this paper proposes a perspective for peaceful co-existence in the world and Nigeria in particular.

## **Introduction**

The impunity in the loss of human lives resulting from activities of terrorist organizations like Bokoharam in Nigeria, ISIS in Libya, Iraq and in other Arab countries including Africa, Alshabab in East Africa, Al-Queda in countries like Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq with

splinter groups in all other countries has never been seen before as it is witnessed in the present world other. The loss of lives is also propelled by the barrage of western sponsored wars going on in countries like Libya and Syria as well as the ill mannered war going on in Yemen. The loss of human lives in high number has become so common that everyday there is always a report in the foreign and local media (print, social media and the TVs and radio) in Nigeria of people dying in their numbers as a result of one form of violence or the other.

The number of death recorded in Nigeria in 2018 alone leaves nothing to be desired. *This Day* live reported that the United States Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in Nigeria has recorded at least 19,890 deaths since June 2015. In the same vein, the Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) disclosed that Fulani militias killed 1,061 people in about 106 attacks on communities in North central Nigeria in the first quarter of 2018. These numbers brings to mind the question what is the value of life? For the Nigerian government, the answer to that question seems to be life is worthless. This assertion is based on the supposed body language of the Nigeria government to the killings and maiming which has been associated with the Fulani herdsman. The number of people killed from unprovoked attacks under the present government is incomparable even in the civil war era. There is need for a re-evaluation of our traditional believes as African and Nigeria which juxtaposes the essence and value of life above material values and needs. The Igbo conception of life is an important focal point for promoting the dignity and value of life as a basis for maintaining peace in Nigeria and the world over. The paper would explore the value of life as it is reflected in the Igbo tradition and explicates the need for leaders and members of the Nigerian society to inculcate these values in their daily lives and interactions.

### **Conceptualizing the Igbo**

Determining the nature and origin of the Igbo is a matter so complex that it has sparked political, religious and social debates among scholars and religious leaders. This is evident in the view of Oguejiofor who states that “the term Igbo has shown itself to be

rather chameleonic, changing its meaning according to time and political climate.”<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, Nwafor is of the opinion that;

“The product of this complexity on the trace of the origin of the Igbo led unsurprisingly to the various versions of the origin of the Igbo. While some Igbo traced their origin to Israel, others did theirs to Benin and yet some others connect it with Sudan. The situation simply suggests that the Igbo probably do not have the same root or origin.”<sup>2</sup> It is clear from all these views that the Igbo clearly do not have a particular origin from which they all came from. This is why Edeh opined that “from oral tradition, the natives who are positive about the claim of outside origin do so on the basis of their own particular kinship, not that of the entire Igbo people.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite these complexities in determining the Igbo root, however, there is one popular claim, which is that the Igbo migrated from Hebrew and descendants of Eri the Son of Jacob who migrated to Egypt down to Igala and then settling in Nri. This group of people speak the Igbo language and are largely independently minded, hardworking, enterprising and adventurous persons. In the present day Nigeria, the States with a vast majority of the Igbo population are Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi and Delta States.

The Igbo are very religious people who believe in a transcendent higher power (Chi) who is the maker of the universe and in control of the working of the world. This is anchored on a belief that whatever action taken during the course of life will be accounted for in the after life. In support of this view Oguejiofor averres that “there is no doubt about the existence of an after life which is a replica of life on earth.”<sup>4</sup> This implies, the need for one to be forthright in his/her dealings and upholding good virtues that are devoid of sacrilages like taking human life. This is termed “alu” in Igboland and it in most cases results in making enormous sacrifices to appease the almighty God. This paper will in the subsequent discuss the conception of life by the Igbo with a view to re-emphasizing the need to extol the value of human life in our nation

Nigerian and with a view to promoting peaceful co-existence that is devoid of violence and unwanted killings in the polity.

### **Igbo Concept of Life**

Making clear meaning of the concept of life among the Igbo is a complex task. This is because of the nature and complexities in which the Igbo view life through its value and care for life. Anuolam clearly explained the rigours and challenges faced in making meaning of the concept of life when he states that;

“Life is a whole, an entity, a compendium, a mystery, and an encyclopedia of its own. In a sense, it is the principle or the source of those activities associated with growth, nutrition, reproduction, breathing, thought, and so forth. It is manifested through some forms of activities. Life is a continuum, such that we are dead, living, existing, or moribund. But there are varieties of ways of living our life. It is within these varieties, that we stamp 'self, destroy or better it. That life is more than mere ideas is certain. The words to convey certain ideas, concepts, as we pointed out earlier, are perfectly inadequate. This stares at us when we run into discussing things like the concept and value of life and especially among the Igbo.”<sup>5</sup>

The Igbo are of the belief that death is an inevitable end that awaits every man on earth. That is why death in most Igbo societies is seen as something tragic. However, the Igbo conceive death as a departure but not a complete extinction of a person. To them when someone dies they go to the great beyond to meet with their ancestors. In his view of the concept of life, Njoku postulates that “firstly, God is the originator of life, the creator of man, the universe and the sustainer of creation, secondly; the ancestors play an important role in the communal life. They are not cut off from the living, for they may still reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives to guide or correct them, Thirdly, life is a communal affair. It involves a relationship and communion between man, God, ancestors, divinities, other men and the land. This relationship must be based on certain rules and regulations for it to

succeed.”<sup>6</sup> It essentially goes to show that life according to the Igbo is regarded as something sacred. Religion is the guiding influence on the way in which the Igbo relate with others and the way they conduct themselves in the society. Reverence for the almighty and the expectation of answering to the ancestors after life shapes the way life is valued.

The value system of the Igbo according to Okolo are anchored on the belief system and mostly determined by his relationship to Chukwu, the gods, ancestors and to nature<sup>6</sup>. This is because values and beliefs are often linked in shared cognitive and moral system, in terms of consistency or compatibility. Hence to understand a particular value, it has to be investigated in the context of this system of ideas if its natural significance is to be understood and appreciated as well. However, apart from the values of their belief system, the Igbo have other values which they live out in their daily life, which are also the rock foundation on which the Igbo society is built. Among such values includes love for children and family. The foremost characteristics which goes to show the value placed on life by the Igbo is in their names. Just like the Hebrew's from where they descended from, the Igbo place an enormous amount of value in their names. This view was reverbrated by Anuolam who states that “to 'own' or know one's name amounts to getting hold of his personality, self and mentality. This mentality, we notice among the Hebrews.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Respect for Life in Igbo Society**

For the Igbo names always have meaning and are most often symbolic when referring to life. They reveal sentiments, aspirations, hopes, fortunes, misfortunes and values. They are accurate records of the peoples beliefs, moral concepts and way of life, wishes and aspirations. Names are not just tags. This view was espoused by Wieschhoff who opines that:

“Names are not merely considered as tags by means of which individuals may be distinguished but are intimately associated with various events in the life of the individual as well as those of the family.”<sup>8</sup>

The Igbo give their children names according to the circumstance, be it social, religious, political and so forth, that is connected with

the birth. In this way emotions and minds are expressed, this idea Leonard beautifully expressed thus:

To every name itself is attached a significance of expression and an intensity of human emotion... and not only is this attachment of living personal memory but it is a record of persons and events that have been associated and connected with it... the state of the parents or of the family affairs when it is born or a remarkable event in the town.<sup>9</sup>

Anuolam reviewed some names showing love of life among the Igbo's

**Onwubiko:** Death please! It is a kind of prayer and 'request' to death to spare life. For a family that has sadly witnessed the death of a number of her children, such a name is normal for any subsequent child. It demonstrates also a kind of disgust over the 'painful' effect of death.

**Ozoemena:** May it not happen again. It has almost the same implications as Onwubiko; a prayer that death may not strike again because life is preferred to death.

**Onwudiwe:** Death is wicked, heartless. If death is so, life was therefore seen as kind, good, lovable and to be desired.

**Onwukwe:** If death permits, and one lives, he can achieve his life's desire. It show a kind of despair over death and a desire for life.<sup>10</sup>

The Igbo see life as a thing to be held dearly and death as a calamity. This is resonant in the belief that God is the giver of life. Hence they have such names as: *Chinenyendu* —God gives life. God is seen as the source and giver of life; *Chinwendu* (God owns life) and not man; *Chikwendu*— If God permits life, we shall live and achieve our desires; *Ndudinakachi* life is in the hand of God and never in man's or wealth. These names clearly reveal the importance of names to the Igbo, because names are clear indication that the Igbo value of life does not depend nor drive from the quality, or on circumstance, or on what one has accumulated, his position of power or position in the society, but on the fact that life is primary and above all, a gift from God- *Chukwu/Chi*. This is why everyone tries to live a life in fulfilment of his name. The traditional names are pace-setter for the bearer, a code of conduct for him —*Ihe akporo onye k'ohu*— what one is called, is what he is.<sup>11</sup>

Life for the Igbo has an absolute value, hence it is respected and cherished as it is demonstrated in their respect for old age and *Omenala* —the moral power house of Igbo society. Ogbalu opines that Igbo regard age as sacred, a by-product of their theocentrism and humanism<sup>12</sup>. The order of seniority in age determines the procedure of doing many things in Igbo society. This is evident in taking of shares popularly known as “iwe oke”. The elder takes a share before the junior; in no circumstance will the junior take a share before the elder unless he is told to do so by the elder. The elders are seen not only as representatives of the ancestors but also as the symbol of solidarity and promoters of inherited values. Hence a child must respect and show signs of respect to all his elders, his parents and all who are older than him, in all forms and circumstances. The elders are supposed to be nearer to the spirits and ancestors on account of their age and wisdom<sup>13</sup>. They are symbolic presence of God and ancestors<sup>14</sup>. The elders on their own part, were always conscious of their position in the community as repository of communal wisdom and values, and therefore maintained some decorum in whatever they said and did, using their practical experiences acquired not through academic knowledge but by long and judicious association with nature and individuals. The Igbo has tremendous value and respect for life. For them, life as the greatest gift from God must be transmitted to sustain its continuity. Hence they take as much steps as possible to care for it and protect it from the moment of conception, through prohibitions, prescriptions, and rituals. However, there are acts that could militate against the proper development and fulfillment of this life, both of the individual and as well as on the community.

### **Offences against Life in the Igbo Traditional Society**

The traditional Igbo society is one which is governed by rules, regulations and customs. These rules, regulation and customs are the guiding principles which determine the way things are done in the community; this is the *Omenala* (that is the moral powerhouse or moral code) which defines various kinds of social relations and behaviours approved by the community as contributing towards harmony. The Igbo society is one which is closely knit in terms of blood relationships.

The Omenala is used in providing sanctions against characters viewed as dangerous by the community. The Omenala is also used to ensure peace and order in the community. The Omenala is the overriding law of the community and any breach of the Omenala is considered a sacrilege (Aru), for it is an act of destruction to the accepted order and peace. This is punished by the corporate society of both the living and the ancestors. This is because the Igbo community does not only subsist on the collective solidarity of the people living who share common customs, beliefs and identical world view, and who are linked by blood relationship but also on the 'living dead members' of the community — ancestors<sup>15</sup>.

Among all the human rights, the right to life is the most fundamental, for there can be no further rights or duties unless there is someone living, someone there to have them. Just as the Igbo say, Ndu bu isi —life is primary, life is first. Life is a natural right to man. This cannot be doubted. It is self evident. My very nature as a person demands that I have the right to life, for I can do nothing without life. This the Igbo understood perfectly as this name *Ndukwe* —if life permits, suggests<sup>16</sup>.

### **Suicide**

Suicide is said to be the direct killing of one's self on his own authority. That is to say, the taking of one's life; the human act of self-inflicted, self-intentioned cessation. Hence, as a human act, it embraces a multitude of underlying motivational states, both conscious and unconscious and is influenced by multiple factors, no one of which can be regarded exclusively as the basic cause. However, above everything else, suicide must be willed and voluntary. It must be at least a premeditated act. Because the Igbo believe that God 'owns' life, —*chinwendu*, and that it is a gift from Him to *man-Onyinyechi*, nobody is allowed to dispose of his own life on his own authority<sup>17</sup>. No reason justifies it; whether directly or indirectly. It is not only regarded as an act of cowardice and the refusal to face life courageously, but also a means of arrogating to one's self the power that belongs to God alone. It is a great *Aru* and a great pollution of the land, which must invite the wrath of *Ala*, the ancestors, and the community as a whole.



It is a traditional practice, to refuse a worthy burial to anyone who commits suicide in Igbo land. The deceased is usually thrown to *Ajoo ohia* —evil forest and his body never allowed to touch the earth. He is not only refused by the community, but also by the mother earth, which he has polluted by his act. According to Esomonu, it is the desire of every Igbo man to be accorded an honourable burial when he dies. One of the greatest misfortunes and evils that can befall a man or a family member is to be denied a ground burial because of suicide or any other evil deed-Aru. Suicide is so abominable and treated with the greatest ignominy among the Igbo, so much so, that if one kills himself by hanging, no member of the community can bring the body down<sup>18</sup>.

This is enunciated by the views of Aquinas who stated that “For anyone to kill himself is to go against his natural inclination and that charity whereby everyone is bound to love himself. Therefore self killing is a mortal sin being against the natural law and against charity”<sup>19</sup>. In every sense it is completely wrong to kill oneself, at least for the natural love everything has for itself and the natural tendency or instinct of self-preservation.

## **Murder**

Murder in most cases is a product of human malice or passion. Thus murder is a wicked and inhuman act. And because the Igbo regard life as sacred, worthy of all respects, all cares, and protection, murder is seen as an intrinsic evil act. It is an abomination and hence it is included in the major prohibitions of *Omenala* called *Nso ala*. Murder according to the Igbo could be plain murder or accidental in nature. For the Igbo, Murder if committed accidentally or wilfully are all abominations that needs to be atoned for. They are all *Aru* —abomination, *nso ala*, and like all other crimes against the earth spirit —*Ala*, all offenders must be punished. No murderer ever escaped punishment<sup>20</sup>. Murder is a grave injustice for the Igbo; not only to the innocent victim, but also to the community that has 'given in all' to care for and protect the life; a serious offense against the earth spirit —*Ala*, who is the custodian of public morality in conjunction with the ancestors. The theme of justice is central in Igbo morality. It is one of the main pillars of Igbo morality and regulates the relationship between man and man.

The gravity of punishment for murder among the Igbo depends on the kind of murder, whether it is a wilful murder or an inadvertent murder. However, one punishment stands out basic and can never be dispensed from, or compromised with; —i.e. the purificatory rites to cleanse the land polluted by the shedding of another's blood through murder, so as to ward-off the wrath of the earth spirit and that of the ancestor. Because murder was in all cases an offense against the earth spirit —*Ala*, it was the duty of the whole community to take reprisal on behalf of *Ala* as her messengers<sup>21</sup>. If the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender.

As the elders said; if one finger brought oil it soiled the others. Hence the land must be cleansed as in the case of Okonkwo. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman<sup>22</sup>. However, in the case of a premeditated murder, the offender automatically forfeits his right to live. He is killed or allowed a little time to hang himself. Esomonu remarked that should he delay action, he was prompted to do so by having a suitable rope handed to him<sup>23</sup>. There were no questions of compromise on this. It was very clear to the Igbo traditional society.

### **Igbo Philosophy of Life and Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria**

The Nigerian society being a pluralist society is one that is faced with many challenges some of which results in misunderstanding and misconceptions among leaders and followers of the divergent ethnicities and religions. However, this misunderstanding should not always end in violence and the lose of human lives. This is because Life as we have seen is sacred and it is something which no man has the power to take at will or at the slightest provocation. It beholds the leaders (political and community) to take a cue from the way of life of the Igbo by insisting on having a fear of God and strong community tie where the family heads are respected and issues related to members of the families are discussed at the family level and decisions relating to such matters are made by the *umunna*-members of the family.

It is very necessary that the youths are made aware of the presence of a higher being which the Igbo call *Chi* (God). Our *Chi* is

the divine master of our fate and who should be revered by the way we live our lives. I am of the opinion that it is the moral decay in the society and the lack of connection between man and God and abuse of religion that has increased the senseless murders and wanton killings experienced in Nigeria in recent time. It is therefore important that the youths are made to realize that at the end of our journey on earth, we shall be answerable for the things we have done. If this is reverberated in the communities and the religious centres, most individuals will come to terms with the need for them to be in tune with their God, hence they will shun violence.

The above brings to mind the necessity for emphasis on respect among youths in our communities. It is a well known cliché that charity begins at home. This thus highlights the importance of the home to every good or bad thing that is manifested in the community. The family heads; mothers and fathers need to realize that their responsibility to their children is much more than just making sure that they are provided with daily meals and clothes. There is need to teach respect for elders. When respect is ingrained in the young ones, they are then open to advice and will consciously do as they are told. This is very necessary judging from the incidences of violence involving youths in the just concluded 2019 general elections. It brings to mind the question; what homes did they come from? This goes to show that there is a lack of family values; this has reverberated through the Nigerian Society, where there are high incidences of youths joining terrorist organizations like Boko Haram, increase in cult activities and high cases of youth involvement in political thugery. It is high time that the elders in the community stood up to their duties and responsibilities in their communities by instilling discipline among the younger ones by making them realize that they have a duty not only to themselves as individuals but to their community and Nigeria in general to maintain peaceful conducts.

Furthermore, it is also essential to note that suicide as espoused not just in the Igbo traditional society as well as in other society in Nigeria is detestful and an abomination. Suicide in recent years is one of the evil acts of causing mayhem by the terrorist group Boko Haram or Islamic State of West Africa. This abomination should continuously be preached against by religious leaders as well as community leaders. This is because life is sacred and no one

possess the power to take his or her own life. Religious leaders in the community should continuously make it clear that any one who commits suicide has soiled themselves and have committed an abomination. If conscious efforts are put in place to dissuade people in the rural communities especially in the Northern part of Nigeria on the ill of committing suicide, the tendency to join the terrorist group will be reduced because life is so priceless that it should be wasted.

Just like suicide, murder is a terrible crime which pervades the Nigerian society. Everyday news of people killed in great numbers is shared on social media platform and sometimes in the mainstream news media. This brings to question, where is our humanity? Is it that the individual life worth nothing anymore? For me, it all boils down to the moral decay that has taken over the society we find ourselves. Murder is not seen as an abomination; the perpetrators have all found excuses to justify their heinous act. It is saddening to note that the agencies of government who should be the protectors of human life are the “harbingers of death” in some of the violent situations in Nigeria. A case in point is the murder of innocent citizens by the Nigerian Military in the 2019 presidential election as well as the governorship election in Rivers State. A situation where a disagreement between brothers ends in death is so sad and should be clearly and completely termed what it is- which is an abomination. This calls for a serious commitment on the part of government to bring to justice perpetrators of acts of violence in Nigeria. Sadly, this has not been the case, thus the high rate of killings in the country. It is imperative that perpetrators of killings and violence should be given the desired punishment which is suitable to the crimes which they have committed. It will not only serve as punishment for crimes, it will also serve as deterrent to others.

## **Conclusion**

Peace is central to happiness and community inter-relationship. To maintain peace in a community it is important that members of the community live in harmony where there is reverence for God and respect for life. It is important that as individuals, people are made to soberly reflect the reasons for their actions and to ask themselves if their actions are pleasing to God.

Reverence for God according to the Igbo is an important aspect of one's life that sets the foundation for value of life. A man who knows that his Chi (God) does not support killing and maiming of his fellow man will not go on a killing spree. In another vein, respect for life is an important factor that will help promote peaceful co-existence in the communities. When the youth are adequately trained to respect life, they are more peaceful and would listen to advice and learn from the experiences being shared by the elder. The mutual respect shared between men will help to foster peace in any community, like the saying goes, respect is reciprocal. When respect is given, it is taken in return thus fostering cooperation.

In order to shun the acts of violence, the religious leaders have an important role to play in making the young ones realize that suicide and murder are abominations that should utterly and completely be condemned by all. Suicide should be condemned by all and individuals should be discouraged from engaging in such acts because it is a sacrilege. Also, there is need for serious attention to be given to issues that relate to the issue or prosecution of perpetrators of murders. Murderers should not be let to go unpunished because, the act of murder is an abomination and the perpetrators must be held accountable for the crime he or she has committed.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the foregoing the author recommends as follows:

1. **Advocating for individual's relationship with God.** When man respects God, he sees God as the Giver of life, so he will see life as sacred and would not harm him/herself or another. The religious leaders have a huge role to play in order to ensure that the relationship between God and man is rekindled.
2. **Spreading The Message of Respect Among Youths in the Community:** A community whose foundation is built on respect stands the test of conflict. When respect is promoted, tolerance comes to stay. The elders in the community should be the beacon of light that directs the path of the younger ones on the things that are expected of them by the society.

3. **Increasing Awareness against the act of suicide in the Communities:** The National Orientation Agency as well as religious and community leaders should continually teach and preach against the act of suicide at every given opportunity.
4. **Sincerely Punishing perpetrators of Violence:** The Federal Government of Nigeria or its implementing agencies must demonstrate sincerity in meting out appropriate punishment for offenders. The practice of providing selective justice based on tribal or religious sentiments will only worsen the current situation.
5. **Legislating against Hate:** The Federal Government of Nigeria should take a step further by putting in place legislation that will criminalize the incitement to hatred by ethnic, political and religious organizations or individual(s) in the country. This should be followed by strict implementation of such legislation when it becomes law.

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