

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 6 (1), Serial No. 24, January, 2012

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v6i1.17>

The Functionality of Being in Pantaleon's Operative Metaphysics vis-a-vis the Niger Delta Conflict

(Pp. 212-222)

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Abstract

The area of operative metaphysics speaks of a metaphysical system that does not just exist as an ivory tower apart from people's experience, but one that could be applied to a concrete historical circumstance. This piece studies the concept of being as understood by Pantaleon Iroegbu, as being qua belongingness. The concept of being qua belongingness lies within the parameters of operative metaphysics. Pantaleon's concept of being is analysed alongside the situation of crisis in the Niger Delta region, which the researcher believes was born out of the feeling of neglect and marginalization. Placed alongside Pantaleon's philosophy of belongingness which opines that to be is to belong, this piece proposes that if the Niger Delta people are given a sense of belongingness, the crisis in the region would come under a more genuine control.

Introduction

The earliest definitions of being from the ancient philosophers, through the scholastics to Descartes and Kant as that which exist have remained abstract and unsubstantive. Although they have answered the question of what is being, Pantaleon (1994) argues that they are yet to answer the question of what being is substantively.

Earliest definitions of being, from Aristotle, via the scholastics to Descartes and Kant as that which is, that which exist, in so far as it exists, the real, the existent, or actual have all remained abstract and unsubstantive. We have therefore not advanced in the quest for a satisfactory and substantive relevant input to this philosophically fundamental question: what is being substantively? (p.23)

Parmenides 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 analyse the Pantaleonine redefinition of being in the light of the Niger Delta crisis.

Igbo ontology as the provenance of Pantaleon's redefinition 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.

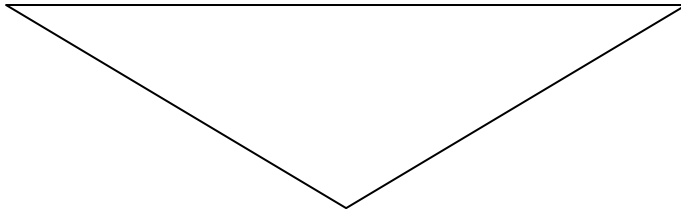
The ontology of belongingness

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. Pantaleon expressed this in a diagram showing the relationship between perching, belonging and being. And this diagram reveals that when one perches, one belongs and when one belongs one becomes.

To perch

To belong



To become

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-(I)-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).

A cursory glance at the historical development of the Niger Delta crisis

Historically, the Niger delta region predates Nigeria's emergence as a British colony. This is attested to by the wave of thriving commerce, agriculture, manufacturing and military prowess found in city states such as Bonny, Opobo, Brass, Calabar, Benin. This era of sufficiency in the South, according to Edosa (2008) explains why the British put forward the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates, that the wealth of the South may be used for the development of North.

The prime movers were British; their own interests no matter how strictly defined and applied mattered most to them. Their prime consideration (that of the

1898 Selborne Committee) was to use the fund available from the richer south to offset the adverse financial standing of the less prosperous North and to reduce fiscal dependence on scarce imperial grants-in-aid (p.6).

The interference of the British led to a fierce operation condition, what was then regarded as the European explorer and trader's rivalry in the slave market. With the abolition of the slave trade, a new struggle ensued in the palm oil market. While the Niger Delta traders acted as middle men, the British sought direct access to the source of palm oil in the hinterland. The British, in October 1850, developed a political means referred to as the "gunboat diplomacy" so as to overthrow the Niger Delta middle men. This entailed the British traders forcing themselves upon local kings and princes to do as the please in their domain. Dissenting kings were either murdered and their towns razed to the ground, or were dethroned and exiled and puppet kings installed to serve British interests (Okonta & Dauglas, 2011). This marked the beginning of the exploitation of the region's resources.

With the emergence of independence, the minorities of the Niger Delta still found out that they are not in control of their resources, even after oil became the economic mainstay in the 1960's (Ademoyega, 1981). While the majority tried to dominate and render the minority insignificant, the minority struggled for self determination and survival. During the Biafra civil war, the minorities of the Niger Delta joined hands with the Federal government against the eastern part of Nigeria out of fear of eastern domination should they win the war. One would have expected that their aspiration would have been achieved after the civil war. But this never happened. It rather ended the eastern region's aspiration and began the Niger Delta vulnerability to the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba expropriation of the Niger Delta oil wealth, who at this time dominated the corridors of power (Ulofu, 2008)

The Federal Government enacted the *Petroleum Decree No. 51 of 1969*, and the *Offshore Oil Revenue Decree No. 9 of 1971*. These decrees vested the ownership of all mineral resources in Nigeria in the Federal Government. In the *Land Use Act of 1978*, the government decreed that all lands belong to the state. By implications, the Niger Delta people and other communities were divested of ownership and alienated from their oil rich land. These decrees were retained in the *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 44 {3})*. Another dilemma was that of revenue sharing, the

money was made from their place and very little was allocated to them for the development of the region (Edosa, 2008). The Revenue Allocation Commission which was highly politicized always failed to do justice to the source region. This put the federal system of government on questionable and shaky grounds.

Before the ascendancy of petroleum as a major foreign exchange earner, the derivation formula was 100%, the region controlled their resources and only paid tax to the centre. The major source of foreign exchange at this time was agriculture. This formula remained until the 1970's when derivation was put at 50%. When oil gained ascendancy, it was subsequently reduced to 45% by General Yakubu Gowon; General Olusegun Obasanjo reduced it to 25%. In 1981, Alhaji Shehu Shagari reduced it to 5%. In 1984, General Mohammed Buhari reduced it to 1.5%. In 1990, General Ibrahim Babangida reduced it to 1%. While the power of control over oil revenue remained in the hands of political powers, the local people watched the rape of their natural resources and the bastardization of their environment. This has led to the rise of the intensification of individual and militant groups, and thus the beginning of unrest in the Niger Delta Region (Ulofu, 2008).

The philosophy of belongingness as a veritable tool for conflict resolution in the Niger Delta area

The twenty first century is characterized by the creation and expansion economic opportunities. Virtually, every activity is geared towards economic interest. When people meet, most times, it is for economic reasons. Friendship between countries and even individuals are made based on economic interests. The yearning for a global village was born out of economic needs. But as long as people are robbed of their economic belongingness, situations of conflict would always arise. The crisis in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria was born out of the feeling that they have been robbed of their economic belongingness. A situation where few have and many do not have; worst still, when people feel deprived of what naturally belongs to them. This is against the principle of economic belongingness, which should allow everyone the opportunity to justly partake in the labours and gains of the national economy.

The opposite of belongingness is alienation. And alienation entails injustice, the dumping of the being of another into non entity. When such happens, there is always a reaction which is born out of the longing to survive or to belong. Such reactions are often violent and detrimental to peaceful co-

existence. While alienation bespeaks violence, belongingness bespeaks peaceful co-existence. The Niger Delta crisis was born out of the hunger 'to belong'; they were feeling alienated from their world. It is not as if the people of the Niger Delta enjoy situation of crisis. Violence is a natural process that springs from the threat to belongingness. It is a tactic for survival.

The Nigerian nation is one that has evolved from tribe to nation, tribe, in the sense of an endogamous group descended from the same ancestor, occupying a particular territory and possessing cultural, religious and linguistic homogeneity. In Nigeria, there are about 400 of such tribes who have united and formed a political union in the form of a federation (Azikiwe, 1978). From this, it is easy to envisage a threat to national unity, especially when minority tribes are given room to feel that they are not part of the whole. The risk of not belonging is the risk of extinction, for to be is to belong. The reaction expected from such a minority group is assertiveness. However, when everyone is made to feel that he or she belongs, a situation peace and happiness, and the zeal to contribute to national goals is ignited. In this case, political belongingness alongside economic belongingness is indispensable for national unity and progress.

The philosophy of belongingness, when applied in political and economic policies, would help to discover the circumstances which can be superimposed on the natural chains of language and culture, which has linked the human beings who inhabit Nigeria to enable them develop a feeling of personal security and group preservation (Azikiwe, 1978). This would create a Federal System of Government which will concede coexistence to all linguistic groups, on the basis of equality, within a framework of political and constitutional warrantees. Such a Federal System of Government would protect individual freedom under the rule of law and thus preserve and sustain any linguistic group. By preserving the linguistic groups of Nigeria and conceding to them local autonomy of some satisfactory nature, an atmosphere for respect is created (Azikiwe, 1978).

If loyalty to the nation must not be replaced by loyalty to the tribe, the philosophy of belongingness (both in the political and economic spheres) is indispensable. The political dimension of belongingness promotes conceding to each region of the nation *de jure* equality and *de facto* inequality. *De jure* equality would imply that every province and local authority in each region in the Federal Republic of Nigeria is legally equal, with the Federal Government providing for each of them. By *de facto* Inequality, it means the

acceptance of the fact that not all regions, provinces and local authorities are equal either in area, population, natural resources and financial means. Again, in the area of politics, the philosophy of belongingness would propose that political parties will have to cut across the artificial barriers of tribes and regions, so that people from wherever can come to wherever and still be part of a party of their choice without the feeling of its categorization as being outside their tribal or religious lines (Elias, 1954).

Conclusion

Nigeria over the years has witnessed a retinue of violent agitations in the Niger Delta region, in the form of kidnapping, hostage taking of elders and children, pipeline vandalization, and wanton destruction of government and private property. Over the years, the Nigerian government has employed a couple of means to quell the crisis, like the use of force on the people, the installation of commissions with endless reports without adequate action; there were times the struggles of the Niger Delta people were given derogatory names: restiveness of irresponsible youths, rascals, kidnappers, criminal militants and terrorists, even though much recently, the Federal Government has begun to bring infrastructural and human development to the area. The thesis stated in this piece is that if the Pantaleonine redefinition of being as belongingness is brought to bear on the Niger Delta crisis, it would address the situation in the region from the root. This piece is also a booster to the already ongoing exercise by the Federal Government of Nigeria to help bring peace to the region.

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