

Chapter Four

IGWEBUIKE AS THE OPERATIVE CONDITION OF AFRICAN ECO-SPIRITUALITY

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Executive Summary

While there are a few papers written on African eco-spirituality, there is hardly literature that discusses its operative condition in a profound manner in relation to the African worldview. The questions, therefore, looming at the horizon of this research is: what is the operative condition or underlying principle of African eco-spirituality? By operating condition, it is meant that which animates from within and differentiates African eco-spirituality from other eco-spiritualities, and, therefore, gives it its identity, or makes it unique in relation to other thoughts on eco-spirituality. The operative condition defines the nature, shapes, determines the direction, and the end of thoughts on African eco-spirituality. The operating condition of African eco-spirituality can also be referred to as the spirit of African eco-spirituality. It is strongly connected to the African worldview and cannot be discussed outside of this parameter. This explains why it is able to animate, determine, shape, define and direct. The concept of African worldview used in this work in relation to the operating condition of African eco-spirituality, is the African theory of the universe, which include the manner of conceiving the world and the place of humanity in this world in relation to other realities. The African worldview forms a 'life

system' that the African holds on to consciously or unconsciously which serves as an interpretative framework for the interpretation and conception of reality as a whole. Worldview is, therefore, at the center of the African thought and expressions, and stands as the operative condition of reality: the human action and thought. Since there is a co-relation between *Igwebuike* and the African worldview, this work understands *Igwebuike* as the operative condition of African eco-philosophy. For the purpose of this study, the philosophical and complementary approaches were employed.

Keywords: *Igwebuike*, African, Worldview, Underlying, Operating Condition, Relationality

Introduction

This work investigates the operative condition for or the underlying principle at the base of the operation of African eco-spirituality. It is this operating condition that differentiates African eco-spirituality from other eco-spiritualities, and, therefore, gives it its identity, makes it unique in relation to other thoughts on eco-spirituality. It defines the nature, animates its operations, determines the direction, and the end of thoughts on African eco-spirituality. The spirit or operating condition of African eco-spirituality is strongly connected to the African worldview. This explains why it is able to animate, determine, define and direct.

This operative condition is connected to the African worldview. The concept worldview has a very specific meaning for Freud (1933). He defines it as "an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place" (p. 158). This definition was to aid his distinction

between rational or scientific worldview from religious or philosophical worldview. Dilthey (1954) and Rickman (1988) understand worldview as hermeneutical constructs, conveying the meaning of the world, thus, the interpretation of worldviews help us to get at the meaning of reality just as the interpretation of language helps to understand a text.

African worldview refers to the African theory of the universe, which includes the manner of conceiving the world and the place of humanity in this world in relation to other realities. The African worldview forms a 'life system' that the African holds on to consciously or unconsciously which serves as an interpretative framework for the interpretation and conception of reality. Nwala (1985) defines worldview as:

The complex of beliefs, habits, laws, customs and traditions of a people. It includes the overall picture they have about reality, the universe, life and existence; their attitude to life and things in general; what they do and think of; what life is; what things are worth striving to attain; what man's place is in the scheme of things; whether or not man has an immortal soul; whether or not life has a meaning and purpose, etc... worldview is enmeshed in the practical life of the people; in particular in the economic, political, social, artistic and religious life (p. 26).

Worldview is, therefore, at the center of our thoughts and expressions through actions and the institutions of society like education, politics, fender, sense of family, religion, arts, social interactions, health care, etc. Within the African context, the worldview stands as the operative condition of reality: the human action and thought. This notwithstanding, since there is a co-relation between *Igwebuike* and the African worldview, such

that *Igwebuike* becomes the articulation of the African worldview, this work understands *Igwebuike* as the operative condition of African eco-philosophy. This study will begin with an understanding of African eco-spirituality and *Igwebuike* as a complementary philosophy. This will be followed by an effort to show how ontologically and cosmologically, *Igwebuike* is at the base of African eco-spirituality.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study of the spirit of African eco-spirituality is the *Igwebuike* theoretical framework which is an Igbo-African proverb translatable as *there is strength in number*, which philosophical speaks of the interdependence and complementarity of reality. It holds for a humane, respectful and polite attitude towards other human beings and realities within nature- knowing fully well that every reality has a purpose determined by the creator; and that there is a strong relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds to such an extent that the physical world is considered a manifestation of great spirit forces. *Igwebuike* presents a worldview in which single individuals or communities cannot unilaterally define and pursue their purposes without recognizing their mutual foundedness, their complementary natures. The refusal to understand the wholeness, interconnected and complementarity of reality and to act outside of its principles will have resounding consequences on the human world in terms of disharmony and disbalance. *Igwebuike* understands wholeness as the regulative principle of the African world since what is asserted is that the single individual is incomplete without the other (Kanu 2017). This has implications for the development of an African eco-spirituality. It has to be developed within this framework of interrelatedness of reality, both physical and spiritual realities. This is the category that the African understands and responds to.

The principle of wholeness in *Igwebuike* forms the basis for the relationship between human beings and nature or the environment. Thus, to care for one another as human beings is not enough; there is the need for caring for physical nature as well since there is a relationship between the human person and the physical world that constitutes his or her home- together the whole is constituted. It is by such care and respect that harmony and balance is achieved in the universe between human beings and the physical world or spiritual world. The human person has a responsibility to pursue harmony so as to maintain a comprehensive but specific relational condition among organism and entities (Kanu 2016). This responsibility is the prerogative of the human person given his or her nature as a rational being.

Understanding African Eco-Spirituality

African eco-spirituality is a contextualized form of eco-spirituality, which was borne out of the need to establish a connection between spirituality and the earth or ecology and a reaction to the Western emphasis on the material, consumerism, technological and economy which lacked the spiritual depth required for a more humane approach to the problem of ecological crisis (Delaney 2009). Aurelie (2017), therefore, defines eco-spirituality as:

A wide range of discourses, whose common interest is in showing that the current ecological crisis is an essentially spiritual crisis of values, so that answers to it should not be merely technological or material but should be sought on a spiritual level, through the foundation of an 'inner ecology' and an enlightened reflection about the meaning of life, the Other, the sacred (p. 7).

Pope Francis (2015) asserts that: "If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be

left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it" (no. 63). It is from this perspective that African eco-spirituality has emerged.

What then is African eco-spirituality? It refers to ecological discourses or reflections that are anchored on the African fundamental belief in the sacredness of the natural world and in the connection between human beings and nature, with the aim of finding solutions to emerging ecological crisis. This reflection is done in such a manner that it respects the African patterns of life or culture as its starting point. African eco-spirituality also holds as fundamental the need for reconnecting oneself with the African natural world, people and the cosmos as a whole, rooted in the manner in which the African understands the world around him or her. African eco-spirituality, in the contention of Uwineze (2021) is a call for a return to our African origins.

The Essential Character of *Igwebuike*

Igwebuike, is employed as a unifying concept of African thought, especially, that aspect concerning the human person's conception of the spiritual and material universe in which he or she lives. It is an explanatory theory or principle that interprets the puzzle of our complex relationship with the non-corporeal world and human social life, that is, major social institutions that ensure social continuity and group identity, and further, underpins the epistemological manifestations of the human person's universe (Kanu 2021).

Kanu (2021) avers that it is essentially, a transcendent complementary comprehensive systematic quest to penetrate the structure and dynamics of reality ultimately for the purpose of giving honest answers to fundamental questions or opinions to questions that arise within the arena of asking questions and questioning answers, selfless enlightenment and furthering of

human happiness. In this search for truth, *Igwebuike*, within an integrated systematic framework, strives beyond all forms of particularities, peculiarities, paradoxes and contradictions and espouses the path of complementation, therefore, showing how realities can relate to one another in a mutually harmonized non-absolutistic mode. Thus, *Igwebuike* explores methods and principles for the mediation, coalescing and comprehension of the different units of reality: ideal and real, universal and particular, progressive and conservative, necessary and contingent, transcendent and immanent, essential and inessential and other units of reality within the same framework. It treats all units, fragments or components of reality, no matter how minute as units and combinations, or missing links that are necessary for the conceptualization of reality as a whole.

Igwebuike in the Theatre of Being

In Igbo-African ontology, reality is subsumed into the following categories: *Muo* (Spirit), *Madu* (Human Being), *Anu* (Animal), *Ihe* (Thing), *Ebe* (Place), *Oge* (Time) and *Uzo* (Manner, Modality or Style of being). Everything is in relation to the other, except the creator (Kanu 2017c). As subjects in the horizon of perception and realization of their existential ends, beings depend on each other for their temporal flourishing. The dependence here is a positive dialectics resulting from their physical and spiritual limitations. Human beings are not ontologically creators of themselves, they are essentially limited, and their existence and action, in the midst of communication, are limited by time, place, perception and knowledge, their being is existentially complimentary (Kanu 2017d&e). Hence they are naturally candidates for company and co-operations. This modality of being in relation to the other is what *Igwebuike* conceptualizes.

***Igwebuike* in its Literal and Linguistic Setting**

Igwe bu ike is an Igbo proverb and also a typical Igbo name. Igbo proverbs and names are among the major traditional vessels where African philosophy, religion and culture have continued to be preserved. Mbiti (1970) writes that: "It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious and philosophical wisdom" (p.89). They contain the wisdom and experience of the African people, usually of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. Proverbs spring from the people and represent the voice of the people and express the interpretation of their beliefs, principles of life and conduct. It expresses the moral attitudes of a given culture, and reflects the hopes, achievements and failings of a people (Kanu 2018a). This is to say that beyond the linguistic expression lies a deeper meaning, that is, the spirit of the letter. It is at the philosophical level that *Igwebuike* is understood as providing an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations (Kanu 2016c).

The expression, *Igwebuike* is a combination of three Igbo words. It can be understood as a word or a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. Literally, *Igwe* is a noun which means number or multitude, usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significances, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu 2016a&b). *Igwe*, *bu* and *Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu 2017f). However, beyond the literal sense of *Igwebuike*, it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. Beyond the literal understanding of *Igwebuike*, it concatenates Igbo forms, symbolism, signs, media, meaning,

anthropologies, universal cosmic truths, functions, semantic powers, physics, phenomena, faculties, and Igbo environmentalities. In a metaphoric sense, *Igwebuike* is used within the Igbo linguistic setting to refer to relational engagement in the world, accomplished in solidarity and complementarity, and the powerful and insurmountable force therein (Kanu 2017g). The closest words to *Igwebuike* in English are complementarity, solidarity and harmony.

***Igwebuike* and African Eco-Spirituality**

What qualifies African eco-spirituality as a particular kind of eco-spirituality is the pivot on which its moral and religious dimensions revolves. African eco-spirituality takes its life from the ontological and cosmological foundations of the African worldview.

1. Ontological Contribution of *Igwebuike* to the discourse on African Eco-spirituality

The mutual relations and complementarity that *Igwebuike* conceptualizes is anchored on the following ontological human conditions (Njoku 2015):

- a. The world in which we live is one in which we encounter several needs, however, with very little resources to take care of the needs. This limitation calls for the mobilization of other forces outside of the self, a social fellowship for the satisfaction of particular needs.
- b. Nature has placed in us the likeness for fellowship. This is based on the fact that we were created by God in His own image and likeness.
- c. Although we are equal essentially, we have different gifts and abilities. What I may be able to do another may not be able to do, meaning that my relationship with the other completes what is lacking in me.

- d. Collaboration with the other is ground for becoming, as everything takes a bit of another to make itself. It is a ground for staying alive and transforming the universe.

Human fellowship and cooperation is a reality that is rooted in the human nature and to keep away from relating is to place a limitation on our being. It is, therefore, a unit of order inscribed in the human nature for survival. The more a person relates the more he or she lives out his or her being to the full. Mutual cooperation and fellowship in the society increases protection, assistance, etc. Being in the company of the other reduces the burden that nature imposes on a person as an individual.

This ontological foundation distinguishes African eco-spirituality as one that is based on the understanding of the relationality of the different elements of nature as a basis for the survival of the universe. This kind of relationship is not based on the principle of utilitarianism or consumerism, but a profound and spiritual understanding of the world that promotes the healthy being of the earth.

2. Cosmological Contribution of *Igwebuike* to the discourse on African Eco-spirituality

Igwebuike is an African cosmological idea that shapes the African cultural, religious and social world. It is symbolic of the African universe of particularities where every creature as an independent entity must negotiate another's existential highway for mutual survival. It is a dependent, interdependent and combinational universe. Negotiation is very important in the African universe because it is a world that one shares with the other in an atmosphere of inter-subjective relations (Kanu 2018b). These inter-subjective relations only play out without chaos when the individual is able to skillfully bridge his or her interiority with the individuality of the other.

The African universe has physical and spiritual dimensions. In the spirit realm, God represents the Chief Being, and sits at the apex of power. In the physical world, human beings dominate, occupying the central position in the scheme of God's creation. The structure of the African universe can be illustrated in three levels: the sky, the earth and the underworld: the sky is where God *Chukwu* or *Chineke* and angels reside; the earth where human beings, animals, natural resources, some devils and physical observable realities abide; and the underworld where ancestors and bad spirits live (Kanu 2013). These worlds interact in spite of their peculiarities, and persist because of a healthy inter-subjective relation. There is really no wall between the physical and spiritual worlds, between the visible and invisible, the sacred and profane; as there is a cooperate existence of reality. Thus, certain elements can move from one structure to another to commune with other elements. In this interaction, human beings commune with God, the divinities, the ancestors and vice versa.

This cosmological dimension of *Igwebuike* that presents the African world as a world of spirits, forwards an understanding of the earth as the abode of the spirits or the physical manifestation of the spiritual presence of great spirits with whom the human person must continue to live with and negotiate his or her own existence with. This introduces the concept of sacredness and respect in the human person's relationship with the environment. The environment is, therefore, not only a dimension of the human world that is present to serve the needs of the human person, but a dimension that the human person must care for so as to preserve his or her own existence. *Igwebuike*, therefore, presents an understanding of the world in which the human person is a being-with-the-other, be they animate or inanimate, spiritual or unspiritual.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the underlying principle of African eco-spirituality, which it articulates as *Igwebuike* a concept that captures the nature of the African universe. The *Igwebuike* connection is in reference to its ontological and cosmological character which speaks heavily of relationships in the African universe. The African world is a world of relationships: relationships between the living and the dead, the spiritual and non-spiritual, the divine and human, the animate and the inanimate. These relationships are shaped by the category of forces that are involved (Tempels 1959 and Maurier 1985). This relationship captures the nature of the African universe. This is the level of relationship where the whole relates with the whole, gives meaning to human existence or existence in general.

What distinguishes African eco-spirituality from other eco-spiritualities is the relational character of the universe in which every reality is understood as a part of the other reality. This understanding of the intricate web of the being of the earth helps further a more humane and respectful relationship within the African universe, knowing fully well that whatever a person does to the other form of reality or a reality of its own specie, he or she does it to himself or herself, and that whatever a person does in relation to the other being, has a resounding effect on the being of all. In this world of inter-subjective relations, *Igwebuike* introduces the concept of negotiation. This negotiation is non-negotiable, and therefore, a very important factor in the African universe. This is because the African universe is a world that one shares with the other in an atmosphere of inter-subjective relations. This inter-subjective relations only plays out without chaos when the individual is able to skillfully bridge his or her interiority with the individuality of the other. In this case, when the human person walks through the natural tracks of nature in

such a manner that it does not cause a dis-balance that will eventually dis-balance his or her own existence.

Recent events also unveils the *Igwebuike* nature of not only the African eco-spirituality but also the consequences of the mismanagement, misuse and abuse of the environment. It is becoming obvious that the destruction of the environment in any part of the world will also affect other regions of the world. This, therefore, calls for supportive roles in ensuring that the environment is protected and respected in every part of the world. If there is a universal consequence, the protection of the environment calls for a universal effort or approach. It is in this regard that Pope Francis (2015) refers to the environment as our common home for common development and future:

When we speak of the “environment”, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its 83lobaliz patterns, and the ways it grasps reality. Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (no. 139).

This calls for concerns for the management of ecological crises project and the need for the elimination of the elements of monopolistic tendencies of development and the politics of diplomatic suppression and subjugation of weaker nations by the economic and military treaties.

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