



Religion and the Perception/Promotion of Human Life Inafrica: Examining the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT:- This study is concerned about the place of religion on how the African perceives and promotes human life. Knowing too well that African people are incurably religious people, some pertinent questions quickly come to mind: Does the religious background of the African has any influence on the way and manner he understands and appreciates life? What are those distinctive characters that make the African to stand out as a promoter of life? Therefore, employing the methods of analysis and hermeneutics, the study attempts to address the above and related questions. It focused on the Igbo people, one of the prominent races in Africa. The study observed that the human life for the African is sacred and is perceived as the highest good and more so as an integral whole; life is given and controlled by the Supreme Being: Chukwu. Life for the African (Igbo people) is viewed, accepted and lived in a communal setting – involving the living, the ancestors/the living-dead and the not-yet born. Upon these perceptions of life which anchor heavily on religion, the African has an interesting attitude towards the promotion and preservation of the human life. Holding life in high esteem, the African takes good care to preserve it. The study concludes that the African is a strong promoter of life as manifested in effective health care delivery, traditional medicine – the dibia/doctor phenomenon, traditional morning ritual prayer and various sacrifices and good intake of natural food, among others.

Keywords:- Religion, Human life, African, Igbo people, Supreme Being

I. INTRODUCTION

The African is said to have religion as his/her second nature. Almost everything the African does revolves within and around his religion. This goes to amplify the general notion that African people are incurably religious. This paper, therefore, is focused on how religion influences the perception/promotion of human life among the African people. We shall focus on Igbo people. The Igbo or Igboland as Obilor (1994: 117) observed is located on both banks of the River Niger, south of its confluence with the River Benue. The greater part of the land and the majority of the people are found east of the Niger in Imo, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra and some parts of River State of Nigeria. These are called the eastern Igbo. The smaller group on the west bank of the Niger is called the 'Ika' Igbo or Western Igbo in Delta State. Thus, in all, the Igbo people, we may say are native not just to six Nigerian States, as Obilor would suggest but to seven. While Africa still remains what forms the larger scope of our study here, we have selected as our area of particular interest the Igbo people, precisely the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria.

II. THE RELIGIOUSNESS OF THE AFRICAN: THE FOUNDATION FOR UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN LIFE

In Africa, religion plays a very pivotal role. The typically African is a highly and deeply religious person. Without mincing words, we say that religion is a mark of a true African. This religiousness or religiosity of the African is a fact that cannot be denied. And as such Mbiti (1969) succinctly says that the typical African is notoriously religious. Elucidating this ontological character of the African, Opoku (1978: 11) says that religion rounds up the totality of African culture. Thus, a person [an African child] does not need any special instruction in religion. He picks it up as he grows up and begins to participate in the communal rituals and ceremonies [which are, as we may add, heavily and extravagantly religious]. Thus, it could be said that to the people of Africa, religion is literally life and life is religion (Adeolu, 2006). What we make out of the above few lines, it seems, is that the African is generally and greatly influenced by his Religion (Asuquo, 2011). More so, this African religion, properly designated as African traditional religion (ATR) is heavily based on the belief in the Supreme Being. This Supreme Being is approached through the living-dead/ancestors, who, being next to

God and to the divinities play an important intermediary role in the lives of the living and the not-yet born, thus making for the three communitarian aspects of the African world, and incorporating both the physical world and the spiritual world.

Talking about the Igbo-Africans in particular, Parrinder (1987: 139) in Obilor (1994: 117) opines that the Igbo people are traditionally and deeply religious, who knew *Chukwu* [the Supreme Being – creator and sustainer of life] before they knew Christianity. Parrinder insists that oral tradition, missionary records and archaeological reports support the above claim.

The typical African, we must re-iterate is incurably religious; very deeply religious. Religion, since it controls not just a lot but every meaningful aspect of the African life, would also wield enormous influence on how the African perceives and treats life in general and the human life in particular. Iheanacho (2014: 3) observed that African people are religiously conscious people; they tend to express their belief in their practical life. Put otherwise, this firm religious attitude of the Africans is seen as expressed in the way they live and value life.

III. PERCEPTION OF LIFE IN AFRICA (IGBO) WORLD-VIEW AND BASIC ETHOS

The African/Igbo perception/promotion of the human life is guided by some fundamental religious beliefs and ethos (Ogbuishi, 2015). The whole perception of life of the African is wrapped up in religion. And this religion, as we have pointed out above, plays a pervasive role in the African life and world-view. This is an intrinsic but obvious nature and character of the African. The religiousness/religiosity of the African is ontological as it pertains to the very question of his being or life. This perhaps was aptly expressed by Mbiti (1969: 15) when he said that Africans have their own unique/distinct ontology. But this ontology is a religious one. It follows therefore that to understand their religion we must penetrate that ontology.

The African/Igbo sees life as God's gift to man. Thus, it is held as sacred, highest good, and understood as part of an integral reality, involving mere mortals and immortals. In what provides the background to this rather religious world-view and ethos *as per* life, Madu (2003: 26) aptly puts it thus:

African's cosmological base underscores the belief in the Supreme Being, deities, the spirits forces, ancestors. Man relates and communicates with these spiritual beings in cults, otherwise called ritual actions. In fact, man's helplessness in the face of the mysteries surrounding him makes him recognize and acknowledge his dependence on these forces, a situation which necessitates his reciprocity to God/gods and his creator, sustainer and preserver.

The point here is that the Igbos and indeed all Africans understand life as a special gift from God, the source of life and creator of the universe. In line with the above, Njoku (2002: 167-169) opinions that the African conceives life as having divine origin. Few points stand out in Njoku's view: 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. And continuing on the above idea, in the thought of Opoku (1978: 137), Njoku says: the ancestors are not cut off from the living in human affairs, 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 (*Ala*). Fourthly, this relationship and communion must be based on certain rules and regulations for it to succeed. On his own part, Opoku (1978: 9) agrees that God is the creator of the world and all that is in it. And that next to God, are the ancestral spirits who play a very prominent role in ATR. In addition to creating men and the world, Awolalu and Dopamu (1979: 208) points out that God also owns the world, man, and the society, and also sustains them. Let us further analyze how the African perceives life under the following subheadings:

Life as Integrated Entity/Communality

The African notion of Human Life is never perceived individually. It is always seen in the sense of connectedness. The African sense of being as we know is one of being-with. This being-with is not just a being-with lived at the sphere of the humans, among the living but also with the living-dead/ancestors and the not-yet born. This integrated sense of living or being, therefore is one that links the spiritual world and the physical world. It is a communality shared by the living, the dead and the not-yet born, men and the spiritual beings. In the same vein, the African/Igbo's high regard for life and his preservative or protective instinctual behavior toward life is an integral aspect of African Igbo world-view (Iheanacho, 2015). The human life – the living, together with other realities – the Supreme Being/Chukwu, ancestors/the living-dead, divinities, spirits, gods/deities, infra-humans; religion, communal ties and relations, cultural and social events; death and after-life, etc., is understood in the African world-view as an integral whole and not as distinctively unrelated entities. Hence, the African perception of life is seen in the light of one part of a whole, one which strictly on its own would have an incomplete meaning.

In Africa, no single person, no single life is independent, strong or formidable enough to survive alone. Life is life when and only when it clings to others, and with these other realities constitute the whole. Thus, in a language that emphasizes the communal nature of the African life, it is said that an individual's life is never understood as alone; it is always part of others. Life has meaning only when it is lived in the community. This means that outside the community, life is meaningless (Ogbuishi, 2014: 160). Thus, there is the village or clan festivals, ceremonies, ritual worships, etc. These are celebrated and done as community activities, for the good and wellbeing of the entire community. Life for the Igbo is never perceived from the egoistic angle but rather co-operative, it is inclusive and not exclusive (Onyeocha 1998: 88). Simply put family and mutuality is the watchword.

Life as Supreme Sacred Value

Concerning life, the African/Igbo world-view unfolds a deep sense of religious ethos. We cannot talk of an African religious belief, attitude, norms and practices without talking of African ethics. Thus, ethics occupies an important place in this religious world-view of the African. To put it straight, African ethics is predominantly a religious ethics. This African religious ethos accords to life a supreme sacred value. Life is sacred and ought to be treated as such. Since the gift of life falls within the prerogative of God, who is the sole master and controller of human life and the entire created order, and since this creator (Chineke) merely calls man to the stewardship of his creation, then the African/Igbo man (being deeply religious/godly) cannot but treat life with an utter sense of sacredness. So, since this supernatural being/God as strongly upheld by the African is the creator of the universe – the originator of all lives including the human life and the sustainer of all of creation (Njoku 2002: 167), the African man sees it as a divine imperative to handle life with such sense of care and respect. More so, for the fact that God – the Supreme Being – is divine and what is of the realm of this divine is sacred, then life, (because it originates from the sacred) is for the African/Igbo, a supreme sacred value.

Interestingly, the above logic perhaps explains why the Igbo people call their children such names as: *Chinenyenwa* – it is God that gives children, *Chinyeomumu* – God gives children/potency/fertility, *Chinwendu* – life belongs to God, and *Chinweike* – it is God who gives the strength that sustains life. Other Igbo names of such significance according to Obilor (1994: 119) are: *Chibundu* – God is life, *Ndudinachi* – life is in God's hands, *Chinazo* – God saves, *Chizom* or *Chizobam* – save me God, etc. Inferring from this understanding of life as a special and sacred gift from God, Madu (2004: 24) says:

From the above stand point, we can infer that life encompasses both the material and spiritual spheres of existence for the Igbo. This existence must be dynamic. Life therefore embraces both the person's material and spiritual well-being. Thus, anything that threatens the material and spiritual well-being of man is feared by Igbo since this would diminish the dynamic quality of life.

This African/Igbo perception of life explains why human life is held on high esteem, such that no man can unlawfully take the life of another or even his own life without being sanctioned. Thus, killing or murder of any kind remains a taboo not only in the past African/Igbo cultural belief and value system but also in the modern dispensation. Following this religious ethics, murder is seriously punished and so is suicide. This sacred sanction placed on human life provides the rationale behind the despicable rejection or throwing into the evil forest or the practice of leaving unburied the corpse of any man who takes his own life. Indeed suicide is generally perceived as a taboo, a bad death and thus unacceptable in African/Igbo cultural belief and value system. It is categorized as evil death, an ignoble death. Also in this category is the death of a man who is killed for incessant theft, rape, defiling of his father's bed or the under-aged, desecration of the sacred or village shrine, among other taboos (*aru* or *nso Ala*). This preservation of *ndu* – life – in Igbo religious cosmology is both an intrinsically humanly attitude and a cultural imperative.

Indeed, life is seen as sacred for which any willful dangerous attitude, action or intention against life is interpreted not only as evil but as a taboo against the community (Iheanacho, 2015). Thus, any inhuman treatment unduly given to a person which threatens his life violates the sacredness of life. Beyond the African/Igbo notions, life generally is perceived by men of every race, tribe and culture as inviolate. The worst evil, sin or crime therefore is the one against human life. Life generally, whether human or animal's, for Africans/Igbos is to be treated with respect. This is why the blood of animals, say chickens or goat meant for celebrations – rituals, worships, festivals, etc., is not spilled anyhow. Animals meant for such events are killed in a careful way and their blood disposed with reverence.

Comparatively, unlike what we see in the so-called modern world championed by America and the West which plays around with life, life for the traditional African, was held and is still seen as highly sacred.

Thus, to give birth to a child is on the part of both the man and the woman. Since life among the Africans/Igbo is highly prized, to have children becomes a great cause of joy for every African parent. There is no traditional African who will not long to have healthy children. Thus, no real African toils with life. And any action that possess threat to life becomes one of the greatest taboos, be it one's own life or that of others.

Life as Highest Good (*Summum Bonum*)

Continuing on the premise of life as a supreme sacred value, the African sees life as the highest good, what the Latin calls *summum bonum* to which we all have a divine duty to preserve, conserve, protect, promote or enhance. Re-iterating this notion of human life Madu (1996) says that life is supreme, and as such everything is done to keep it on. Thus, sickness diminishes life and so its cause must be diagnosed through divination and appropriate measures to restore life. This could imply that this world (this abode of men where life is physical and visible) is exalted and valued more than any other world. Thus, making this point clearer, Madu (2004: 23) says:

To the traditional Igbo, the *summum bonum* or the highest value is life (*Ndu*). This is made manifest in their names e.g. “*Ndubisi* – life is of supreme importance, *Nduka* – life is greater, *Ndukaku* – life is greater than wealth, *Nduamaka* – life is good. [In these names], the supremacy of *Ndu* in both cosmological order and in the day to day life activities of the people is reflected.

The African desires long life; he wishes to live long and thus he keeps in touch positively (a close and cordial communion/relationship) with the spiritual powers, aligned with his ancestors who guarantee his security and continued existence. And whereby eventually at his ripe age/ old-age when he then has to accept and await death or for his ancestors to take him, he finds consolation of living-on in his children. Little wonder then, childlessness is mourned and abhorred. And this must be guarded against by marrying a second wife, for not doing so implies extinction of a lineage, the worst tragedy of life.

For Africans, life on earth is of crucial importance. Though Death and life after death, for the traditional African is seen as unavoidable, it is not looked forward to. The reason is that this world is the best place people could live in. And so, the greatest expectation one would have after death is to continue to participate in the life of the community, since the living could always commune with the living-dead and /or ancestors. Even then, at death, a person, who lived a good moral life, went through all rites of passage – at birth and during different stages of life, died at an age that could be considered a ripe-age and of natural cause, could expect to become an ancestor, to be asked to mediate between God, the divinities and man, and expect to reincarnate.

In a line of thought that re-emphasizes the central role of religion in the African/Igbo cosmology and perception of life/after-life Metuh (1981: 148) opines that this supreme good called life in African/Igbo world-view is not understood nor lived away from God. God has a central role in the life of the African/Igbo person. Thus, man, his life/after-life is better studied from a linked approach to the study of God, man and worship. It is in the light of the Africans' relationship with the divine, his reverence of this Supreme Being, the highest deity, the transcendent and ultimate reality, God, that he appreciates the gift of life, accepts his fate in the mundane reality of death, and finds consolation in reincarnation and the cyclic notion of life.

Life is Cyclic (Reincarnation)

Life for Africans is cyclic. Thus, a man goes through a circle of births, deaths and rebirths. Highlighting this aspect of the African sense of life which is embedded in Njoku's first point, that is, the concept of human life in relation to time, Mbiti (1980: 24) sees life as a rhythm or cycle which includes: birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, and death; entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the company of the spirits. This implies that God created man with the potentialities of passing through these stages of life. Every human being must go through them, although they vary according to cultures and time. As regards these variations mentioned above, while for Mbiti and for the East Africans there could be the possibility of an eventual final entry into the company of the spirits, it should be noted that for the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, and the majority of Africans there is actually no final end.

It must be noted that African notion or perception of life, as distinct from the Euro-Christian linear notion, entails that through reincarnation (*Ino Uwa*) the African/Igbo life goes in circles of birth, death and rebirth. It does not consist in the erroneous notion of returning to life in the complete physical human form. No! It rather means that through the process of continuous reincarnation(s) the soul of a man continues to come back to life not in his complete human nature but in the form of an identifiable personality in the African spiritual world, who in a mysterious but real way incorporates his personality traits on a new unique born personality. Thus, the term “reincarnation” as understood in this study does not merely designate the notion of born to die

child or repeater – the *Ogbanje* for the Igbo or *Abiku* for the Yoruba Africans, respectively. Rather it is conceived in the sense of the African/Igbo belief of *Ilo Uwa*, which entails that an identifiable personality in the African spiritual world is said to, in a mysterious but real way, incorporate his personality traits on a new unique born personality without destroying that personality or substituting himself/herself for that new personality. This is how both Eneh (1987) and Ekwunife (1999) conceive reincarnation – a sense which we adopted for this study.

Giving this understanding, it must be re-iterated that the African sense of reincarnation, properly understood should not be confused with the western notions of reincarnation understood as: “transmigration”, “rebirth”, “palingenesis”, and / or “metempsychosis” (Ekwunife, 1999: 32, Eneh, 1987: 28). The African notion of, and believe in cyclic life and reincarnation perhaps explains the ritual significance/functions of: “*Okpesi*” – the ancestral spirit symbol in Igbo-land, “masquerades” – which portrays the permanent stay of the ancestors in the spirit land, and the rationale behind the “cult of ancestors” (ancestors’ worship).

IV. THE PROMOTION OF LIFE IN AFRICAN/IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: THE AFRICAN SENSE OF HUMANNES

From our discussion so far in this paper, it is observable that the African perceives life as an integrated entity, a gift from God, one that should be respected as a supreme sacred value, as *summum bonum*/the supreme good, for which certain steps are taken towards its care and enhancement. Life for the typical African/Igbo man is held very high with deep sense of sacredness. This is why in the traditional African/Igbo society certain provisions are made for the promotion, preservation, conservation and / or sustenance of life. There are firmly established structural and institutional set-ups in terms of ethos, norms, values, acceptable attitudes and behavioral patterns that regulate the treatment of life. There are certain customarily imbued rules and sanctions that are put in place for the preservation of life – what is understood here as promoters of life.

Some Promoters of life in Africa

Indeed, the African/Igbo society has effective schemes for promoting and /or enhancing life. For the Igbos in particular, *ogwu*, *aru*, *nso ala* and *omenala* (traditional medicine, taboos, sanctions and customs) defined moral/legal code for life, and these stands out among others as promoters of life (Ogbuishi, 2015: 40). The potency of *ogwu* (traditional medicine) and the *Dibia* (traditional medicine-man/Doctor) for the Igbos is one to be reckoned with as far as life enhancement scheme is concerned. Put otherwise, some religious institutions (like *ogwu*, *nso ala*, *aru*) and functionaries (*dibias/ trado-medicine doctors, diviners, and traditional birth attendants*) play a tremendous role in the care of life. It is in a bid to avoid going against the *nso ala* that the African cares and enhances life.

The above line of thought perhaps further re-affirms the African/Igbo sacred perception of life, the highest value placed on life, and perhaps provides the rationale behind the embargos / sanctions that are placed on such abominably despicable acts like: murder, suicide, starvation and other ill treatments of life. The Igbos as stated above abhor all forms of murder – ritual killing, malicious murder in cold blood, killing of unborn babies (abortion), of oneself (suicide), etc. The African makes effort to live a moral life as designed and accepted in the community; thus he is activities are geared towards the promotion and enhancement of life – not only the individual life, but also the life of other people. Such nefarious activities like insurgencies, kidnapping, etc are antithetical to the African-ness of the African person.

It is also good to note that there are some of the promoters of life or life enhancing schemes in the African Traditional Society which include good healthcare services, festivities, wrestling and cultural dances, among others. These activities are devised to keep both the mind and body healthy. Iheanacho (2015) noted that these activities as enumerated above help to provide excellent care for the human life. He further argued his point thus:

Effective healthcare provision, good food intake [secured in hard work, especially farming – dedicated to the gods of the land – the gods of fertility, marked in ceremonies like new yam festivals], physical exercise [exemplified in village wrestling contests and cultural dances], protection against inside and outside foes [attacks] or protection against spiritual forces as the case may be. Divination is employed as the last protective mechanism for life. In divination, answers to hitherto or perennial problems are sought and obtained from trusted diviners. Igbo/African Trado Medicine Professionals are always on hand to provide the most excellent cure for health challenges and protection to life.

Aligned to the above is the Traditional African Communitarian spirit which provides an enhancement to life. Thus, the communal life of sharing, togetherness, mutual complementarities and solidarity is a communion that prefigures the continuing communion with the living-dead/the ancestors and the spirit world.

This perhaps explains why the Igbo African holds that when he arrived the spirit-land, the dead continues to live in families, clans, villages and communities. Still on the physical plane, cultural festivals like new yam festivals, masquerading, etc., promote life, as they bring joy and happiness, especially through the dances, songs, eating together and other aspects of communal participation and sharing. In all, the rich cultural heritage of African/Igbo traditional society is geared towards the promotion of human life.

Above all, among the Africans/Igbos there is a strong belief and hope of entering the ancestral world. This is another strong promoter of human life. Without the hope of joining the ancestors the way and manner the African treats and values human life would have been different from what it is today. That the African strives to keep to certain sanctions placed on life is to a large extent owing to this prospect in another phase of life, in joining his ancestors in the after-life which could only be attained after a good life experience in this earthly phase. One can only join the ancestors only when one must have lived a good life here on earth. The belief helps to condition the behaviour of a traditional African which invariably is geared towards the enhancement of life as an individual in particular and the community in general.

V. CONCLUSION

We wish to conclude by reiterating that for the Traditional African, there is no end to Life, especially in the materialistic notion of some Greco-European thinkers. Thus, Life for the African, precisely for the Igbo person is a continuum. There is no total break or annihilation. For even at death, one who dies an honorable death, only goes to sit with the ancestors and comes out again through re-incarnation. Life therefore for the Igbo people is cyclic. But this cyclic notion of life, consisting in reincarnation, for the African/Igbo is not to be wrongly understood or interpreted to mean that the spirits of the dead come back fully as human beings after death. It does not consist in the erroneous notion of returning to life in the complete physical human form. It rather involves the return of an identifiable personality in the African spiritual world, in a mysterious but real way, incorporating his personality traits on a new unique born personality without destroying that personality or substituting himself/herself for that new personality. This perhaps explains the ritual significance/function of *Okpesi* which is the ancestral spirit symbol in Igboland and what we may call the rationale behind the invocation of the ancestors at Igbo morning ritual prayers – an expression of the cult of ancestors/ancestors' worship.

In sum, we have made effort to establish in this paper that the way and manner the African perceives human life is highly anchored on his religious belief. The African is a creationist; he does not believe that human life evolved from the ape or other lower animals. The evolution theory does not make any sense to the African. Human life originates from God, and as such it should be cherished, preserved and revered. Human life should not be tampered with carelessly. No wonder the African has high regard for human life. We strongly maintain, following our discussion in this paper, that the African is a true promoter of human life. Therefore, if the African is a true promoter of human life, we, as African people should reject any tradition or culture that does not have regard for human life. We have to stand up to condemn abortion, euthanasia, terrorism, war, murder, suicide, and any other act that militates against human life.

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