



## Defining Life in African Igbo Cosmology

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### Abstract:

A people's cosmology defines their perception of the universe and their place in it. It explains their thought systems, values, attitudes as well as hierarchy of forces and their relationships. Thus African Igbo Cosmology explains the people's perception of the universe and their place in it; their values, laws and very importantly their understanding of the purpose of existence. Igbo cosmology recognizes three ontological levels of existence in the universe where the inhabitants of these levels interact in some unique ways to give meaning to human existence. This cosmology also recognizes some elements of human existence which include life, offspring, truth, justice, wealth, love and peace as great values. But among all this values, 'life' stands tall as the greatest and most cherished value among the people. Undoubtedly, life is cherished in all human societies, but the value attached to life is not the same in all cultures. This paper therefore seeks to give a broad definition of the meaning and essence of life as a value among the Igbo and also show how the people's belief system, attitudes etc are informed by their perception of life. Apart from seeking to clarify some misconceptions about the meaning and essence of life in Igbo cosmology, this work is also a premeditated effort geared towards encouraging good and moral life among the Igbo, as bad and immoral life is seen as worthless by the people.

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# Defining Life in African Igbo Cosmology

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## **Abstract**

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## **Introduction:**

What constitutes the true meaning and essence of life has been one of the major concerns of Philosophers right from the ancient, down to the contemporary period of philosophy. For instance, Socrates would say 'not life, but good life, is to be chiefly valued'. And Aristotle in his Philosophy of Mind would say that 'a soul is the actuality of a body that has life; where life means the capacity for self sustenance, growth and reproduction.

However, in spite of the enormous interest shown over the years in studying and understanding the subject of human life, it can be said that a definitive and unequivocal agreement on the real meaning and essence of life has still not been reached, hence different conceptualizations of life among different peoples of the world. Thus studies in philosophical and social anthropology reveal that scholars are divided in their conception of what actually constitutes the meaning and essence of life. The group known as 'vitalists' (Mondin, 1999) considers life as a singular original phenomenon, irreducible to matter. Vitalists are of the view that living organisms embody the phenomenon of self- construction, self-conservation, self-regulation and self-repair, which are absent in machines and non living beings. Yet another group known as 'mechanists', asserts that all life phenomena can be completely explained in terms of the physical-chemical laws that govern the inanimate world. In other words, life is subject to physical and chemical laws that operate in the world; and these laws confer meaning to life. This view is held by some philosophers led by Rene Descartes.

However, what actually constitutes the essence of life in African Igbo Cosmology is the major preoccupation of this paper. This, the paper discovers through carefully addressing the various beliefs, thought systems and practices of the Igbo that directly and indirectly point to their conception of the value and essence of life, which is at the very centre of their cosmology.

## **Understanding African Igbo Cosmology**

To fully understand the meaning of Igbo cosmology, it is pertinent that we first explore the concept of cosmology. The word 'Cosmology' originated from the Greek words 'Cosmos' and 'Logos' which mean 'universe' and 'science' respectively. Put together, the word 'cosmology' means 'science of the universe'. Studies in Social anthropology show cosmology as meaning broad ideas and explanations which people have about the world in which they live and their place in that world. These include notions of other worlds, worlds from which they may believe they have come and to



which they go after death in this world, or indeed during transcendental experiences in this world (Hendry, 1999:115). Expatiating further, Madu (2004:84) explains that:

... cosmology focuses its search-light on the question of meaning of the world, its origin in space as well as the question of the intricate web of relationships within the cosmologic ontological hierarchies. Such questions implicate the quest for transcendental reality, a quest which is inherently a religious one.

Therefore, Igbo cosmology means essentially the ways the Igbo race perceives, views and understands their universe; the lens through which they see, evaluate and appraise reality, which helps them form their values and attitudes. Kanu (2015:82) avers that 'it is the ... search for the meaning of life, and an unconscious but natural tendency to arrive at a unifying base that constitutes a frame of meaning' For Uchendu (1965:11), 'Igbo cosmological ideas express the basic notions underlying cultural activities and define cultural goals and social relations'. Going further, he points out that:

Igbo cosmology is an explanatory device which theorizes about the origin and character of the universe. It is a guide to conduct or a system of prescriptive ethics which defines what the Igbo ought to avoid, and finally, it is an action system which reveals what the Igbo actually do as manifested in their overt and covert behavior.

Igbo cosmology defines the underlying thought system that unifies the Igbo value system, their perception of life, social conduct, moral values, laws and ideas. There are divisions of Igbo cosmology. On this Agbeke Aja (2015: 154) writes:

...the Igbo, in an attempt to give account of their cosmology, end up by pointing to the sky, the earth and the world underneath. The sky, to the Igbo, is the abode of God, Chukwu, and the Spirits, the departed live in the world underneath, ala muo; white living humans devils on earth. The earth, the human world is also the abode of the lesser spirits. That is to say, the Igbo conceive three dimensions of existence people, as it were with different categories of forces or beings, some visible, some invisible.



The above shows divisions that represent the structure of the African Igbo universe. Corroborating the above view, Ijiomah (2005) in Kanu (2015:84) avers that:

The African Universe consists of three levels: they are the sky, the earth and the underworld. The sky is where God, Chukwu or Chineke and Angels reside; the earth is where man, animals, natural resources, some devils and some physical observable realities abode; and the underworld is where the ancestors and some bad spirits live.

The African Igbo cosmos therefore, harbors the spiritual and physical realms which despite their separate existence, interact at some levels to give order and unity to African Igbo existence and cosmology. This unity is underlined in the fact that the traditional Igbo have a unified picture of the universe with ideas about its origin, its structure and the nature of the various forces that occupy it. Although these ideas are largely speculative, their original impetus is nevertheless empirical.

An author had rightly opined that:

The Igbo world-view implies two basic beliefs (1) the unity of all things and (2) an ordered relationship among all beings in the universe. Consequently, there is a belief in the existence of order and interaction among all beings. Any disorder is the result of improper conduct on the part of any of the beings. If the cause of this is known then it can be corrected and rectified. Human survival and existence depends on a proper maintenance of this order. To safeguard and ensure this cosmic and social order, a number of prohibitions, taboos (nso-ala) and sanctions are devised and enforced through various means.

The major reason for the prohibitions taboos and sanction is nothing else but to maintain and ensure continuous equilibrium of the nexus of relationships.



## **'Life' in African Igbo Cosmology**

A careful look at the Igbo world, would show that in everything, life stands out for the Igbo as the greatest value around which other values like wealth, health etc. find their meanings. It is the greatest and the most prized value which is at the centre of Igbo man's experience of the universe and which confers meaning and authenticity to his general perceptions of reality.

The primacy of life in Igbo world is evidently clear in expressions like 'Ndubuisi' (life is First); 'Ndukaku' (life is greater than wealth) etc. These are not just mere appellations or ordinary expressions, they are pregnant with meanings. According to Ehusani (1996:31):

Igbo world is principally anthropocentric such that human life is immensely valued, zealously and religiously guarded, hence anything that threatens life is ruthlessly death with. For instance, one who is a witch could either be killed or expelled from the community and never to return because that witchcraft is permanent threat to life.

Life is at the centre of Igbo cosmology and ontology. Virtually all activities of the Igbo man are geared towards achieving one objective which consists in maintaining and augmenting life. Anything that negates or detracts from achieving this all important objective is most times considered abominable and therefore, condemned and detested. For instance, Amaegwu (2013:75) succinctly notes that 'suicide is considered most abominable crime against humanity and any person guilty of suicide is denied formal burial'. The fate of one who commits murder is no better. His is sometimes more serious because spilling human blood is the worst crime among the Igbo. The practice of euthanasia or homicide is considered abominable and highly detested among the Igbo. As far as the Igbo is concerned, euthanasia is an alien concept which is never justified by the people.

Therefore, because of its importance and position in the scheme of things, life is maintained in order to be lived fully and meaningfully. Sometimes to do this, the Igbo elder starts his day with prayer (Igo Ofo). This he does with the intermediary Ofo, symbol of justice. And the centre and focus of his prayer is always 'life': thanksgiving to God (chukwu) for giving and preserving life; invocation of the ancestors and other spirits for help in preserving his life, that of his family, relatives and others; petition to God, ancestors and the spirits for provision of the necessities for maintaining and



increasing life. Sometimes, the prayer expresses disavowal of having contemplated or attempted the destruction of another's life or anything fundamental to the continuity and increase of the said life.

The end of the prayer is always a malediction directed against those who threaten his life and the life of his family. To further capture the pattern and spirit of the prayer Egudu & Nwoga (1971:55), show it thus:

Protect me and my household from evil men  
and spirits; wish no man evil, but if anyone  
says I have lived too long, let him go before me to  
see what it is like in the land of the dead...

This represents the usual pattern of prayers among the Igbo, with those present lending their voice of affirmation with a thunderous 'Amen' to the intentions of the prayer. This pattern goes a long way to show that Igbo conceptualization of life is transcendent. This is evidently clear in their constant invitation of God (chukwu), their ancestors, deities and other spirits to partake in kolanut (an edible usually present in every prayer). Through this practice they portend that life comes from God and has its ultimate meaning in God (Chukwu). The sharing of the kolanut among God, ancestors, humans and deities is symbolic because it points to the division/separateness as well as the unity in Igbo cosmology. God, man and the spirits, though living in separate abodes, nevertheless interact in some unique ways that are beneficial to man.

Daily prayers and invocations are most common religious activities used by the Igbo to establish a dynamic link of dependence and interdependence with God (Chukwu), the source of life; ancestors, spirits and humans for the special purpose of maintaining and preserving life, which is the ultimate value.

Again, Life is conceptualized among the Igbo as meaningful only when lived among others in the human community. This is because for the Igbo, life is a shared experience. We are because others are, and our being finds meaning and expression in the being of others. This is the spirit of Igbo African communalism which is one of the defining character of the traditional Igbo. The truth of this is underscored by Ogugua (2003:7) thus:

As the Igbo live in community,  
they value communitarian kind of life,  
no doubt for them, life is a communion in  
interaction or else why their belief that  
if one does a moral evil, that it affects  
the entire community.



## Conclusion:

Life is highly valued among the Igbo that at its inception, it is welcomed with great joy, great rejoicing and cultural celebrations, and at its end, it is greeted with great mourning expressed in different cultural and funerary practices. Ada Mere (1973) in Ogugua (2003:11) captures the situation vividly, when she pointed out that:

Traditionally children are highly valued as they have to continue the ancestral line in order to retain the family's ownership of whatever property belongs to it... on the part of the Igbo parents, having children wards off the anxiety of growing old and fear of loss of property to undeserving fellows...

This explains the philosophy behind Igbo man's constant prayer against childless marriage, which most times is seen as a curse from God and from the deities. Children are a sign of immortality as one who has children never fully dies because his offerings continue his earthly existence after his death. However, it must be pointed out that not every life is cherished by the Igbo as never do wells (ndi okaliogoli) are never celebrated. The life that is celebrated and valued by Igbo is only a worthy and moral one. Murderers are themselves condemned and put to death without recourse to any court of law. Good children are seen as assets and gifts from God (Chukwu) while the recalcitrant ones are often chided for their unworthy and unacceptable lifestyle.



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