



Cultural Rationality and the Igbo Society

Ajanwachukwu Edward Okoro PhD¹, Hilary Eze PhD², Francis Ofoegbu PhD³
^{1,2,3}Department of History And Strategic Studies/Philosophy Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo Ebonyi State.

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ABSTRACT: Culture is complex. Each culture is clearly different. This is because of its unique historical evolution. This confers on it qualities that make it peculiar, original and an organic whole. Culture as the entire way of life of a people past and present, has dynamic interplay of factors promoting progress, adaptation and interaction. Global change constantly challenges people to maintain their identity in the face of new conditions. Notwithstanding culture is marked by stable and enduring elements as well as by changing and contingent factors. As a way of life, culture includes art, religion and religiosity, marriage and family, elders and ancestors, egalitarian societal values etc. The Igbo people have a profound religious sense in which the existence of the divine being and the invisible spirit world is natural. This study will examine some components of culture and highlights cultural erosion that affects the esteemed values vis-à-vis global changes. This leads to the trend to jettison original cultural authenticity by its sons and daughters. Hence the urgent challenge to engage the rest of the world within a composite framework situated in a purely African reality in spite of global change.

Keywords: Culture, Global change, Rationality, Igbo society, Philosophy, De-culturation

Introduction

It is quite amazing when you look at the complex and diverse nature of human cultures. Each culture is distinct by its unique historical evolution and the resulting qualities which make it a structurally peculiar and organic whole. Africa imprints its colour on its children by impressing its clear physical and cultural characteristics irrespective of the country they might find themselves.

Culture is the entire way of life of a people, past and present. There are evidence of a dynamic interplay of factors resulting in progress, adaptation and interaction. Cultural flux constantly challenges people to maintain their identity in the face of emerging new conditions. Philosophy as a human preoccupation involves people of all ages and cultures. This is in line with what C. D. Broad (1969) said:

If...we want to decide what philosophy is, we shall naturally begin by considering what kind of activities have been pursued by men whom everyone would regard as great philosophers when engaged in what everyone would regard as their characteristically professional work (59).

From Broad's position, philosophy deals with the theoretical activities of those that have been regarded in the histories of philosophies as philosophers. This leads to the preoccupations that can be regarded as summarising the intellectual endeavour called philosophy. Some see it as the pursuit of wisdom and consequently the search for the guide of life.

In addition to its critical function, philosophy involves, in the words of J. O. Sodipo "reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles which we use to organise our experience in morals, religion, in social and political life, in law, in history and the natural sciences" (Fadahunsi & Oladipo, 2004, 16). These therefore highlight the primacy of philosophy in man's daily activities including culture.

Understanding Culture

When we talk of society what readily come to mind are persons in a community. Society according to Francis Cardinal Arinze:

...have its own language, its own art, its own way of building, planting, celebrating and eating and its own way of looking at the world and interpreting reality. Every people have its own philosophy of life, its own manner of showing belief in superior powers and respecting them and its own way of living. Every people have its peculiar customs and traditions, its own code

of living man's place in it. In short, every people have its own culture (Ogbualu&Emenanjo 1982, 181).

For Kwame Gyekye in *Tradition and Modernity*:

Culture is the way of life of a people. It is a public phenomenon, a product consciously and purposively created by a people or society. Most, if not all, members of the society share and participate in the cultural products of their society. A cultural product has a positive meaning for the life of a people as a whole (1997, p. 198).

And as a public phenomenon, it is undertaken or committed in the glare of publicity with the enjoyment of members. Culture is also seen in the realm of ideals and ideas, values and symbols. In this sense, elsewhere culture covers all the ways, means, and conditions of living which make human societies possible. This is to say that the survival of people is a survival of their culture. Everywhere man has culture and builds up his culture through his intellectual, artistic, physical, religious activities.

Different cultures have different moral codes. The customs of different societies are all that exist. These customs cannot be said to be correct or incorrect since the implication must be the presence of independent standards of right or wrong out of which judgment is obtained. There is no such standard anywhere.

Man is necessarily a symbolic animal which builds up his culture through signs, symbols and his creative intellectual, social, religious production. It follows that culture refers to the way of life of a particular group or race. Culture also means the totality of life within any given group of people or community. This will include the art, music, mode of dressing, beliefs and practices.

For Raymond Williams in Paul Edwards, culture is a metaphorical term derived from the act of cultivating the soil (Latin, *cultura*) (1967, 273-6). The cultivation of the mind was seen as a process comparable to the cultivation of the soil. This shows that different people understand culture from various points, such that it cannot be universally appreciated collectively.

In all, culture is the amalgam of nature and history. So through culture we think we can best express who the people are, where they are, how they are and what they have and even the yearnings of their heart. Hence we are using culture in these senses. It is the totality of the human activities considered to afford individuals the possibility to cultivate, to actualize and to develop their human potentialities, mental and physical. It is the totality of human efforts, achievements in the course of man's struggle for existence.

Yuval Lurie (1992) sees it from a social perspective (193-204), in which man is a cultural being. Thus, this corroborates Jaegwon Kin (1995) in which the aim of culture is to interpret and transmit to future generations the system of values giving the participants a form of life-found meaning and purpose.

Albert T. Dalfovo (1999) makes a distinction between inner and outer aspects of culture. The outer aspect is the social heritage of a community that is under perception. The inner aspect is the collective mental and spiritual heritage such as systems of symbols, beliefs, aesthetic perceptions, values, ideas, motivations and the worldview expressible in the outer aspect of culture (37-49). Culture is dynamic but it does not remove the fact that it is an attributive term. It therefore follows that in spite of erratic time, there are some things which remain unchanged in culture and as such identifies and individuates people.

All of the above understanding of culture could be summarised in the following expressions of Geert Hofstede (2005). He sees culture as the collective mental programming of the people in a social environment in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences. In this work, he contrasts collectivism and individualism. Collectivism societies value social relations over individual performance. People in a collectivist culture think naturally in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'.

He equally contrasts femininity and masculinity. Feminine cultures place a high value on the maintenance of harmonious social relations. Masculine cultures focus on achievement and performance. The feminine dimension of culture places a high value on social relationships to seek harmony and to avoid conflict. The Igbo culture before now places great emphases on living and working in pleasurable atmosphere and on fostering a strong spirit of community. Masculine cultures emphasize results, performances and productivity.

In Hofstede (2005) understanding, culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others. Programming suggests that beliefs and values and behaviours of our cultures become inculcated. This inculcation renders us blind to alternative viewpoint. We do not consider many of our cultural beliefs as viewpoints. They are truths that we do not question.

Ronald Fletcher in Bullock (1991) sees culture as the total body of material artefacts (e.g. tools, weapons, houses, places of work, worship, government, recreation, works of arts, etc), of collective mental and spiritual artefacts (e.g. systems of symbols, ideas, beliefs, aesthetic perceptions, values, etc.), and of distinctive forms of behaviour (institutions, groupings, rituals, mode of organisation etc) created by a people...in the ongoing activities (Bullock 1991, 191).

Culture in Karl Rahner's calculation is everything in this earthly life that is worthy of human dignity, everything towards which man feels himself drawn or fitted in his history or in his concrete situation, through the forces of nature. Wherever man makes something richer and more meaningful of his life, wherever he creates works of intellect, of science, of arts, of literature, wherever he stamps the imprint of his spirit on the things of earth and expands his own being, there, he finds culture (1966, 45-46).

Thus culture can be understood as the sum of cultural expressions, products, beliefs, images and behaviours. Fletcher and Rahner seem to infer a degree of homogeneity among those who share a culture but such homogeneity cannot be assumed especially when we are to speak of a global culture. Values in Igbo land vary from one society to another. But when these values are analyzed, in terms of their functions and interrelation, some general principles emerge.

Igbo Culture within Global Change

The Igbo people, sharing a contiguous geographical area, speak Ibo language and share a common culture. The Igbo nation is located on the western coast of Africa. In the Igbo tradition, culture is passed on orally through stories, proverbs, folktales, myths and traditions that are primarily face to face interaction.

Igbo art is a manifestation of the aesthetic, the philosophical, the historical, the human and the divine milieu in the midst of human creativity. This, in the words of Obiora F. Ike and Ndidi N. Edozien (2004) offers itself as music, artefacts, sculptures, painting, poetry, dance, drama, folktale, proverbs and traditions manifested in vivid, hardly subtle patterns that establish equilibrium and glorify harmony (2004, 21).

In Igbo, arts are the fundamental dimensions of existence of birth, life and death. Art as a depiction of society is preoccupied with force. This, according to Placide Tempels is "to the pure African a vital, universal and omnipotent energy to which all thought and action are related and exist" (Ike & Edozien 2004, 71).

Art is associated with this energy and divine. Thus art points to religion and according to Obiora Ike, every work of art seems to say: look beneath and beyond me, for what I represent and say is more than what you see and hear (2004, 21). Thus Igbo art is modest but deeply expressive. With dances and figures, it depicts humanity in its simplest form showing the Igbo people in their natural environment, immersed in activity and at various stages in their rich ancestry.

On religion and religiosity, it permeates all aspects of Igbo life. This is characteristically African. In traditional Igbo society the practise of religion was non-institutional and intrinsically woven into society's communal way of life.

The Igbo people accept that a supreme spirit known as Chukwu exists. They believe that Ndi Ichie or ancestors intercede for mankind before Chukwu and plead mankind's cause. Ndi Ichie is the link between the known and unknown, between earth and beyond. The ancestors are constantly active in the daily human affairs of their family and clans. Culture for the African especially the Igbo is that arena where history and achievement combine to give existence.

Obiora F. Ike (2004) continues that "cultural influences are obvious in the Westernisation of so much of popular culture in music, clothes, life styles etc. Today the single largest export industry for the United States is not aircraft, automobiles, computers but entertainment-Hollywood films and television programmes" (8).

There are structures that form the foundation of cross-cultural flow and which will guide its future development. These structures are ideology, capital flow, trade, political and culture. Some traditional Africans see culture within the global sphere as the imposition of values and styles by dominant forces. In a sense, an aspect of global change is seen to mean the cultural integration of fast music, computers and fast food. The global cultural influences are obvious in the Westernisation of so much of popular culture in music, clothes, life styles and so.

Traditional cultural values such as family, community, respect for life, hospitality etc. come into strong confrontation. And do loose battle with the values communicated through Western music, movies, videos, cables and satellite television advertisements. And the idolised figures of entertainment and sports such as individualism, the desire to have more even when one does not become more; a new cult of violence, the unbridled belief that money buys everything and the growing loss of meaning of life and in traditional values.

In support, Mbaya Kankwenda saw globalization as:

cultural integration process through the transnational flow of ideas, goods and images. Thoughts and forms of art expression are being globalized and therefore part of the process. This is obvious in music and movie industries, painting, dressing, literature, language and even religion. The new world market embraces all these aspects. Since the cultural integration goes to some extent with the economic globalization, it is obvious that culture and cultural expressions will be dominated not by small and developing countries but rather by powerful economic countries and their transnational corporations. Globalization is in its cultural dimension, a denial of cultural identity (Obiora Ike, 171-172).

This, as highlighted by Kankwenda resulted in the denial of cultural identity. Cultural crisis may arise due to many factors as seen in the concept globalization. In the words of MkwugoOkoye (1964) globalization “represent a corruption influence on the prior innocence of the African (Igbo) by making rogues of honest men, self-seeker out of unselfish men, lairs and perverts and neurotics of men happily free from these defects” (15). The Igbo has been exposed in no consistent or radical fashion to milieu of cultural influences which is different from that which he naturally belongs, though the latter continues to surround him. He is a truly displaced man. His mastery of the new culture is never complete but is rather self-conscious and generally in conflict with the mores into which he is born. His cultural ambiguity, according to William E. Abraham is characteristically accompanied by misgivings of wide-range proportion (1962, 35).

The eventual presence of cultural elements from other cultures in Igbo land had brought some measure of de-culturation. The cleavage between the traditional life style and the western life style seem to affect the complete and irretrievable de-culturation of the Igbo community as a whole. But it should be noted that no culture can protect its interests if it behaves as if it exists outside the globe, when in actual fact, it exists within its swinging spiral (Agbo 2003, 209).

Rationality within cultures

Peter Winch in the American Philosophical Quarterly (1964) some years brought back to the forefront the question of superiority of one culture over another. This is hinged on the issue of rationality or irrationality or better still which rationality is richer. Furthermore, it raises the questions of: are there standards of rationality which are accepted in all cultures? Can we claim a culture which believe in witchcraft or magic be considered less rational than the advanced scientific culture of the west?

This will lead to the understanding of what we mean by rationality? The western understanding will see it as consistency in logic. Thus, someone is irrational who affirms both q and not- q . This is to say that someone acts grossly in opposition to his personal interest can be considered irrational.

On the other hand, can we understand irrationality in terms of inconsistency? It might appear so. If we impute to an agent end E and if we follow the principle: who wills the end wills the means. If we see him act to prevent means M from coming about, this makes a formal inconsistency.

On equating irrationality with inconsistency, the mere fact of having E as an end and acting to prevent M is not sufficient to convict the agent of irrationality. He might not understand that the correct description of his end was E , equally he might not know that M was unavoidable means. He also might know that what he was now doing was not compatible with M ; this is to say that he has to know that he is frustrating his own goals, before we are ready to call him irrational. Seen from another angle, the imputation of irrationality is dependent on our attributing unconscious knowledge to him.

Thus inconsistency in logic is fundamental to rationality due to the fact that the person who acts irrationally as having the resources to formulate the maxims of his action and objectives which are in contradiction with each other. It therefore follows that possible inconsistency is enough to explain the accusations of irrationality. The West sees their concept of rationality as richer than the cultures of the Africans. This assumption is wrong since our actions are backed up with sufficient reasons.

Conclusion

There is no doubt the modern Igbo society is at a crossroads as a result of global influence. As such, there is the witness of a certain disjunction between traditional culture and the demands of modern life. As a result of global change and the disintegration of traditional social structures, conditions of conflict and poverty are undermining the family and leaving the Igbo youth bereft of values and discipline.

Majority of the young people lack orientation and there is a widespread alienation among them. The challenges are enormous and in some cases things have fallen apart. The challenges of social and cultural global changes and exchange have affected some of the people of Igboland in many negative ways. There is a trend to jettison original cultural authenticity by even some Igbo's sons and daughters.

Thus there is the erosion not only of the religious and spiritual outlook on life which characterise African culture but also the organic unity between faith and real life. Family values, at a time the strength of Igbo nation are being eroded. This leads to the need to return back to Igbo's cultural heritage, much of which is still unknown, to rediscover it and place it at the service of inter-cultural dialogue.

The effects of global changes on the socio-cultural mentality of the Igbos include the outlaw of native languages in schools which is followed by demise of folkways. Its attendant result is that Igbo youth and the young one night are neither rooted in Euro Christian values nor in traditional values. They never spoke or relished their mother tongue, yet when considered with the parameters of the western world are found to be untenable as westerners. In the words of Izu Marcel Onyeocha (1997), the child is deprived of his or her mother tongue, severed from his or her roots, bombarded with myriads of strange values extraneous to his own, the

African (Igbo) has not found any sure foothold either in the received cultures or in his or her own embattled one (58). Thus the Igbo youth is forced to learn by rote things that are of little interest to normal African life.

Elements of Igbo culture has been eroded by global changes in culture. This erosion is mainly in the outer component of culture. The inner components like the mental and intellectual ideas are still intact; otherwise it would be no culture at all. The best response to this erosion is for Igbo people to revive the good aspect of our culture to have a well ordered society. This it could do by identifying those values, norms and traditions of the past which are still resistant to global change. Then it would be possible through dialogue to sell these to other cultures by a kind of cross-cultural dialogue.

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