

## ***Ezigbo Mmadu: An Anthropological Investigation into the Concept of a Good Person in Igbo Worldview***

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Every human society has certain general framework of principles, values, and norms or precepts with which people are categorized and placed in the moral scheme of things. It is on such templates or ethical system that individual's conduct or behaviour are evaluated, judged as good or bad, right or wrong. On this moral scale, every individual is placed, differentiating A from B, C, D as well as group from groups. This categorization is based on what society perceives as the model of a good person and model for emulation, which in turn shapes the nature and direction of interpersonal relationships. In Igbo worldview, the personalization of the model in the ethical system is embedded in what the Igbo people refer to as *ezigbo mmadu*.

This paper attempts to delve into an anthropological investigation of what embodies an *ezigbo mmadu* (good person) in Igbo worldview with the intention of understanding how this conception shapes human behaviour and social interaction in Igbo traditional society. This is against the background of an exploration of the nature of the relationship that exists between the individual and the community in Igbo traditional society. The likely questions this paper seeks to address are: (i) What is the nature of Igbo traditional society that provides the context for individuals and groups interactions? (ii) What is the nature of the relationship existing between the individual and the community in Igbo traditional society? (iii) What is the conception of *ezigbo mmadu* in Igbo worldview, and how does this shape their construction of interpersonal relationships? (iv) Finally, what are the likely parameters for judging whether a person is *ezigbo mmadu* (good person) or not. This paper seeks to provide answers to these questions as it investigates the ethical issues that guide intra-group relationships in the Igbo traditional society. Anthropological reports and other literature materials on Igbo people and culture provided data for this study. Also primary data research gathering techniques such as key informant interviews, and participant observation augmented the data generated from the literature. We believe that using the emic approach, that is, insider's point of view, will help us to understand the people from their perspective in order to represent and interpret their behaviours and conducts the way they understand their worlds. The data collected were analyzed using the techniques of qualitative research.

### **THE IGBO PEOPLE**

The Igbo territory is located in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. The River Niger divided the land into two unequal parts, namely the eastern Igbo, which is located in the eastern part of the River Niger, and the western Igbo, (the smaller portion) located in the western bank of the River Niger sharing boundaries with the Benin people of the mid-western

Nigeria. The word, Igbo as Uchendu noted is used in three senses, namely the Igbo territory, the native speakers of the language, and finally a language group.<sup>1</sup> Igbo language belongs to *kwa* language group of Niger-Congo family. Both Forde and Jones<sup>2</sup> and Onwuejgwu<sup>3</sup> divided the Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria into sub-cultural groups. While Forde and Jones identified five sub-cultural groups, Onwuejgwu divided the people into six culture areas. Though the Igbo people speak one language known as Igbo language, there are dialectical variations. However, those who are closer in the language continuum tend to share greater mutual intelligibility. Nevertheless, the people share core cultural values such as umunna (patrilineage) system, ozo (a titled society), similar traditional marriage practices, kolanut hospitality, masquerade institution, white chalk custom, wall paintings and vigorous dancing steps.<sup>4</sup> The people are traditionally farmers and traders, while those in the riverine areas also engage in fishing. Staple foods include yam, cassava, and maize; economic trees include palm produce which yielded much foreign currency to the region before the crude oil boom of the 1970s. The Igbo are known for their hard work, resilient and ubiquitous life style.

The Igbo people believe in the duality of human existence. Madu summed it up this way:

Traditional Igbo is convinced of the existence of two distinct but similar worlds – the physical world and the spiritual world. ... Whatever exists in the physical world has its counterpart, equally real, in the invisible, spiritual world.<sup>5</sup>

The interaction of these two worlds implies that there is the need for harmonious relationships between the inhabitants of the two worlds. Traditionally, the people worship the gods of their ancestors, which include spirits and deities. They also believe in the Supreme Being whom they referred to as Chukwu, (the Almighty God) or Chineke, (God the Creator). The Earth goddess referred to as Ala play important role in the people's day to day living. To the people, the Earth goddess is the messenger of the Supreme Being and she assists him in punishing the wicked and rewarding the just. As the earth is intimately close to humankind, it is impossible to do anything that she is not aware of. The honour and reverence ascribe to the Earth goddess also owes to the fact that she provides humankind with food, herbs for curing sicknesses and diseases, and it is to the earth that human beings must return after death. As the interaction is inescapable, the people believe, one must endeavour to cultivate good relationship with the Earth goddess through obedience to the omenala (the unwritten code of conduct or literarily the 'doings of the land') of the people which are in any case the injunctions of the Earth goddess.

Igbo socio-political organization is categorized on the basis of the family, which is predominantly polygamous, the umunna (patrilineage), the village and the village groups. When the Igbo talk of the family, they are basically talking of the extended family. The umunna is the basic political unit and the most important one for that matter. The village or the clan is made up of many umunna. Members of an umunna claim the same ancestral lineage up to ten generations, and are headed by an okpara who is the co-ordinator of the affairs of the unit. The largest political unit of the Igbo is the obodo, that is, the town which is made up of a group of villages. In pre-colonial times, beyond this, the traditional Igbo person owes no allegiance to any other political unit. Leadership in traditional Igbo society is gerontocratic, that is leadership by the elders. The women groups which are basically the umuada or umuokpu institution (association of patrilineage daughters both married, unmarried, divorced) and the inyom di or anumanu (association of wives) are the two

dominant women groups in the traditional society.<sup>6</sup> The age grades are also significant and function as the executive arm of the government. In the pre-colonial period, their duties, among other responsibilities, were to carry out the instructions of the community leaders and execute the decisions arrived at by the general assembly.

## **THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY IN TRADITIONAL IGBO SOCIETY**

This section explores the nature of the individual and the community, and the relationship that exists between the two in traditional Igbo society. We view the individual in this study from the normative point of view, that is, the social and moral conception of a person. The metaphysical conception of personhood is also present in Igbo worldview. But, for the purpose of our reflection, attention is paid more on the normative as this is located in the social life of the people whose worldview we are reflecting on. We begin by examining the nature of the community in Igbo culture, and then identify the interconnectedness existing between the individual and the community.

The Igbo conception of community is different from the Euro-American model. In Igbo culture, the community is perceived solely in terms of its communality. The Euro-American model on the other hand views community simply as an association aggregate of individual persons who share interests, which is in opposition to African conception of the community. In Akan culture, for instance, Gyekye notes that the community is “a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, biological and/or non biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of the group and who have common interests, goals and values.”<sup>7</sup> This is also applicable to Igbo culture. In addition, to the Igbo people, the community goes beyond human beings to include the living dead (or ancestors), the Earth goddess, the spirits and deities. Afigbo sums it up this way:

In traditional social philosophy [of the Igbo] the ‘community’ meant the living members, the dead ancestors, and the convocation of the local deities and spirits. These deities and spirits were conceived as closely associated with and interested in the weal and woes of the unit.<sup>8</sup>

Members of the community in Igbo culture go beyond the physical human beings to include the spiritual, the invisible. The Igbo people believe that all these entities participate and make impact in their day-to-day life. The ancestors, for instance, oversee their still-living relatives and guard them in their daily activities. Within this holism of tempo-spiritual relationship, the individual is located. Nwoga, for instance, observes that, in Igbo culture:

The individual is a member of the community that sets the goals that have acceptability within the community. It is the community that sets up reward and punishment systems. To a large extent, the individual in Igboland is subsumed within the requirement of the community.<sup>9</sup>

Invariably, the individual is bound to the values of his community because it is in this community that, as it were, he exists and has his being.

Anthropologists have observed that culture has great impact in the behaviour of the human person, and is the fundamental distinguishing factor between a human person and the lower animals. Shared values and meanings integrate the individual into a community. There is an inherent symbiotic relationship existing between the self and the community. To participate in the social life of the community demands that the individual shares in the people's thought system by imbibing those non-material or metaphysical aspects of the societal ideals inherent in the value system. It is these values, and how the individual live them out in day-to-day activities that constitute the parameter for the individual's categorization in the socio-cultural schemas. To be integrated, one has to conceive of these values as paramount, which, if observed in daily life, paves way for one's social acceptability. The individual understands that he does not live for himself alone. In this symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community, the actions of the individual member, the people believe, can affect positively or negatively the lots of the community. Little wonder that when an individual commits an *nso ala* (abomination) like murder, shifting of land boundary, or having sexual relationship with a woman who is still mourning the late husband, or generally desecrating a taboo in the traditional pre-colonial Igbo society, it was the whole community that suffered the consequences, particularly when such an individual was not exposed by his family, a witness or even the community at large for punishment or necessary cleansing rituals to appease the gods. As a member of a community, therefore, the overriding interest of every individual within that group is to seek to live a good life within the conditions and standards set by the community.

To be perceived as living a good life in Igbo traditional culture, one is expected to inculcate and abide by the laid down principles of interpersonal interactions. For instance, there are acceptable principles guiding wealth acquisition and how the acquired wealth is enjoyed. For this purpose, chieftaincy title taking provides an avenue for a wealthy man to distribute part of his wealth to others through the principle of socio-economic exchange between him and members of the community. While he distributes his wealth, he is given chieftaincy titles, which further offers him honour, privilege and power in the community.<sup>10</sup> This patterned social life further enhances the exchange of social capital among the group members, with the advantage of creating the atmosphere for harmonious co-existence. Because the Igbo people also believe that without economic well being, life is meaningless, every individual is expected to work hard towards meeting the basic necessities of life. Poverty is abhorred, and a life of abject poverty is worthless. Nevertheless, the people also believe that this wealth must be acquired without disrupting intra and inter group harmony, and be used to nourish the cells of the group as it were.

The metaphysical aspect of Igbo culture is summed up in the tenets of *ofò* (*Detarium senegalense* stick). *Ofo* represents the people's moral philosophy, the symbol of authority, justice and peace. *Ofo* also represents a two-dimensional approach to peace, that is human being to human being, and human beings to the ancestors/spirit beings or gods. Whether in relating with one's spouse, children, friends, neighbours and associates or in the relationship between the leader and the led, the yardstick of moral evaluation is embedded in what *ofò* stands for. The people often say '*èjì m ofò*' which literally means 'I'm holding an *ofò*' but which in actual sense symbolizes one's claim of clear conscience or innocence in the face of accusation or suspicion. Of course, *ofò*'s strengths are derived from the fact that it anchors on the people's customs and traditions known as *omenana* (or *omenala/omenani*), which literally means the 'doings of the land' and are also the injunctions of the Earth goddess. *Omenana* is an unwritten constitution that guides the people's day to day activities. The *ofò* simply re-echoes those principles and values inherent in the *omenana*. Conversely, the tenets of

omenana re-enforces the doctrines of ofo, which include justice, peace, truthfulness and the like.

Peaceful co-existence among members of the group demands that people abide by the principle of social justice and respect for the rights of members, particularly their right to land. Okafor has rightly noted:

The notion of right must be examined in the context and light of social justice. It is in fact from the taproot of social justice that individual rights in Igbo traditional setting draw nurture and strengths. And social justice demand mutual and reciprocal respect of rights and interests.<sup>11</sup>

Although it is difficult at times, to demarcate where individual rights and that of the community extricate in Igbo traditional culture, right to land is one of the fundamental and inalienable rights. Nevertheless, it is the community that functions as the custodian of these rights, and their defender when they are infringed upon. In fact, the community determines the valuable goals for the individual, and it is from these goals that the individual members of the group can set the personal goals. In his discussion of the Akan society of Ghana, Gyekye has drawn similar conclusion when he noted that it is within the context of the community that an individual person can pursue and achieve life goals, and it is this same community that determines what goals and values are pursuable.<sup>12</sup> For this purpose, the traditional Igbo person has unequivocal loyalty to his community. Beside the fact that his biological relationships and associational life are established within the community, more importantly, the community harbours him and provides moral and psychological security, even economic well being when life seems difficult. Above all, the community safeguards his right to ala (land), which is one of the most precious possessions of an Igbo person. Land, to a traditional Igbo man, is the soul of his being. Land provides food, herbs, sustains life and to the people, it also consumes life. It is thus a symbolic object full of ironies and contradictions. To the Igbo, land is animate. It symbolizes life, consumes life, and along the line, land takes a religious significance, a goddess, symbolizing the Earth goddess.

The Ala is the messenger of the Supreme Being who executes judgments - metes out punishments, at times instantly, when one contravenes the omenala of the people, which in itself represents the commandments of the Earth goddess -, and bestows blessings on those who abide by the principles of decorum and harmonious co-existence. The belief in the Earth goddess is so pervasive that she is constantly invoked in conversations and speech. For instance, when told to carry out an activity which the addressee believes the community detests, he/she may assert, 'Nso! Ala be anyi ekwekwa naa', which means, 'Abomination! May our Earth goddess forbid'. The people believe that the fear of Ala is the beginning of wisdom. In pre-colonial Igbo society, this belief was so pervasive in the daily life of the people that it was difficult if not impossible to draw a clear demarcation between the sacred and the secular, as the two are intertwined in mutual exchange and re-enforcement, and the Earth goddess was a mediating force in these tempo-spiritual interactions. The metaphysical dimension of the Igbo moral philosophy added ember to the moral character of the traditional Igbo person. The spiritual and the social are intertwined in inextricable and symbiotic relationship. Significantly, in the execution of justice, the people believe that in the final analysis, humans in their imperfection cannot adequately execute justice. The supernatural is, therefore, constantly invoked in the negotiation of social justice.

## **EZIGBO MMADU: A SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS**

This section explores the conception of *ezigbo mmadu* (good person) in Igbo worldview, and how this is constructed in human relationships. Every individual is entangled in a network of social relationships that define who and what the individual is. Indeed, these patterned networks of interpersonal interactions reflect the underlying principles that inform the categorization of the individual in the moral cadre of the group.

In order to make meaning of and fully appreciate the concept of *ezigbo mmadu* in Igbo worldview, this concept must be viewed within the context of the Igbo practice of morality, and the social recognition and significances they invoke. To begin with, what do we mean by moral? Probably, we begin with Agulanna's position. According to him, moral entails:

Human principles of right and wrong, and deals with how people treat themselves in order to promote mutual welfare, progress, creativity and meaning in a striving for what is right over what is wrong, and what is good over what is bad.<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to note that in Philosophy, 'moral' and 'ethical' are used interchangeably. On their part, Popkin *et al.* noted that 'ethics' in one of its most frequent uses refers to "a code or set of principles by which men live."<sup>14</sup> They further submitted that for philosophers, ethics also means "a theoretical study", where the object of study in ethics are theories or sometimes called ethical theories which deal with such questions as " 'How ought men to behave'? 'What is the good life for man?' and so on."<sup>15</sup> Our focus in this section is not on the ethical theories but more on the principles of right and wrong that guide the behaviour and conducts of traditional Igbo people, particularly in their interpersonal interactions, which establishes and determines who is an *ezigbo mmadu*. To begin with, the concept, *ezigbo mmadu*, can be semantically analyzed as follows:

<i>Ezigbo/ezi</i>	good, correct, acceptable
<i>Mmadu</i>	humankind, human being, person

The word, *ezigbo* or '*ezi*' thus, means, 'that which is correct, good, or acceptable'. In the context of human relationships, *ezigbo* connotes sincerity/truth, self respect, good nature, trustworthiness, fidelity, genuineness, fairness, dependableness, loyal, faithful, integrity and the like. The concept *mmadu* can further be divided into two parts and analyzed as follows: *Mma* and *du* or *di*. *Mma* means 'beauty', 'goodness' while *du* or *di* means 'exists' *Mmadu*, therefore, means 'beauty/goodness exists' or put differently, 'beauty/goodness does exist'. *Mmadu* (human being/humankind), the Igbo people believe, is the climax or peak of Creation. Human kind is the summit of beauty and creativity. Of all the creatures created by the Supreme Being, humankind is the zenith. Nothing can equate humans or surpass him in beauty and comeliness. In humankind, beauty, goodness, comeliness, is exhibited in its entirety.

The opposite of '*ezigbo*' is '*njo*' or '*ajo*' which means 'ugly', 'bad', 'wicked', 'evil', 'lack of beauty', or 'lack of comeliness'. When ugliness is used to describe an individual in social interactions, it is not the outward appearance that is being emphasized, in terms of the shape of the nose, mouth, legs, or colour of the skin as the case may be. Emphasis is laid on the non-material aspects of the individual that is, the character, behaviour, or conduct. In any case, the fact that the word *mmadu* means 'beauty exists' implies that the Igbo acknowledge that beauty is inherent in the human person. Ironically, the people also recognize that this beauty can be lost. For this reason, they say '*ajo mmadu*', that is 'bad person', or 'bad good person', if literally translated. The grammatical construction 'bad good person' depicts the difficulty in the language to attempt to conceptualize the human person as bad. This could have two implications: first, the Igbo do not expect an individual to be inherently evil or bad, hence, the prefix '*ajo*' attached to '*mmadu*' seems a misnomer, and thus could indicate that evil is originally strange to human nature. Secondly, that although beauty exists, this beauty can be lost, temporarily though, through bad conducts, hence the necessity for the individual to nurture this beauty, protect it, and retrace his/her steps when the beauty is threatened through bad conducts.

As a moral agent, the Igbo believe, the individual is accountable for his/her conduct. This implies that one can mar the beauty which *Chukwu* (the Supreme Being) has bestowed on him or her, hence the need to guide against this. For, to lose the beauty is to lose one's humanity, and in the context of Igbo worldview one becomes a misfit, in fact, a social outcast. Such an individual has no place in the abode of the ancestors. Depending on the gravity of this social 'unfitness', one may be excommunicated as punishment, and to prevent group disintegration. When an individual commits an abomination, certain steps are taken before such a person can be re-absorbed into the different groups that constitute the collective. But first, the individual must acknowledge that he has contravened the laws of the land and confess his/her evil deeds following the appropriate procedures in order to be re-integrated into the community. For as Radcliffe-Brown rightly observed, such an individual is regarded as a pollutant and thus, looked upon:

As a source of danger not only to himself but also to those with whom he comes in contact or to the community. He may therefore be more or less excluded for a time or even permanently from participation in the social life of the community.<sup>16</sup>

In Nanka, a local community in southeastern Nigeria, a respondent affirmed that in pre-colonial Nanka society:

For confession to be made, a person has to go to '*Ana oji*' [a local deity in the village] stand bare-footed and swear that he did not commit a particular crime, and that if he did it, may our earth [Earth goddess] hold him.<sup>17</sup>

By implication, the community has a designated arena for social and spiritual purification/sanctification. According to the respondent, in a situation where the offender was not known despite all efforts to bring him/her to the open, the '*nze na ozo*' (titled men) would gather at '*ana oji*' (a local deity in the village, symbolising holy land) and begin to render conditional curses: "He that did this thing (mention is made of the offence committed) let the Earth goddess hold him". The people would respond 'ofooooooo' which means 'So be it'. In

a situation where the evil doer confesses his wrong doing, *aja* (ritual sacrifice) is carried out, having ascertained the minds of the ancestors and the gods through the process of *afa* (divination).

*Ezigbo mmadu* conveys the idea of someone who conducts his/her day-to-day activities in an ethically appropriate way. Mazi Udonna, a respondent, gives an example of one of the ways of assessing whether the head of a household is an *ezigbo mmadu* or not:

In a polygamous family, as a good person, the family head must be able to coordinate his family, avoid shameful activities, for the sake of the family name. Despite rivalries in the polygamous home, he must be seen to be fair in his dealings with the wives and the children, recognize and respect the position of the first wife, for instance.<sup>18</sup>

When the people say, '*O bughi ezigbo mmadu*' that is, 'He/she is not a good person' or *O bu ajo mmadu* meaning, 'he/she is a bad person', such assertion occlude space for the one so referred, and determines his/her life chances and access to social resources in that community. To deny the goodness in a person, is saying that such an individual lacks sincerity/truth, self respect, good nature, trustworthiness, fidelity, genuineness, fairness, dependableness, loyalty, faithful, integrity, and reliability. In fact, he has lost the humanity in him. The people often say that *Ajo mmadu bu ajo ofia* meaning 'A bad person is an evil forest'. In Igbo cosmology, an evil forest is a place that the corpses of the despicable people or those who have committed '*nso ala*' (abomination) in the community were deposited in pre-colonial times. Such people were excommunicated when alive and denied of proper burial after death. They were, consequently, separated from normal human social life in this world, and life with the ancestors in the spirit world. In a culture where elaborate burial ceremony was regarded as honourable and a way of ushering the dead into the abode of the ancestors and spirits (the people's concept of 'Heaven'), to deposit one's corpse in the evil forest can be likened to, in the Christian parlance, to physically cast one into Hell fire to rot with the Devil. Indeed, in traditional society an *ajo mmadu* (a bad person) was abhorred. Truthfulness was, indeed, very important in the people's relationship with one another. For this reason, Otakpor rightly asserted:

The importance of truth per se and truth-telling in human life and its affairs is so compelling that the Igbo believe that only those who have a passion for truth can be entrusted with the leadership of the community.<sup>19</sup>

As a respondent observed, "In Igbo culture, truth is expected from everyone. Even when people are not in good terms, one is expected to speak the truth about the other person. This helps to maintain group harmony."<sup>20</sup> The people believe that the Earth goddess could strike dead a dishonest person or something mysterious could begin to happen to members of his family, depending on the gravity of the offence. On the other hand, the community recognizes and appreciates one whose conducts consistently reflect truthfulness - sincerity of hearts, purpose and well meaning in conducts, hence he is perceived as an *ezigbo mmadu*. According to Chiegwe, Igbo culture recognizes that:

Opposing qualities hardly inhere in the same person; a deceitful person, for example, can hardly be fair or dependable; greedy and fraudulent person can hardly be kind and frank. ....it becomes clear, therefore, that

the concept of 'truth', situated in a broad social context, takes on the attributes of conformity or correspondence to fact or reality as well as the qualities, dispositions and characteristics that are both personal and socially desirable.<sup>21</sup>

In a communitarian society, therefore, to be an *ezigbo mmadu* one must, necessarily, incorporate into one's life the precepts and values inherent in such a society.

In the context of our earlier analysis on the relationship between the individual and community, a good person is also one who abides by the principles of communal interests and must necessarily exhibit those non-material qualities the people value. Such a person stands for the common good and when self interest conflicts with common good, the overriding consideration is to de-emphasize self interest. *Ezigbo mmadu* is that person to whom the members of the community can entrust responsibility with the conviction that he/she is trustworthy and abides by the principle of collective interest. An *ezigbo mmadu* does not cheat or defraud people of their belongings and dues. An *ezigbo mmadu* does not relegate his role as husband, father, wife, mother, daughter, son, brother, or in-law but performs the social roles and responsibilities customs and traditions demand. *Ezigbo mmadu* is sought after whenever the need for third party consultation arises - for conflict resolution, peacemaking, leadership position and the like. It could also be in term of marriage partner, business associate or even in giving out one's child for business apprenticeship. To the people, in human relationship, such an individual is an epitome of beauty, goodness, and justice. In addition, an *ezigbo mmadu* is conscious of the limits of human's engagement with the universe and therefore appreciates the place of the Earth goddess and the ancestors in the people's belief system and gives them their dues. As the head of the family, an *ezigbo mmadu* is also the priest of his household, offering sacrifices and prayers for his household. For this purpose, in Igbo culture, the judicial principle exists in two parts: human and divine laws. Human laws regulate human interests and conducts and by implication moderates social interactions for the promotion of collective interests. Okafor puts it this way:

Igbo human laws are social instruments by which diverse and often conflicting interests of the members of the society are regulated in such a way that common interest of the community as a whole is placed above individual interests.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, divine laws re-enforce human laws in the execution and sustenance of social justice, assist in establishing spiritual harmony between human beings and the spiritual world.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, both the social and spiritual aspects of human well being are significant in determining an individual's acceptability or otherwise, or put differently, to determine whether an individual is an *ezigbo mmadu* or not. The two types of laws function as instruments for fostering justice, fairness and equity among the members of the group. Obviously, to the Igbo, *ezigbo mmadu* is realized in the context of their social life, and their relationship with the Earth goddess and the ancestors, and these permeate their moral thinking.

The sense of collectivity and the need for the creation of a humane social environment further provide the atmosphere for the pursuance of personal and group goals. Issues of moral significance and value are adjudged according to the communal principles of morality, as prescribed by the *omenala* (tradition). For this reason, those who do not abide by those

precepts and values adjudged to be standard markers in the people's worldview are termed *ajo mmadu* (that is bad people) as their conducts contravene the culturally prescribed moral parameters. In pre-colonial times, such morally bankrupt individuals were denied leadership positions in the community. The traditional Igbo person is conscious of the fact that his/her conducts are judged by the social and moral character in the people's moral thought, and that his/her conducts in turn have impact on the extent to which the individual could further utilize space in human relationships for the achievement of social mobility and self actualization.

## Conclusion

This paper had attempted to investigate the concept of *ezigbo mmadu* in Igbo worldview within the context of the socio-cultural constructions of human relationships among the people. We have noted that the Igbo people believe that the human person is a free, rational moral agent and as such, responsible for his/her actions. Thus understood, the human person has the power to choose either to do right or wrong, to be good or evil, to be selfish or altruistic, to be socially responsible or become a deviant. Nevertheless, whichever the individual chooses assumes symbolic significance either to create or occlude space, determining the individual's life chances in that community. The Igbo, we have also noted, see humankind as created to reflect beauty in its entirety, hence, the term *mmadu* means 'beauty exists'. The people further recognize that with regards to morality, it is in relationships that the question of whether an individual is good or bad is evaluated. Collective interest is privileged above individual's interest, thereby stressing the need for one to pursue those goals that the group perceive as significant, and that abide by the principles of collective moral standard. The unwritten regulations encoded in the principles of *ofo* and *omenala* function as reference points and provided ethical foundation, which ensured that these values are respected, and that members of the group employ them as the parameters that guide their behaviour to protect both the collective and individual's interests, and to ensure that peace and social harmony prevail.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See V. C. Uchendu. *The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria*. London: Holt Rinehalt and Winston, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> D. Forde and G. I Jones. *The Ibo and Ibibio Speaking Peoples of South-eastern Nigeria*. London: International African Institute, 1950.

<sup>3</sup> M. A. Onwuejgwu. *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom & Hegemony*. London: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1981, 14 -15.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See Okechukwu Raphael Madu. *Studies in African-American Culture: African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths: The Hermeneutics of Destiny*. Owerri: Assumpta Press, 1996, 145 -146.

<sup>6</sup> See Chinyere Ukpokolo. 'Gender and Socio-political Organization of Igbo Traditional Society'. *AFRICA: JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ISSUES*. Vol. 2. NO 2, 190 - 203 for a discussion on gender and socio-political organization of Igbo traditional society, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Kwame Gyekye. 'Person and Community in Akan Thought'. In: *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I*. Wiredu, Kwasi and Kwame Gyekye (Eds.). Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy. 1992, p, 105

<sup>8</sup> A.E. Afigbo. *The Warrant Chiefs; Indirect Rule in Eastern Nigeria 1891 – 1929*. London: longman, , 1972, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Donatus Nwoga. 'Nka na Nzere': The Focus of Igbo Worldview'. In: AHIKOKU Lecture 1979 – 1986 Excerpts. Published by the Ministry of Information, Culture, Youth and Sports Division. Printed by Government Press Owerri, 1984, 58 -59.

<sup>10</sup> Gyekye, Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See T. U. Nwala. *Igbo Philosophy*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> F.U. Okafor. *Igbo Philosophy of Law*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1995, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Kwame Gyekye. See also Polycarp Ikuenobe. *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*. New York: Lexington Books, 2006, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> See Okigbo as cited in Okechukwu Raphael Madu. *Studies in African-American Culture: African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths: The Hermeneutics of Destiny*. Owerri: Assumpta Press, 1996, 148.

<sup>15</sup> See Madu, 1996. Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Nkeonye Otakpor. 'Introduction: Wisdom Teaching in Igbo Culture. In 'Eziokwu bu Ndu': Truth is Life. *Uniben Studies in Philosophy Vol. 1*. Otakpor, Nkeonye (Ed.). Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2006, 11–26.

<sup>17</sup> Oral interview conducted with Pa Okeke Obuoha, in Nanka, a local Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria, August, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Oral interview conducted with Mazi Augustine Udonna.

<sup>19</sup> Otakpor, ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Otakpor, ibid., 22.

<sup>21</sup> Oral Interview with Mazi, Augustine Udonna.

<sup>22</sup> Onwuka Chiegwe. 'Eziokwu bu Ndu: An Essay in Sociological Interpretation'. In 'Eziokwu bu Ndu': *Truth is Life. Uniben Studies in Philosophy. Vol. 1.* Otakpor, Nkeonye (Ed.). Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2006, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Okafor, *ibid.*, 64.

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