

Igbo kwenu: A Consensus Philosophy in African Communalism

Joannes Asikaogu ph.D

joannesasikaogu@yahoo.com

Department of philosophy

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

&

Rev. Fr. Franklin Amaechi Eze

Ph.D

amaechieze2002@yahoo.com

***Abstract:** The work studies 'Igbo kwenu' as a consensus philosophy in African communalism. It is a cultural identity, belongingness, solidarity and collective will particular to Igbo people of Nigeria. Culture as we know is a people's way of life. This is a universal Igbo greeting that cuts across all Igbo nations and "Igbo kwenu" is a sacred call that connotes agreement, endorsement and unity to achieve a common purpose. In good and in bad times, this has been a major component speech of the Igbo nation whether at home or abroad. In any public gathering you will hear the cheering up when it is called upon "Igbo kwenu" Yaa!. The communal nature of the society makes the community to be a life giving or living principles that injects and nurtures the spirit of togetherness, solidarity and community consciousness. However, some people use Igbo kwenu" as a cautionary command or call to order while others pleads for unity with Igbo kwenu". In using the method of philosophical analysis it will help in breaking down communalism rooted in "Igbo kwenu" and its relevance in Igbo culture. Therefore, the work examines the uniqueness and the spirit of communalism rooted in "Igbo kwenu" as a consensus philosophy of action in African communalism.*

INTRODUCTION

"Igbo kwenu" is a universal and unique Igbo greeting that cuts across the Igbo nation. Culture being defined as a peoples' way of life, means that before the advent of the colonial masters, Ndi- Igbo had a culture to reckon with. As a cultural area, Ndi- Igbo had a cultural identity and Igbo kwenu stands out as

one of the beautiful cultural practices of Ndi- Igbo even in this present dispensation.

“Umuofia Kwenu, yaa! Kwenu yaa! Kwezue nu, yaaaa!” wrote Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). One may ask, what is the meaning and communal tendency of Igbo kwenu? It literally means “we the Igbo people stands together in agreement and collective will. It is actually a consensus philosophy of action and communalism rooted in cultural identity, togetherness, belongingness, solidarity and contribution to one’s society. A popular African proverb comes to mind here to express the African sense of community it says “go the way that many people go, if you go alone, you will have reason to lament.”¹ Philosophical perspectives on African communalism revolve round the notion of community and its relationship to individuals. In African culture, community is not simply the aggregate sum of individuals as is the case in the western world, but where the aggregated sum is fused. This is to say that the African view of communalism is not one way but a two way affair between a community and an individual.

This is what propels Menkiti in his Bantu philosophy when he said that human being has no existence from the ontological hierarchy and interaction of the forces. This interaction is what accounts for African communalism. He accepts that there is no conception of man as an individual or a force existing by itself outside its relationship with beings. For him:

Bantu psychology cannot conceive of a man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationships with other beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it. The Bantu cannot be alone being. IT is not good enough synonyms for that to say that he is a social being. No, he feels and knows himself to be a vital force, at this, intimate and personal relationship with others acting above him and below him in the hierarchy of forces. He knows himself to be a vital force even now influencing some forces and being influenced by others. The human beings apart from the ontological hierarchy and the interaction of forces, has no existence in the conception of Bantu.²

Communal living then becomes the main priority of every African community. These interchange promote the spirit of identity and brotherhood in what Julius Nyerere will call "UJUMAA" 'Brotherhood'. "Hence the existence of an individual who is cut off from the communal organism becomes unauthentic. The authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his community"³

However, how do you explain communal tendencies of "Igbo Kwenu?" It is actually a collective call or wish to agree or disagree in political or communal issues or matters among the Igbo people as a sacred call that connotes unity to achieve a common purpose or objective; a communitarian spirit which spurs the individual to think action and work for the collective well-being.

The Communal Team Spirit and Consensus Philosophy of "Igbo Kwenu"

The Igbo nation is a community oriented society; Igbo's live and work within the community. The community consciousness speaks eloquently in the mind of every Igbo person. "I Think therefore I am (cogito ergosum) of Descartes does not fit in into Igbo culture. According to Mbiti, "For African particularly Igbo's, it is "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."⁴ (cognatus Sum ergo Sum)

It is given that traditional societies recognize two principals that define the social-economic, social-political and the cultural life of an African man. This includes the individual and the social tendencies. Therefore, "Igbo kwenu" in its conceptual connotations implies these two tendencies. It underscores the social tendencies, while at the same time appraising and recognizing the individual tendencies when it is voiced.

The speaker is saying in essence, let us put aside our individual differences and goals and consider the community goals as a unit. It is an appeal to each individual to see things from a communal perspective. This is because in saying "kwe" (agree) you are making a personal sacrifice for the common good. This means that Igbo kwenu becomes that occasional force that ignites the glow of "we" over the weight of the 'I'.

Community- individual relationships sum up the pattern of the African ways of life in general and the Igbo's in particular in speaking of the co-operative and social assistance which demonstrate the spirit of solidarity among the people. Uchendu rightly observes when he said:

Community spirit is very strong among the Igbo. Almost from the first, the individual is aware of his dependence in his kin group and his community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group to which he owes so much. He seldom, if ever, becomes really detached from the group whenever he may live.⁵

In the Igbo society, the survival of any individual depends on his participation, co-operation and in commitment to the community norms, spirits, and also, in dedication to the social life of the community of which “Igbo Kwenu” is not an exception, since the community confers identity and nurtures individual person.

Igbo Kwenu: A Cultural Voice of Identity and Solidarity.

Culture as we know is the peoples’ way of life. Meaning the way they do things. Culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts.

Culture is also defined as “the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and effective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.”⁶

For Edward Tylor, “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.”⁷

This definition makes it clear that culture is not the privilege of a few individuals or peoples. Therefore, people without a union to express themselves are a people without a cultural voice to create change at home and diaspora for the better. The question is, how many nations around the world possess such a two word combination and use it as often as the Igbo people do? What beauty! What power! Whenever it is said, it vibrates through your being. It is a prayer, a song, a wish, a call for unity, a call for action, a call for solidarity, a call for celebration or mourning, a call for rebirth or renewal and a call for re-evaluation. It is unarguably a priceless voice of the people.

“Igbo Kwenu” is a consensus voice in action at a moment of need to move on and achieve things of honour for their valued meaning of life in solidarity. It is a mark of Igbo cultural identity and heritage. It is observed that “Igbo Kwenu”

as part of Igbo culture is handed over from one generation to another even though it is actually being affected by globalization.

However, “Igbo Kwenu” is also used as a cautionary command or call to order; others plead for unity with it. It is a scared call of a kinsman to his umunna, an appeal for audience and a call for compromise. In gathering of all sorts, namely marriage, rituals, celebrations, age grade meetings, war, wrestling, hunting and village political affairs. The Igbo’s assert motions and psychology together through calls to order of solidarity such as invoking the” Igbo kwenu”.

In Igbo land, when a person among a gathered group intends to speak and has masterly and skillfully summoned attention with “Igbo Kwenu,” he is automatically granted audience. Igbo Kwenu is a supreme call to attention and order to speak in a culturally appropriate way. This is a cultural values to Igbo people of Nigeria and are actually transmitted and acquired from one generation to the other.

Acknowledging African cultural values, Pope John Paul 11, admonished Africans thus:

Preserve carefully your African roots, safeguard the values of your culture. You know them and are proud of them: respect for life, family solidarity and support for relatives, respect for the old, the sense of hospitality, judicious preservation of traditions, the taste for feasts and symbols.⁸

These cultural values are now being threatened by the negative effects of globalization as well as western unbounded excesses.

Conclusion

Having explored “Igbo Kwenu” as a consensus philosophy in African communalism, one will agree with me that the Igbo’s in their natural freedom of expression has a culture of engaging themselves in a fraternal dialogue to reach a consensus opinion. It is from this level of understanding that the practical application of the consensus philosophy of “Igbo kwenu” demonstrates the reached cultural heritage of African communalism. Again, it essentially ties in with the Igbo sense of solidarity, belongingness, participation and the fostering of their psychological momentum in a cause of social, cultural, economic, political and global identity of who they are at home and abroad. “Igbo Kwenu” is a mark of Igbo cultural identity and heritage. It is

their consensus voice in action at a moment of need to move on and achieve things of honour and desirable for their valued meaning of life in solidarity.

References

- 1 B. Davidson, *The African Genius* (Boston, 1969), P.31
- 2 J. Menkiti, *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought, in African Philosophy: An introduction*, ed; Richard A. Wright,(U.S. A. University Press of America,1984), P.172
- 3 J. Nyerere, *The African consciousness*, Trans. By Mbiti (Bissang Publishers, 1998), P.12
- 4 J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*(New York: Frederick A Praeger, 1969), P.108-109
- 5 V.C. Uchendu, *Ezi- Na-Ulo: The Extended Family in Igbo Civilization* (Ahiajioku Lecture Owerri: Ministry of Information and Culture, 1995), P.40
- 6 The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota, <http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/definitions.html>.978-0-495-8182.
- 7 E. B. Tylor's, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray,1903), P.19
- 8 <https://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/.index.html>