

## **SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF SUICIDE IN IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF CENTRAL IGBO AREA**

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### **Abstract**

*Termination of life in Igbo society and beyond is certainly not new yet the trend is fast gaining momentum and as the world grows in science and technological discoveries it seems that people are also going nuclear in getting ways of punctuating and terminating their lives. The Igbo are known for cherishing and enhancement of life. Life, for the Igbo, is the highest good. For this reason they can go at any length to sustain, promote and enhance this life. This explains why they promote the medicine men and talisman, and take all sorts of concoctions, all in a bid to sustain life. But what interests this study is the mystery behind the reason the same Igbo who cherish life, will turn around and deliberately waste away the same life. It is this backdrop that spurs the researcher into investigating the concept of suicide among Igbo of central Igbo region and its implications on social and religious lives of the people.*

## Introduction

One of the ethical or socio-moral challenges facing the global society is suicide. It is believed that suicide is not only a social matter; it is also both moral and psychological matter. In today's world one hears about suicide committed by one or two persons in one place or the other. The reasons for the waste of human life vary. If it is not psychological, it is frustration; if it is not emotional, it is depression; if it is not rejection by the family, friends or society, it is discrimination and so on.

Suicide has indeed become a global ethical issue. This study intends to explore the concept of suicide and its implications on society. The methodology used is descriptive, and the scope is Igbo of Nigeria. It intends to look at the types and causes of suicide among the traditional Igbo, its implications on religious and social lives of the people.

Since Igbo land is a large area, the study will adopt culture area method of interpretation. The reason for this method is to avoid falling victim to the error of over-generalization, hence what obtains in one subculture may not be the same in another subculture. Therefore, this study will concentrate on central sub-cultural area of Igbo land. This area includes Awka to Onitsha to Ihiala axis. This means all the surrounding towns, villages and communities in this area.

## The Concept of Suicide

The operative word *suicide* has so generally been used that it now creates a lot of confusion trying to distinguish between what it is and what it is not. To this end, there is the need to establish the meaning of suicide and in doing this; the study shall critically analyze some texts that have tried to define the concept.

Hornby (1974) sees the word *suicide* as *self-murder*. Looking at this definition, *self-murder* is a compound word. And the word *self murder* is made up of two lexical terms: self and murder. Self suggests the absence of a second or a third person, while murder suggests unlawful killing of a human being or human beings. When the two words are synthesized, suicide then means *an unlawful killing of oneself*. The problem created by this definition is that it suggests that, there is a legal or lawful type of killing of oneself. If so then, the question is: which type of murder or killing is lawful? And which type is unlawful? This same problem is created by Peschke (1996) as he tries to define suicide as "unlawful killing of oneself".

On his part, Menninger (1938) asserts that "when one considers many different conceptual treatments on suicide, it becomes reasonably clear that there are several fundamentally independent but related dimensions that are included in different combinations and to varying degree in most, if not all of the definitions". This assertion goes to show that many authors are equally aware that it is not very easy to come by the definition of suicide. He, therefore, gave some dimensions or approaches to look at what one could term to be suicide. Some of such dimensions are to see suicide as:

1. The initiation of an act that leads to the death of the initiator, that is, where the person takes an action which leads to his death.
2. The willing of an act that leads to the death of the willer.
3. The willing of self destruction.
4. The loss of will, that is, the loss of the will power to live.
5. The motivation to be dead or to die which leads to the initiation of an act that leads to the death of the motivator.

A close look at these dimensions reveals that most of them over-lap and the inclusion of some words like initiation in the first dimension; willing and willer in the second dimension;

motivation and motivator in the fifth dimension, and so on, makes the attempt to define suicide with the help of these dimensions difficult.

In numbers 1 and 2, initiation of an act that leads to the death of the initiator and the willing of an act that leads to the death of the willer, tend to over-lap. Hence, they suggest that the victim here takes the step towards what led to his death. We will state that the definition of suicide will be unnecessarily broad if we accept these as pre-conditions for suicide. This will then mean that a vehicle driver who died in a motor accident committed suicide. Since he initiated it, by making the move or the first step.

Durkheim (1976) defines suicide as “all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of himself which he knows will produce this result”. This definition shows that suicide is different from risk or accident. According to Durkheim, the death here is intentional and the intender knows full well that his action will directly or indirectly lead to his or her death. Durkheim cites two examples, one of a soldier who courts death in a war to save his nation and the martyr who fights to save his religion. We will state that the death of these two classes of people and the likes cannot be considered as suicide. Rather any death in which the victim is the cause whether directly or indirectly is considered as suicide.

The question here is: what can be said about the death of Christ? Will it be considered a suicide? Well, if we consider the circumstances surrounding the death of Christ like that of the soldier, the martyr and the likes, one will rather see the death of Christ as sacrifice rather than suicide.

Helen-Hemingway (1984) sees suicide as “the act of taking ones own life voluntarily or intentionally.” This definition intends to emphasize that for any case of self-killing to be termed suicide, the victim must not be forced to it. In this case, a person who, for instance, poisoned himself voluntarily has committed suicide, while the fellow who poisoned himself without having the knowledge of the effect will not be said to have committed suicide, but his action is accidental. Helen-Heminway (1984) stretches the definition further to include any person who attempts to take or has the tendency to take his own life, or with a notion that may bring about his own self-destruction.

The definition by Helen-Hemingway is very close to reality but the problem is, how can one know when suicide is intentional or voluntary? Here the contribution of Douglas (1970) becomes necessary. He suggests that emphasis be placed on the instrument and mode of the self-destruction to determine whether it is voluntary and intentional or not. For instance, if someone leaves a suicide note on the table, bolts his door from inside and hangs himself, the bolting of the door, the note and mode of self murder makes it abundantly clear that his action is voluntary and intentional, thus an indisputable case of suicide. If on the other hand, we cannot find any evidence to prove the case, Helen-Hemingway (1984) suggests that “we can rightly depend on what the experts like medical practitioners or any judicial verdict establishes on whether a self ruin is a suicide or not.”

Having tried to explore what some experts have said about suicide, we will at this juncture define suicide as “a voluntary and intentional act of effecting one’s own death especially by a person who is capable of discretion, sound in mind and reason”. This definition is buttressed by Merriam-Webster (2006) who defines suicide as “... the act of or an instance of taking one’s own life voluntarily and intentionally especially by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind.”

### **Concept of Suicide in Central Igbo**

In Igbo land, especially in the area understudy, suicide is understood as the application of any artificial means to effect death of one's self. This is self-killing. Suicide is regarded as abomination against the spirit of the earth goddess, in other words, the earth abhors it (*nsọ anị*). Anedo (2014:15) in other words adds that it is "... an abomination (*nsọala*) to the Supreme Being, the Earth goddess (*ala*) and other divinities." Once committed an appeasement must be made to the spirit of the earth goddess to avoid exterminating the family or the community as the case may be. And the only people capable of cleansing the abomination are the *Nri* priests (Okeke, 2012). These are empowered to carry out such cleansing or appeasement throughout the Igbo land. This is because suicide is regarded by the Igbo as a very serious or grievous offence. Like murder, suicide is one of the major crimes in Igbo land.

Suicide is grouped into two: fatal and non-fatal. Non-fatal suicide include all attempted and all actions which are injurious or dangerous to one's health such as alcoholism and drug addiction. Fatal suicide or the suicide proper is grouped into three. They are altruistic, egoistic and anomic suicide.

Altruistic suicide occurs when an individual dies as a result of love he has or commitment for his community. Egoistic suicide on the other hand, results when an individual decides to take his own life basically because of an issue which is purely of his interest and not of the society or his community. This is normally witnessed among the Chinese hence Anedo (2013) decision to situate his study of *guanxi* within the context of contemporary Chinese society where according to him, the rising socio-economic conflicts in China, leads to frustration and suicide. Anomic suicide results from the society's failure to regulate and control its citizens, so that people find it easy to take away their lives without any intervention.

In all these cases, the egoistic suicide seems to be the most grievous and seems to go without the saying that anyone in Igbo land who involves himself in it has a case to answer before the living and the dead.

The Igbo of central sub-cultural area view suicide as bad death (*ọnwụ ọjọọ*), a miserable and ignominious death (*ọnwụ ihere*). For the people of this area, suicide is suicide; there is no distinction between one particular type and the other; and the people do not bother about the cause of the suicide. What is clear is that suicide has occurred and the death must be treated as that. Whoever dies as a result of suicide is neither buried nor given a befitting funeral. The corpse is thrown into bad bush (*ajọ ofia*) hence the shame on the family of the victim .

### **Causes and Modes of Suicide in Central Sub-cultural Igbo**

One popular Igbo saying goes thus: "*echiche mmadu chere wee gbuo onwe ya, O chei ya so otu abali*" meaning that the thought which drove a person to commit suicide was not hatched over a night. This assertion suggests that suicide is a result of old and long standing grievances by someone against oneself. This could be correct in some cases, but not in all. Hence, the adage is more concerned with the time and duration of planning a suicide, not more of the cause.

Causes of suicide differ from culture to culture. Even among the same culture, as long as there are individual differences, the cause of suicide in one person may not be the same in another person. People's temperament differs just as their problems differ. This explains the reason people say *mkpomkpọ ndụ ka mkpomkpọ ọnwụ mma*. This means that a shattered life is better than death. In this case, people prefer to live their life no matter the condition than to die a miserable death. Other people would prefer to die than to live a miserable life. This is depicted in the adage "*Kama ndụ anya ghe oghe, ọnwụ were ututu bịa*", meaning that rather than to live a

hopeless life, death in youth age is preferred. Such life of hopelessness in reality is not preferred by anyone. And this goes to suggest that a hopeless life is surely a cause of suicide.

An intensive study on the cause of suicide conducted by Meer (1976) reveals that in most cases of suicide, the victim first of all feels frustrated, depressed and then suicide proper. Her research is in tandem with the causes of suicide in central sub-cultural area of Igboland. The causes of suicide in this area include: mental illness, depression, failure in life to achieve a target, unable to achieve one's expectations, fear of authority, fear of certain illness, fear of people, inferiority complex and shyness, unusual biological features, demotion or retrenchment, unemployment, infertility, broken heart or infidelity, loss of kith or kin, strained marital life, scandals, unwanted pregnancy, demonic control or possession, fear of old age burden, constant beating by parents or husband, among others.

On the mode which suicide cases take in this area, it is generally by hanging and drowning. But even drowning is not taken seriously as hanging, except if the fellow had earlier indicated his intention to take away his life through that means, otherwise it could be explained away. Only hanging which is self-betraying is viewed with all seriousness. However, within the limit of the peoples' civilization, some other mode could be noted. Such other modes include: jumping from heights such as bridge into the river, poisoning oneself, setting oneself ablaze, though this mode is rare; drugging oneself by taking over dose of drugs.

However, no matter the cause of suicide, the implication of the victim's action as a social crime is a major concern to all especially to members of his immediate family.

### **Social Implications of Suicide in Central Igbo Area**

In central sub-cultural Igbo, like in most other parts of Igboland, suicide is viewed as a taboo with a far reaching implication. It is seen as a social crime against oneself, one's family, the land and community; and above all, against the divinity. It is a crime and evil (*aru* and *nsọ anị*) against the earth goddess. The earth abhors it (*ọ bụ ihe anị na-asọ nsọ*). The penalty for any type of suicide is always grave but grievous when it is by hanging. It is an abomination which goes with a corresponding taboo.

Thus by committing suicide especially by hanging the individual automatically loses all rights and privileges as a native, kinsman and even as a human being. Thus, he or she loses the honour and respect accorded to a human being. He is denied the sympathy done to a person who died a natural death. It is a taboo to see the corpse and worst still to touch it. Anyone who sees him in that hanging position spites at him rather than weeping for him. The person either walks away silently or raises alarm to warn people from coming to see the corpse. Walking away silently is even seen as evil intention; the best thing to do is to raise alarm so that people do not contaminate their sight and person. The bush, road or house where the hanging is done, is abandoned by all until the priest from *Nri* is invited to perform the expiatory sacrifice and bring down the corpse for burial. This is because no one is permitted to touch the corpse except the stranger, particularly, *Nri* priest. The corpse is buried or thrown into *ajọ ọfịa* (bad bush) without funerals.

Achebe (1958) captures this situation very well as he gives a picture of what could be the answer if any Igbo man is asked "why can't you take him down yourself?" as the white man asked Obierika and his group. They replied, "It is against our custom. It is abomination for a man to take his own life. It is offence against the earth and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clan's men. His body is evil and only strangers can touch it".

By suicide, it is taken that the victim has cut off his relationship with the living and the dead and certainly he cannot be admitted in the company of the ancestors. His spirit is believed to wander about; hence he is not at rest and peace in the land of the dead.

### **Religious Implication**

The religious implication meant here is the effect of suicide on the members of the public with regard to their religious belief and practices. The public here refers to two classes: the passers-by and the natives. Thus the passers-by who unfortunately have come into contact with the impurity are required by cultic laws to participate in the expiatory sacrifice called *iju okuko anya*. This means wiping out the evil which anyone who saw the corpse whether accidentally or deliberately is believed to have been contaminated with.

The people are so religious that a ritual of cleansing must be performed in order to become clean again. In this ritual all those whether passers-by or natives are required one after another, to hold a chick brought for the sacrifice, on the legs, wave it on his head, rub it on his two eyes, repeat whatever the priest says and hand the chick to the priest who leaves it to wander away with the *aru* (evil or crime).

It is believed that everybody shares with the infliction that might result from any failure to appease the gods, also share from the shame as people from other towns will mock whoever comes from the place of the victim. Because of this, the community gets aggrieved and demands from the family of the victim a guilt offering and internal cleansing of the land and appeasement of the offended.

### **Conclusion**

In the course of this study, it was found that any act or incident that involves self-killing is a tragedy; it is atrocious and a taboo. Suicide or self-killing as established in this study is any act of deliberately or intentionally taking one's own life. It is a crime against the land. There are many ways through which people commit suicide but the most agonizing way is hanging and it is viewed and treated as a serious matter by the community. The family of the victim must appease the spirit of the earth-goddess through sacrifice and anybody who sees the corpse whether accidentally or not must join in the cleansing in order to be clean again and restore relationship with the divinity and community.

In the central sub-cultural area of Igboland, suicide fetches sanction for the deceased; it attracts mockery and shame to his family. By suicide, the supernatural powers, that is, the divinities, ancestors and other spirit forces are believed to have been offended, therefore, efforts must be made to escape their wrath, and this is through expiatory sacrifice.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study is made in the central sub-cultural zone of Igboland. It is designed to explore the understanding of suicide among traditional people of this area. It is very clear that traditional Igbo view suicide as a crime and abomination against their gods, meaning that taking one's life is not permitted by any human and spiritual agents.

Thus, if suicide is condemned and unacceptable despite the mode and the cause among the traditional Igbo, the contemporary Igbo man and woman and even beyond ought to condemn it as well. The contemporary society ought not to celebrate it through the classification given to it. It must be condemned in its entirety no matter the cause and the mode.

This study has heightened the more, the religious inclination of the traditional Igbo. Igbo man and woman are religiously inclined so much that anything that offends their belief is never tolerated or accepted in their midst.

Thus the white missionaries and their trade counterparts who came to Igboland with their so-called superior religion will through this study come to realize that the traditional Igbo do not shy away from their religious beliefs. In fact, the people eat and drink religion (Mbiti, 1990).

Furthermore, students and teachers of religion will through this study enrich their knowledge and widen their scope of understanding about the true nature of the traditional Igbo with regard to their strong belief in their religion and its practices. In fact, they are custodians of faith. This means that they believe and practice what they believe in.

### **Recommendations**

Suicide as a serious crime should be avoided. People should not resort to it as a means of protest or a means of showing out their anger or displeasure especially when they are faced with life difficulties or disappointments.

It is striking that the traditional Igbo make ever effort to appease the supernatural beings through sacrifices and cleansing whenever suicide is committed. The contemporary society should learn from this, by begging God who is the author of life to forgive both the victim and anyone who might be the cause of the suicide committed by another. This way, harmonious relationship is restored between the living, the dead and the creator of life.

Efforts must be made to see that people are accommodated and accepted in the life condition. Instead of insulting or cajoling or despising a person who finds himself in a critical condition, efforts should be made to help him out either by counseling or financial help. This way, we become our brother's keeper.

Public lectures, seminars, workshops should constantly be organized both in public places, schools, market places and so; and jingles made in the media on the evil of suicide. This will make people who contemplate committing the evil act not to engage in such.

Priests and other religious leaders should use the power of pulpit to educate their congregation on the fact that no one has the right to take away his life or life of another. We are simply custodians of life, like care-givers. Life belongs to God, and to him alone. We are answerable before him on what and how we use the life given to us here on earth.

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