

The Place of Igbo Myths in Igbo-African Philosophy

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Abstract

The present piece has studied the place of myths in African Philosophy and more precisely in African metaphysics. It asserts that Igbo-Mythology carries within itself the history and philosophy of the African people. They are the encyclopaedia engraved in the chambers of the African mind to be passed from generation to generation. In today's search for an African identity, and move for a cultural renaissance, myths are indispensable if the African must find his real essence, and the remnant of his being distorted as a consequence of his encounter with Western powers. This is true as African myths preserve the last drop of our Africanness. For a better analysis of the topic in question, this piece explores the meaning of myths with samples from the Igbo cultural area, the spatio-cultural horizon of the Igbo cultural space and the relationship between Igbo myths and Igbo-African philosophy. It discovered that myths and philosophy both gear towards proffering answers to the fundamental questions that burrow the human heart. However, on the one hand, while philosophy investigates the reasonableness of answers proffered by myths, on the other hand, myths provide raw materials for philosophical reflection. Not minding the distinct roles they play, they walk together in accompanying mankind in their search for meaning.

Keywords: Igbo, Myths, African, Philosophy, Nri, Imilikenu, Ovoko, Origin, Invention.

Introduction

Investigating the origin of the national god, origin of the world, the origin of humanity, its place in creation, the deity that governs the land, the temple, the cult etc., has been the object of human reflection right from the ancient times. The outcome of these investigations is usually articulated and preserved in myths. Thus, myths are the outcome of human attempts to explain historical institutions and developments by appeal to non-historical factors and forces. According to Abanuka (1999), in the whole process, the interest of the myth maker is not so much in the coherence of the arguments, as in the thing which he aims to say. As such, an analysis of the quality of myths based on the principle of coherence would be misleading.

Even in their seeming incoherence, they are a veritable mine for both religious and philosophical research. It provides knowledge which satisfies the human person's religious and philosophical yearnings and questions. It satiates man's yearning for a reality which surpasses his being and for a state of being which surpasses that of the present in perfection. It helps to link man with the supreme reality which can fulfil his desires. They connect man in his world of incompleteness to a world of completeness, and provide indices that guide him on the way towards completeness. This notwithstanding, this piece studies the place of Igbo myths in Igbo-African philosophy. Meanwhile, a fundamental question is: what is the historical-cultural root of the Igbo?

Historical-cultural Roots of the Igbo

A fundamental step in our study of Igbo proverbs is the identification of the spatio-cultural horizon of the Igbo cultural space. According to Onuh (1991), by way of definition, "Igbo" is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. There is however an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term 'Igbo'. In the contention of Ekwuru (2009), the difficulty of arriving at a precise etymological and semantic clarity of the word "Igbo" has its trace in the unprecise nature of the history of the Igbo people. For Afigbo (1975a), compared to the state of research as regards origin in relation to other tribes in Nigeria, the Igbo history can without much exaggeration be described as *terra incognita*. However, Afigbo (1975b) further observes that the Igbos are not indifferent to this crisis of identity. Their experience of colonialism, and even the Biafran War has sparked off in them the quest for a historical identity.

It is such that Isichei (1976) avers that no historical question arouses more interest among the present day Igbo people than the enquiry “where did the Igbo come from?”

As regards the territorial identity of the Igbos, Uzozie (1991) observes that “To date, there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of territory” (p. 4). Ekwuru (2009) states that any attempt to introduce who the Igbo is poses a lot of problems in all aspects of its academic conceptualizations. This notwithstanding, Hatch (1967) describes the Igbo people as a single people even though fragmented and scattered, inhabiting a geographical area stretching from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta. They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions; they believe in a common Supreme Being known as Chukwu or Chineke. Two theories have emerged in response to the question “where did the Igbo come from?” There is, *the Northern Centre Theory* which Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the *Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland*. According to Jones (cited by Isichei 1976), the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.

Geographically speaking, Njoku (1990) posits that Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. According to Uchendu (1965), in its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westwards, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis.

Socio-politically, unlike the other tribes in Nigeria, who evolved a molithic centralized system of government, the Igbo distinguish themselves with a complicated socio-political structure which has been qualified as *republican*. The Igbo ethnic group is divided into clans, each clan is made up of towns; and each town is comprised of villages. The village is the primary social unit constituted of families or kindred. The family is the nucleus of society. Politically, the lineage system is the matrix of the social units or organization and provides grounds for political and religious structures. The traditional concepts of political power and authority is structured and determined by their concept of *umunna* and the membership of the association based on elaborate title system. Economically, Aligwekwe (1991), avers that the traditional Igbo people were sedentary agriculturists. This delimitation of Igbo land as a cultural area, helps to identify the cultural horizon for the study on the place of Igbo myths in Igbo-African philosophy.

The Meaning and Nature of Myths

A cursory glance at the definition of myth by scholars reveals that there is a strong link between myths, religion and philosophy. What then are myths? According Marshall (1988),

The word ‘myth’ is used to refer to stories that are fictional, and hence, it has come to have a pejorative sense. Traditionally, it refers to invented stories about the gods in which they behave like human beings with superhuman powers. Closely associated with this sense of the word is its usage to refer to the stories which may accompany and allegedly form the basis of religious rituals. (p. 449).

Gunkel (1901), defined myth as “Stories of the gods in contradistinction with legends in which the actors are men” (p. 14). From the etymological perspective, Esposito, Easching and Lewis (2006), explain that the word “myth” comes from the Greek “mythos”, which means “story”. They are thus symbolic stories about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world. They relate human beings to whatever powers they believe ultimately govern their destiny, and explain to them what those powers expect of them. Unlike the contemporary English use of myth to indicate an untrue story or a misunderstanding based on ignorance, in every religious tradition, myths convey the eventual truths of life. The emphasis on the gods and the origin of humanity in the definitions of Marshal and Gunkel, begins to reveal the religious and philosophical dimensions of Myths.

Igbo Myths of Origin and Invention

For the purpose of this study on the relationship between Igbo myths and Igbo-African philosophy, four samples of myths will be studied.

i. The Nri Myth of Origin

The Nri hegemony and its influence on Igbo history cannot be over emphasized. It is in this regard that Madubuko (1994) observes that the story of the Igbo people, no matter how briefly considered, would be incomplete if one omits the Eri-Nri contribution. Afigbo (1981) shows Eri clan as originating from the regions of Anambra River, at Aguleri; from there they fanned eastward and established various communities. According to Uzuoku (1988), Eri is the father of all Nri; and tradition says that he came from Chukwu. It is reported that the earth was not firm when he came to the world. To solve the problem of flood, he employed blacksmiths from Awka to use their bellows to dry the flooded land. There was no food as well for the people. To provide food, he prayed to God and He demanded that he should sacrifice his first son and daughter to him. After the sacrifice and burial of his son and daughter, as though all were lost, yam and palm tree began to grow out of the place where he buried his first son while vegetables and cocoyam grew out of the place where he buried his daughter. If yam germinated from where Eri's first son was buried, it means that yam is the resurrected son of Eri, and since it was given to man to sustain life, it is regarded as life itself. This myth reveals so much about Igbo life and value system, which is equally relevant in our Christological considerations.

ii. Imilikenu Myth of Invention I

The Imilikenu people believe that God gave the eldest man, referred to as *onyishi* a palm tree to help him meet his basic needs. To guarantee his domestic needs, he planted a lot of these palm trees. However, one day when he was walking on his palm tree plantation, he discovered palm fronds damaged by thunder and lightning; out of fear that God had cursed the tree, he cut it down. The next day he came around, he saw chickens pecking at the flower of the palm tree he cut down, with some water flowing out of it. he collected the water out of curiosity and went home, wanting to know what it tastes like. When he tasted it and discovered how sweet it was, he went to Chukwu's shrine and thanked him for leading him to discover another product of the palm tree. From this time Palm wine was invented; he began tapping wine, which later spread to other cultures.

iii. Imilikenu Myth of Invention II

The Imilikenu people also believe that a father once sent his son to initiate his other brothers into the art of hunting. The initiation began with the offering of sacrifice to their deity who blesses and protects hunters. After the initiation, the deity gave the eldest brother a basket of special glittering stones with the instructions to heap the stones together and heap a good quantity of wood on it; to also dig a trench from the heap, and let no one come close until after three days. He was asked to use what he found in the trench to construct his tools for hunting. When he went after three days, he discovered that the stones have melted and formed into different shapes and sizes. With the Iron that formed from the stones, the hunter produced spears and arrows. this explains how spears and arrows were invented.

iv. Ovoko Myth of Invention

The Ovoko people have a myth as regards how their people came about the knowledge of the roasting of the palm fruit called *osukwu*. At a time when the art of farming was not yet developed, the man Akpurokwe lived on fruits he gathered, which he ate raw. Among the fruits available, palm fruits were more abundant. However, one day he ate the palm fruit called *agu okpurukpu*, which unfortunately damaged his throat. This damage lasted for a couple of days, preventing Akpurokwe from eating. One day, God *Ezechitoke* visited him while he was at the point of death. Akpurokwe narrated his ordeal to God who now taught him the best way to prepare palm nuts for eating. God made some fire and put some *osukwu* palm nuts on it. After some time he used a stick to turn the nuts in the fire. Akpurokwe was surprised to see *osukwu* change colour, for it had become dark in colour. When it was well roasted, God took some and ate and handed another to Akpurokwe who was marvelled at the taste of roasted palm nut. Akpurokwe followed God's instruction and always did the same. To his greatest surprise, the throat disease left him. this was how the knowledge of roasting *osukwu* was invented.

Igbo-African Philosophy

First of all, I would like to explain the reason for the use of Igbo-African philosophy. The idea of Igbo-African represents the generalizations from the Igbo race, which is one of the races making up the African race. According to Ogugua (2003), it is reasonable for one to make a limited generalization about Africa from what we get from the Igbo worldview because of felt similarities which exist among races in Africa. This notwithstanding, the question of the meaning of Igbo-African philosophy is still on the looming at the horizon.

However, it is worthwhile to first understand the meaning of African philosophy. Gbadegesin (1991) observes that there are four schools of thought as regarding what African Philosophy constitutes. They are as follows:

- i. For one group, African Philosophy is the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, and untainted by foreign ideas.
- ii. The second group understands African philosophy as, the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, African conceptual systems and social realities as undertaken by contemporary professional philosophers. This reduces African Philosophy to reflections by professionally trained philosophers who operate with the collaboration of traditional thinkers.
- iii. The third group understands African Philosophy as the combination of these two approaches, without suppressing or looking down on any. This would involve sifting philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc, and reflecting on them by professionally trained African philosophers.
- iv. The fourth group argues that African Philosophy is not any of the above; however, its proponents regard African Philosophy as any collection of texts produced by Africans and specifically described by their authors as Philosophy.

However, while it can be said that all these views reveal the dimensional content of African philosophy, preference is given to the first definition. The second is treated with reservation; this is because African philosophy goes beyond the thought of professional philosophers. As regards the third, the comments for the first two definitions still apply. The fourth definition needs to be remodelled. What makes a piece philosophical is not the author. What if a mad man was to be the author of an idea, and he calls his thought philosophy, does it make it philosophy? There should be principles that make a thought philosophical.

What then is Igbo-African philosophy? It is the philosophical thought of Igbo-Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. It further involves the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, Igbo-African conceptual systems and social realities. It is the philosophy indigenous to the Igbo-African.

Igbo Myths as Raw Materials for and Embodiments of Igbo-African Philosophy

Abanuka (1999) has rightly observed that the fundamental task of philosophy is to ask fundamental questions accruing from proper perception. These crucial questions border on the origin of the universe, the nature of man, the origin and possibility of knowledge, actions that enable the fulfilment of the human person, the causes of things. As philosophy reflects on these questions, it carries with it the ammunition of critical reasoning. In this process, it is critical of questions raised, answers proposed and the methodology for seeking answers to questions. The audacity of philosophy to ask fundamental questions about man and his universe, places philosophy at a position where it cannot but relate with the world of Igbo-African mythology. In the relationship between philosophy and Igbo myths, two kinds of interactions emerge:

- i. Philosophy investigates the reasonableness of Igbo myths, not as regards whether it really happened, but as regards if it does reasonably answer the questions looming at the horizon of the human heart. This is because myths are not concerned about truth or falsity, but appeals to the accent of the mind by giving hints. And since myths avoid the questions of truth or falsity, philosophy does not come into a sharp attack at it, but rather emerges with a new methodology that seeks to enquire about its reasonableness and ability to answer the fundamental questions of the human heart. This is quite different from the relationship between myths and religion. In religion, it is accepted by a general audience since it has been given by the divine, but in philosophy, it is stripped of the power of its divine authority, which creates room for a profound investigation, usually not for a general audience but a particular group dedicated to the search for the truth with the elements of reason and criticism.
- ii. Secondly, and very important, myths provide raw materials for philosophical reflection. If as Abanuka (1999) observes that the fundamental task of philosophy is to ask fundamental questions accruing from proper perception. These crucial questions border on the origin of the universe, the nature of man, the origin and possibility of knowledge, actions that enable the fulfilment of the human person, the causes of things, myths provide answers to these questions. For instance, in the Nri myth, Madu (2004) observes a cosmological drama in the whole myth. It reveals the dynamics of the cosmic drama between god, man, land and crops.

Eri, the civilization hero enjoys a special relationship with *Chukwu*, and through Eri's sacrifice, humanity now enjoy a special relationship with the land which offers food for his sustenance. From the sacrifice of Eri, we come to discover the philosophy behind the use of yam in Igbo sacrifice and life, a situation which warrants its annual elaborate yam festivals throughout Igbo land. The growing of yam from the spot where Eri's first son was buried accounts for the respect given to *okpara* (first son) in Igbo life and philosophy, he is in fact considered to be closer to the ancestors. Thus, Koech (1977) observes that in myths, African metaphysics is created and the African belief constructed, which gives answers to fundamental questions that baffle the mind of the Igbo-African. Both philosophy and myths provide answers to fundamental questions. Thus, Myths like philosophy explain the unexplainable. They reveal our fate after death, and the reasons for crises or miracles, and other puzzles, and yet they retain and even encourage an aura of mystery. They give meaning to human existence.

Conclusion

The present piece has studied the place of myths in African Philosophy and especially its relationship to African metaphysics. It carries within itself the history of the African people. In today's search for the African identity in African philosophy, myths are indispensable if the African must find his real identity and the remnant of his being distorted as a consequence of his encounter with the colonial powers. The African myth according to Koech (1977) preserves the last drop of our Africanness. They are the encyclopaedia engraved in the chambers of the African mind to be passed from generation to generation. To philosophy, it provides raw materials for philosophical reflection, with philosophy, it leads mankind in her search for meaning.

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