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A Philosophical Exposition of the Dynamics of the Kindred Group in Igbo-African Ontology

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Abstract: Ndigbo have a peculiar way of being in the world. It is the outcome of a process of cultural evolution which has crystallized over the years. In the peculiar Igbo way of being in the world, the kindred group is the smallest but the most fundamental unit of the Igbo society. It is the basic, in fact, the only way of being a member of the tribe. It is the clan. It is a politically evolved biological unit. The kindred group is basically bonded by common ancestry, common identity and a powerful social cord of brotherhood. It is a unit of the village, the Igbo town-state and the Igbo tribe. It is a judicial territory and a cultural unit. As the basic unit of the Igbo town-state, the kindred performs statutory functions of the state in the conduct of marriages, arbitrations and adjudications of sundry issues or disputes that may arise in the kindred. The kindred unit also has a territory which is apportioned to members and handed over from generation to generation in a well defined system of inheritance. It is in the context of the kindred that the Igbo person defines his identity, and acquires a sense of rootedness in the world. The questions regarding the meaning of life and the end of existence are resolved by Ndigbo in the context of the kindred as it is in relation to the kindred that Ndigbo seek meaning in life. In death, the Igbo man's ultimate quest is to be admitted in the comity of ancestors from his kindred in the world of the dead. This work studies this peculiar Igbo ontological experience, using candid observations and philosophical analyses of the existential activities of Ndigbo, past and present.

Keywords: Igbo, Kindred, Ndigbo, Africa, Kinship, Ontology

1. Introduction

Ndigbo are parts of the realities that constitute the cosmos. They share in the fate and destiny of the cosmos. They share in the relatedness of phenomena that we have come to know as the cosmos. They share in the basic cosmic qualities of mind and mater. They are a people, an existential category and parts of the manifestations of the cosmos as we know it today. Ndigbo share in the relatedness of the Milky Way, the solar system and its revolutions and rotations. Ndigbo are firmly situated on the earth where they share in the relatedness of life and the yields of biological evolution. Ndigbo share in the relatedness of the animal kingdom where they fall into the genus of mammals and the species of man, the Homo sapiens.

On earth, Ndigbo are found mainly on the African continent, the West African sub-region and in Nigeria precisely. Like all Homo sapiens, Ndigbo are humans and share in the relatedness of all humanity. Like Aristotle (Pol. 1. 1253a) noted, man is a social animal. Like all humanity, Ndigbo are an ontologically social people. They are found in social units and a nexus of relationships which are uniquely peculiar to them. Traditionally, the town-state was the highest Igbo sociopolitical organization. It was a sovereign entity in all ramifications. It had defined boundaries, laws and proper state institutions. Within the town-state, Ndigbo had villages which were often said to have common ancestry. The villages were further divided into kindred groups which were mostly people with common genealogy. The kindred unit therefore, is the smallest and most basic sociopolitical unit in Igbo ontology. The kindred is not just a political unit, it is an ontological unit for it is primal to the identity of the Igbo person. It is in the kindred that the Igbo person becomes a member of the community.

This is the uniquely Igbo way of being in the world. It is in the kindred the family becomes a part of the community. Therein, the individual acquires the sense of rootedness in the tribe, and a sense of relatedness with the ancestors. This is an immortal relationship in Igbo ontology for when the Igbo man passes on, he is expected to join his ancestors in the

beyond, still bonded in the kinship of the kindred.

2. Ndigbo

Ndigbo are the Igbo people, a tribe of Black people found in sub-Saharan Africa. They reside in the West African sub-region and people the rain forests of southeastern Nigeria. They are said to be an autochthonous people as they have no clear history of migration from anywhere outside Igboland [1]. The most prominent myth of origin of Ndigbo depicts Eri, the acclaimed progenitor of the Igbo nation falling down from the sky at Omabala River. This is not to say that there were no subgroups that were assimilated into the Igbo tribe from other tribes. Such cases of subgroup migrations abound especially among boundary communities in Igboland. However, the Igbo culture remains largely dominant. The core of the Igbo nation remains largely autochthonous.

2.1. Possible Igbo Consanguinity with the Jews

In recent yes, some neo-Christian groups among Ndigbo have tried outlandishly to weave a consanguineous relationship between Ndigbo and the Jews. Such claims are outlandish to say the least. There is no single instance of Igbo-Jewish interaction in Igbo mythology. There is no myth of origin of any part of Igboland claiming to have migrated from the Jews. Ndigbo have no traditional allusions to Israel. Ndigbo neither share same religious practices with the Jews nor same political traditions. While Jews are fiercely monotheistic, Igbo egalitarianism applies even among the gods in Igbo ontology [2]. Ndigbo are a freely polytheistic people. In fact, any attempt to impose monotheism in traditional Igbo society would have been met with fierce resistance. The Jews always had a king and a central government. No king has ever ruled over Igboland. The idea of a central government was alien to Ndigbo. The highest Igbo political organization was the town-state which comprised a few villages. The town-state was a sovereign state nonetheless. The king served at the pleasure of the people; and had no real powers as his position was largely symbolic. He could be done away with anytime the people considered him problematic. Even the community gods in Igboland could be done away with if they failed in their duties to the communities [3].

Among the Jews however, the king was lord and had absolute sovereignty over the people. The Jewish God dominated their culture. Their entire culture revolved around God. Among Ndigbo, the gods could be said to be marginal to their culture. It is clear that Ndigbo could not have had any consanguineous relationship with the Jews. As a matter of fact, traditional Igbo society could not have been aware of the existence of a people known as the Jews as Ndigbo were not even aware of the existence of the White race until the coming of the missionaries and colonialists in the 19th century. Perhaps, the bitter experiences of the Biafra-Nigeria civil war and its aftermaths led Ndigbo to seek kinship with Israel, a powerful nation with tumultuous history. Ndigbo seek independence from Nigeria and would really appreciate the any diplomatic backingfrom Israel. Recent DNA tests conducted by Israel among Ndigbo demonstrates amply that Ndigbo have no consanguinity with Israel as such claim does not bear out in their DNA [4].

2.2. Language

The language of Ndigbo is Igbo. It has so many dialects which vary to the point that some Igbo persons may not understand themselves when both of them are speaking their respective dialects of the Igbo language. However, there is the central Igbo which is the standard Igbo language understood everywhere in Igboland. This is the Igbo language that is taught in schools.

The Igbo language is categorized into the Kwa group of languages [5]. The Kwa is a subgroup of the Niger-Congo language group. This is the group of languages spoken in some parts of Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin Republic and parts of Nigeria. The languages demonstrate striking affinity.

The Igbo language like the rest of the Kwa group of languages is a tonal language with high level of vowels harmony. It is spoken in the five states of southeastern Nigeria – Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi states. It is also spoken in many communities outside the southeast of Nigeria. Igbo is spoken in many communities in Rivers State in the Niger delta. It is spoken in the Anioma region of Delta State. It is spoken in Igbanke, an Igbo community in Edo State. In Kogi State, a number of communities speak Igbo, especially in Ibaji and Igalamela/Odolu local council areas. The Igbo language is strongly spoken in Benue State among the Umuezekoha which comprise over three hundred villages. In Akwa Ibom State, Ohaobu community speaks Igbo. In Cross River State, several communities in the Abi local council area speak the Igbo language. Bayelsa State has Igbo speaking communities in Sagbama local council area.

2.3. Economic Culture

The traditional Igbo economy was always dominated by farming and trading. Ndigbo are land stressed by the virtue of their location in a tiny portion of the tropical rain forest in Nigeria. Although the land is arable and fertile, it is in short supply comparative to the burgeoning population. The insufficiency of land turned Ndigbo into a largely mercantile people. They had to trade to survive since land was not enough for subsistence agriculture. Till date, Ndigbo remain predominantly traders

3. Kinship

It is a biological fact that humans are all related [6]. The common physical characteristics shared by all humans point decisively to common ancestry. In this guise, relatedness is universal. All humans share the same earth and are fated in its contingencies. However, the successful survival and dominance of the human species led to the population explosion of the humankind to the point that they number in billions. The high population necessitated the institution of

kinship. The human person would be alone in the crowd of humanity were he to be bereft of kith and kin. Among his kin, man experiences relatedness and the support, and sense of meaning that come with the experience.

On earth, kinship starts with the continent. When people gather at the global roundtable, people from the same continent share kinship apart from the rest of the continents. They are often of the same race. Europe share kinship that excludes the rest of the continents. A fundamental requirement for membership of the European Union is membership of the European continent. Middle East shares its own kinship. They have their own kinship organizations that are exclusive to the subcontinent. Like the European Union, memberships of these organizations are predominantly predicated on the membership of same subcontinent. Africa has the African Union [7]. North America, the Caribbean, South America, Asia and Australia all have theirs.

Beyond the continents, people of the same country share kinship. They share the same identity in nationhood. They are subject to the same laws and the same government. At the international scene, an individual is identified by their country. They carry a passport that clearly identifies them as citizens of such a country. It is within the country that an individual gains citizenship. The fates of the citizenry are tied to the fate of the country. All citizens share in the relatedness of being members of the same country. They share in the same nationalism regarding their countries.

Countries still, are too populous to completely solve the problem of relatedness for man. The population of a country normally counts in millions. Some countries' populations count in hundreds of millions. Although citizens of a country feel some kinship as citizens of same sovereign state, that kinship is not sufficient as countries are normally broken down into administrative units. Some countries are divided into north and south or even eastern and western geographical regions. Members of same geographical region feel more related than those outside their region. Some regions are further broken down into provinces or states. Still this makes for further relatedness as states have their own government, peculiar laws, even a state legislature, judiciary and a governor. Within the same country, a citizen would still have to declare his state. States or provinces are further broken down into counties or council areas. This further creates kinship differentiations as within the same state or province, one would still have to be identified by his county or council area. Counties and councils areas have towns that constitute them. Members of the same town share kinship. Towns often have their respective leaderships, and are often broken down into areas or layouts. This creates its own relatedness. Even within the same area, there are neighborhoods. Citizens that dwell in the same neighborhood share even special kinship as necessitated by the proximity of their residences.

These are largely social or political kinships. Those that share the kinship do not have to berelated by blood. They are bonded by contingencies of boundaries and political administration. However, people share kinship also by consanguinity. These are kinships based or bloodlines rather than geographical locations. In many societies, inclusiveness in the kinship thus formed does not go beyond cousins and second cousins. In some other societies on the other hand, the inclusiveness of consanguine kinships go far beyond cousins. The Igbo society happens to be one of such societies. Most times, the Igbo society, bloodlines geographical locations go hand in hand.

4. Kinship in the Igbo African Society

Ndigbo like the rest of the world share same kind of geographical location based kinship largely rendered above. However, that applies only from the country level down to the local council area. At the town level, the kinship pattern changes.

Ndigbo are citizens of Nigeria. Like other Nigerians, they share in the same political kinship that comes from being a Nigerian citizen. They are found mostly in the southeastern region of the country. They are also found in the Niger delta, western and northern regions of the country but as minorities. Ndigbo are found in thirteen states of Nigeria mentioned earlier in the work. They are also grouped into local council areas like other Nigerians. But they have peculiar kinship system from the town level downwards.

The Igbo town was the largest political organization in traditional Igboland [8]. It was the equivalent of a country. It had its ruler, legislature and peculiar judicial system. For all purposes the traditional Igbo town was a sovereign state. At the town level, Ndigbo share kinship akin to that shared by the citizens of same county. The Igbo town usually does not share a strictly consanguineous kinship. The town is a union of villages. In most cases, villages share mythical consanguineous kinship. They lay claim to a progenitor who is said to have fathered the village. However, villages were always too small to form the traditional Igbo town-state. Most of the time, the Igbo town is made up of different villages who often share different mythical consanguineous kinship. These villages merge with the aboriginal village or villages to form a town. Population was very important to the traditional Igbo town-state. Bigger populations meant the ability to people the town's territory and ward off inter-communal clashes. The town-state offered citizenship in traditional Igbo political superstructure.

The villages are further divided into kindred units which are the smallest administrative units in the Igbo political organization. The kindred sharestrictly consanguineous relationship. People who are adopted into the kindred are viewed as blood relations of the family that adopted them. They are therefore considered as bona fide members of the kindred.

5. The Igbo Kindred

The Igbo kindred are uniquely different from the idea of kindred in most cultures. The kinship web is significantly more extensive. It is a group of many families who trace their paternal genealogy to same progenitor. The extended families are grouped into houses. A group of houses makes up the Igbo

kindred. The nuclear family has no political recognition in Igbo ontology. Traditional Igbo families were polygamous and extended. They lacked knowledge of the concept of "cousin" [9]. Children of fathers from same parent were always considered as brothers or sisters. This is because; the fathers of the children belong in one traditional Igbo family. Their individual nuclear families were thoroughly deemphasized. The nuclear family was unknown in Igbo ontology.

5.1. Membership of the Igbo Kindred

Membership of the Igbo kindred is strictly by birth. However, there are exceptions. A slave who settled down permanently is considered a member of the owner's kindred, especially when such a slave has been granted freedom. The slave automatically becomes a member of the former owner's family, his house and ipso facto, his kindred. Same thing also applies to the visitor or settler who wishes to become a member of the kindred. He is seen as a member of the family of his host. That gives him, and especially the people that are descended fromhim, right to the membership of the kindred.

In rare cases, an entirely different people who are too small to be a village or a kindred unit, who have no consanguineous connection to a kindred may merge with another kindred to become one. The union is perfected after elaborate rituals in which the two kindred and the merging people enter a covenant to become one. Once the covenant is done, they begin to address themselves as relatives irrespective of the absence of any consanguineous relationship.

5.2. The Structure of the Igbo Kindred

The typical Igbo kindred is divided into three administrative groups:

a. The men
b. The daughters
c. The wives

The men comprise all the adult males in the kindred. Their unit is foremost in the kindred. They are the fathers of the daughters and the husbands of the wives. Their peculiar relationships with the daughters and wives naturally give them in the leadership if the kindred. They are the center force in the kindred. They inherit, possess and maintain the lands/territory of the kindred.

The daughters are next in hierarchy in the structure of the kindred. They comprise all the adult women born in the kindred whether married or unmarried. They serve as checks on the men and the wives. They are traditionally charged with maintaining peace within their fathers' families and among and between the other units in the kindred. The daughters are held in very high regard in the kindred. They intervene in controversial disputes among the men especially where they feel that the men are not able to boldly declare truth. They have their own separate leadership within the kindred. They hold their meetings separately from the rest of the kindred. Unlike other units of the kindred, children of the married daughters are not members of the kindred. But the children of the unmarried daughters in the kindred are bona fide members of the kindred.

The wives comprise all the women married into the kindred. They are the wives of the men in the kindred. The function of their unit is basically to maintain order among the wives and to socialize the wives who must originate outside the kindred, in the traditions of the kindred. It is important to note that marriage between members of same kindred is forbidden.

5.3. Administration of the Igbo Kindred

The Igbo kindred is traditionally headed by the oldest male from the oldest family in the kindred. This leader is traditionally called the *Ichie* (titular head) of the kindred. The leadership was hereditary. However, with time this pattern of leadership became unfashionable as it often led to abuses. The traditional tenure of the *Ichie* was for the lifetime. So, the Igbo kindred modernized to be led by a periodically elected executive committee headed by the chairman. The chairman took charge of the day to day running of the kindred while the *Ichie* became a ceremonial traditional head.

6. Functions of the Igbo Kindred

The Igbo kindred unit traditionally performs key administrative and judicial functions. They include:

a. Conferment of Citizenship

An individual becomes a citizen of the Igbo town-state by being a member of a kindred group. There is no other way of attaining citizenship in traditional Igboland apart from this. Any person who seeks to become a citizen of a town must become a member of a kindred unit.

b. Administration of Inheritance

The Igbo kindred administer the inheritance of the traditional land of the kindred from one generation to another. Beyond the traditional lands, the Igbo kindred have strong traditions on how a man's estate may be shared by his survivors. The idea of a will was alien to traditional Igboland. The kindred unit oversees the inheritance of members' estates from one generation to another.

c. Administration of Marriages

The kindred unit conducts marriage ceremonies for all the women born in the kindred. The kindred normally have elaborate marriage rituals which must be fulfilled before a daughter can be considered to be properly married. They equally accompany the men to marry their wives who by tradition must not be members of the kindred. A wife may not be considered as divorced if the kindred were not involved in the process.

d. Settlement of Disputes

The kindred mediate in all disputes from land disputes to domestic matters even between husband and wife. It is a court of first instance. A case between two wives may be settled at the kindred wives' meeting. A case between two daughters can be settled at the kindred daughters' meeting. Any other case shall be settled by the men at their meeting. The men's meeting which is the highest judicial body in the kindred may summon a

daughter or a wife to the meeting if they were involved in the dispute brought to them to adjudicate. The jury is usually all adult males present in the meeting. A lawyer is not required as each contender states their case while the assembly gives the verdict after thorough questioning and cross examination.

e. Burials

The kindred unit conducts the burials of their deceased members. They dig the grave and play prominent roles in the burial ceremony irrespective of the deceased religious or social affiliations. To be rejected by the kindred at death is akin to loss of identity. The kindred takes charge the burial ceremony, mediates in any family issues that might arise from the death of the deceased and ensures that the deceased gets a befitting burial. The kindred perform the chores at the burial ceremony of any of their deceased member.

f. Welfare

The Igbo kindred is a natural port of call when an individual encounters a problem he cannot solve or a calamitous situation. Ndigbo do not generally beg in the streets. An individual is expected to fall back on his kindred for assistance. The kindred functioned as the social welfare in traditional Igbo society. To this date, members of the same kindred are socially expected to help themselves [10].

7. Eschatology of the Kindred in Igbo Ontology

In Igbo eschatology, the dead neither go to heaven nor hell. Death is seen as the continuation of life in another plane on earth. The kindred is believed to be in continuous communion even in death. The dead join the ancestors in the kindred in the world of the dead. They do not join a communion of strangers as might be suggested in the Christian idea of heaven. The Igbo dead remain in a comity of kinship with members of their kindred not just in the world of the dead but also assumed to be spiritually present among the living who must continue to pour libations to them from time to time. The greatest punishment given to an Igbo person is to be cast away from the comity of the kinship of their kindred. That precisely, is the punishment given to the unworthy Igbo dead. They are refused admittance into the comity if kinship of their kindred in the world of the dead. No other kindred would admit them either. They are believed to be consigned to an eternity of aloneness. They are neither admitted into the comfy world of the dead peopled by worthy ancestors nor are the readmitted into the world of the living. No one pours libations to them. They are consigned to hover between the dead and the living. Ndigbo call them *akalogheri* – wandering spirits [11].

8. Conclusion

The Igbo kindred is a unique social evolution of the Igbo African people which has political and even eschatological ramifications. It is within the kindred, the Igbo define their identity, in life and in death. The kinship force of the kindred in Igbo society subdues even the affinities of family ties. It is basically in the kindred that the Igbo person does his living. Even when he travels afar in search of greener pastures, he still lives for his kindred and hopes to eventually return home to the comity of his kindred. Ndigbo even in death do not wish to stay away permanently outside their kindred. Ndigbo ferry their dead from far and near to be interred in their kindred just because of this. It is in being with the kindred that the Igbo find meaning.

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