



*INTERNET AFRREV: An International Online Multi-disciplinary Journal*

Vol. 1(1) January, 2012:36-40

ISSN: 2070-0083

afrevjo.net/journals/internetafirrev/vol1\_no1\_art6\_kanu\_igboontology\_jan2012.pdf

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF IGBO ONTOLOGY TO PANTALEON'S CONCEPT OF BEING

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### ABSTRACT

*Recently, African philosophers have begun to reflect on what being is, using categories that are common and relevant to the experience of the African. Contrary to the abstract and unsubstantive definitions of being by their Western counterparts, the concepts employed by Africans have indices of operativeness, concreteness and substantiveness. Although a couple of African philosophers have contributed in this regard, like Placid Tempels' 'force', Emmanuel Edeh's 'onye' and 'ihe' hypothesis, and F. O. C. Njoku's 'chi', this work is concerned with Pantaleon's philosophy of being as belongingness as a contribution of Igbo ontology to the development of the concept of being. The researcher studies the ontology of belongingness, which includes the analytic themes of belongingness. This research reveals that the whole idea of belongingness proposed by Pantaleon is generated from the Igbo worldview of belongingness.*

### INTRODUCTION

The enquiry concerning the nature of being was first set in an articulated motion by Parmenides. He defined being as whatever is. He further said that being is one, eternal and unchanging, meaning that whatever changes is not being (Parmenides cited in Omoregbe, 2002). This notwithstanding, Heraclitus of Ephesus was chiefly famous in antiquity for his doctrine that everything is in a state of flux, as such, being is characterised by flux (Heraclitus cited in Russell, 1975). Plato, while disagreeing with Heraclitus on his doctrine of flux, agrees with Parmenides that reality is eternal and unchanging, however differs from Parmenides in arguing that being is multiple rather than one; and these are the forms in the Platonic World of Forms. Aristotle who defines Metaphysics as the study

of 'being qua being' identifies being with God, it is therefore not surprising that in Aristotle, Metaphysics becomes theology (Aristotle cited in Omoregbe, 2002).

The emergence of the Medieval Epoch did not alter the centrepiece of metaphysical enquiry (Onyeocha, 2009). St Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle in identifying being with God, an argument which Duns Scotus rejects and proposes that creatures are beings in the real sense of the word and not in an analogical sense as Aquinas had taught. During the Modern Period, the problem of being did not feature prominently as philosophers were more concerned with the problem of substance. The problem however emerged in Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel, in whom being became a mystery (Omoregbe, 2002). These notwithstanding, in recent times, African thinkers have tried to redefine being, moving away from the elusive and unsubstantive concepts employed by their Western predecessors and counterparts. They have tried to define being using the categories common to the experience of the African. For African scholars like Pantaleon Iroegbu, *to be is to belong*, thus *being is belongingness*. The burden of this piece is to understand the contribution of the Igbo worldview in the Pantaleonine redefinition of being as belonging, as a contribution of Igbo ontology to the development of the study of being.

### **IGBO ONTOLOGY AS THE FOUNDATION OF PANTALEON'S CONCEPT OF BEING AS BELONGINGNESS**

Igbo ontology is the springboard of Pantaleon's concept of being. Pantaleon (1995) believes that the Igbo world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. Without any choice of its own, with neither interrogations nor dialogue, the child is born into the Igbo world. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world (Pantaleon, 1995). The communal individuality of the Igbo is expressed in proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs (Pantaleon, 1995). The Igbo's believe in the Akan saying that "when a man descends from heaven, he descends into a community". The community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group (Uchendu, 1965).

During one of the feasts organized by Okonkwo in the *The Things Fall Apart*, his uncle Uchendu prayed into the open the essence of the Igbo philosophy of belongingness:

We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him (Achebe 2008, p.132).

After the feast, when one of the eldest men of the *umunna* rose to thank Okonkwo, the reason for the Igbo philosophy of belongingness is revealed with a different shade of insight,

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so (Achebe 2008, p.132).

Mbiti has classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti 1970, p.108). The community, according to Pantaleon, therefore gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community (Pantaleon, 1995). It is from this background that the Pantaleonine concept of belongingness is born.

### THE ONTOLOGY OF BELONGINGNESS

Pantaleon (1995, p.374) defines belongingness as ‘the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness’. In this case, the recipient-subject of belonging is involved: something belongs and it belongs to something. Belongingness is a special noun from the verb ‘to belong’. It means to be part of, or to be a member of a group. For Instance, I belong to Arondizuogu community, this gives me rights and privileges that others who do not belong to this community do not have. There is also a possessive nuance of the verb ‘to belong’. I can say that the soap belongs to me. In the first nuance, to belong creates a situation of participation and in the second, it creates a situation of possession. There is an ontological nuance of belongingness, which specifies that a thing is because it belongs. To be is to belong and to belong is to be (Anah, 2005).

The Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch) re-enacts the contents and significance of belongingness as the essence and hermeneatic core of reality (Pantaleon, 1995). Pantaleon believes that what a being is, is its activity of perching (belonging). To perch is to be. To be is to perch. To be is to belong and to belong is to be. When *Egbe* perches and *Ugo* perches, they come face to face with each other. They are with each other. They are present to each other. They relate to each other deeply and directly as well as have relationships with other inhabitants of *Uwa* (world). To relate is to share something: to give and take. They have common projects, needs and desires. Together they struggle to overcome their difficulties and share their joy (Pantaleon, 1995).

Obviously, the idea of ‘To be is to belong and to belong is to be’ may sound tautological, but it is the definitional circle involved in any description of being as being. This circle will however be clarified as the four Pantaleonine analytic connotations of belongingness is explored.

#### ***Be-(I)-on (Be on)***

In this case, ‘to belong’ involves ‘being on’ in the *Uwa* (*Uwa* is the world in English, but in Igbo it takes up a meaningful depth. It is the entirety of existence) from which all concrete realities derive their being. To be on in this sense is to escape the contrary of being off. For either one is on or he is off (Pantaleon, 1995). To be off is to cease to exist and to be on is to be.

#### ***Be- (l)-on-going***

Having been given existence in the *Uwa*, this aspect of belongingness speaks of the being now going on in its *Uwa* and *Uwaness* (Pantaleon, 1995). In this case, Pantaleon suggests that *Uwa* is the underlying principle in Igbo Metaphysics. This particularly speaks of the process of being, for to remain in being is to proceed in being and not out of being. In this process of being, Pantaleon (1995) makes a difficult synthesis of change and permanence. As the being goes on in being, it maintains its identity even though something in it changes. In ancient philosophy, change and permanence was a bone of contention between Heraclitus and Parmenides, but in Igbo Metaphysics it is no problem at all. For *uwa naeme ntughari* (the world changes), even though, in the midst of the change *Uwa bu otu* (the world does not change).

#### ***Be-long***

To be-long for Pantaleon (1995) means to abide, to stay or live long. In this case, it means that belongingness lives long. As such, the subject of *Uwa* lives long. This brings in the issue of space and time, for belongingness is expressed in space and time. Be-long extends into eternity in Igbo

ontology; it goes beyond the present dimension of the *Uwa* to the *Uwa* of the ancestors, such that to be and not to be-long is not to be at all. While *on-going* belongingness may be open-ended, *being-long* belongingness stretches into everlastingness. As such, in Pantaleon, one becomes through being-on so as to be-going, in other to be-long.

### ***Be-longing***

This speaks of being and longing to be. It stresses the longing for life and being. It is founded on the awareness that nothing is higher a value than life. Expressions in Igbo bring this home: *nduka* (life is greater); *Ndubuisi* (life is the principal thing). To long for life is to want to be, not in the abstract *Uwa* but in the concreteness of what *Uwa* offers.

Each of these themes of belongingness addresses the significance of being, and thus summarizes the essence of being as belongingness. From these analytic themes, we also come to learn that once one is tuned in being; there is no going back from its beingness. One continually goes on in being and not even death can stop one's ongoingness of being (Pantaleon, 1995).

## **EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION**

The philosophy of belongingness is one that touches virtually on every aspect of the human life, be it economic, political, social and otherwise. It is also one that identifies with the categories of the African people. At a time when globalization with its weapon of individuality, among others, is eating deep into Africa and her values, the philosophy of belongingness is in tandem with the call for an African cultural renaissance. It brings out the rich values in African traditional thought and contribution of the Igbo worldview to the development of African philosophy. Above all, the philosophy of belongingness answers the fundamental question of the reason for existence, not just abstractly but concretely: the reason to be is belongingness.

Be that as it may, the Pantaleonine concept of being as belongingness also raises a couple of questions. When Pantaleon speaks of belongingness as being, is he talking about being or the characteristic of being. Belongingness is not being as such because belongingness is a characteristic of being and not being in itself. A thing has to be before it belongs. Pantaleon is here confusing the characteristic of being with being itself. And also, when Pantaleon speaks of being, he refers primarily to the human person. But being goes beyond human beings to include other realities. This notwithstanding, Pantaleon has made an enormous contribution to the development of Igbo metaphysics, and my criticisms cannot change this fact.

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