

## COMMUNITY AND HUMAN WELL-BEING IN AN AFRICAN CULTURE

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**Abstract.** An interest in community has remained the concern of philosophers and other thinkers from the period of known history. All through the history of thought, there have been those who have tried to denigrate community and who have seen it as something that could be jettisoned or discarded by humans. Among Africans, however, it is generally held that it is in the community of other human beings that the life of the individual can have meaning or significance. This paper pursues this line of thought and examines how the Igbo people of Nigeria, Africa, conceive of the relationship between the individual and the community. The conclusion the paper reaches is that both as individuals and as groups, people need the protective cover that community life offers if their lives are to have any meaning or significance. Community, the paper adds, is the only essential means by which humans can achieve their social goals and aspirations.

**Keywords:** community, African culture, human wellbeing, the Igbo of Nigeria, cultural universals, egalitarian individualism

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### 1. Introduction

What is community? And what role does it play in enabling individuals to achieve their goals and aspirations in the Commonwealth, otherwise known as the commonwealth of people? These are questions that philosophers have grappled with from the period of antique history. But it is not only philosophers, but sociologists, anthropologists and ethnologists that have shown more than a cursory interest in community. With particular reference to philosophers, in the history of thought there have been thinkers who have questioned the relevance of community and who have expressed deviant opinions about its value and importance. A classical example is the Cynic philosophers of ancient Greek society who called for the abdication or complete abandonment of community and in its place

advocated a return to nature and a renunciation of earthly pleasures and possessions. The Cynics were misanthropists; that is, haters or disparagers of society who saw community or society as a distraction and as something that hinders individuals from leading a life of primitive innocence, which in their thinking is the truly happy life. I shall return to this issue later on in the essay. Suffice it to say that the Cynics were not alone in holding a sceptical view about the relevance of community to human well-being or happiness. Alike in philosophy and in religion, there have been people who have riled at community and who have called for its renunciation or total rejection. However, these have been in the minority. Again, they have been mostly religious mystics, shamans or others whose views on community have been untoward, askew and out of kilter.

Against the views expressed by this group of people, the leading lights of the philosophical enterprise have been mostly people who recognize the ineluctable nature or great value that community possesses. Community, many great thinkers remind us, is a necessary condition for the realization of human social goals. A short list of the philosophical luminaries who have emphasized the importance of community includes people like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to mention but a few. In the opinion of these thinkers, community life is a *sine qua non* for human flourishing and individual wellbeing. And as Aristotle is wont to say, the person is either a god or an animal that is able to survive outside of society, that is, the human community – here I use the words community and society interchangeably to mean one and the same thing. Without doubt, it is the co-operative instincts in humans that ensure mutual survival among them. In this same way, it is also such instincts that limit the atavistic tendencies among them that have the potential to atrophy or destroy the camaraderie feeling that individuals mutually express.

## **2. On the idea of the universality of culture: some tentative remarks**

The introductory remarks made above set the tone for the discussion that I undertake in this paper. However, the paper has a restricted focus or scope. Rather than get into all the details about the meaning, nature and purpose of community as such, my focus in the paper is on showing the nature of the relationship that exists between the individual and community in the African world. In fulfilling this goal I have set out in the paper, I adopt as my stalking horse, the traditional Igbo viewpoint on community, as representative of the African view on that aspect of human relationship. In my choice of the Igbo culture for the analysis I undertake in the paper, I am faced with the charge of being involved in a problem that philosophers refer to as a ‘category error’; in this context, the error of using the categories found in one culture to generalize about what the whole of African peoples are said to believe. I am also faced with the problem of how to coalesce into a single whole the multitudinous opinions Africans hold on the different aspects of reality. How can one meet these charges or difficulties? One way to respond to these charges is to remind ourselves that cultures are neither wholly

particularistic nor are they completely autarchic in nature. On the contrary, there are some elements in culture referred to as 'cultural universals', or what John Bowker has identified as the "recurring elements, in human behaviour, which arise as a consequence of the fact that we are all conceived and born in, broadly speaking, the same way" (Bowker 1991:18).

Cultural universals, also known as 'cultural constants', refer to those elements in our cultures that help to establish the universal brotherhood and kinship of all human beings. For example, while Africans may differ in respect of certain aspects of their cultures, they nevertheless share those aspects that are universal in nature. It is because of the possibility of this sharing that Africans are able to interact and communicate with themselves and others. And as Oladipo (1995:2-4) would say, "with interaction and communication ... came the possibility of dialogue, criticism and mutual understanding across cultures." My choice of the Igbo culture as a foil for African cultures in general is hinged on two major grounds: one is that not only am I familiar with the Igbo culture itself, I am also familiar with the language with which the culture is expressed. In other words – and in a manner of speaking – in highlighting issues in the culture, I will be treading on familiar ground, or to use a popular dictum, I will be swimming in familiar waters. The second reason is based on the account I have given above on the idea of 'cultural universals', or what in other words is referred to as 'cultural constants'.

### 3. Conceptualizing the individual

Having elucidated the point above, it is pertinent to mention that in the history of thought, different people have regarded the importance of the human person in different ways. Here, I provide some examples of the ways the individual person has been conceived in the past. I start with Hitler's *Third Reich* or Nazi society as a case in point. Under the Nazi Gestapo regime, the individual was considered as a being of no consequence, merely to be used to realize the goals of a racially tainted Movement called the Nazi Party. In the case of Stalin's Soviet Socialist Republics, the individual was seen as a mere passive 'plaything' meant to serve the interest of an abstruse idea called the Party. In both cases just highlighted, the individual was goaded and merely used to serve some abstract social goal or expectations (only to be discarded or cast off as a husk from a shell or as a mere peapod later). In both instance too, the State eventually collapsed due, perhaps, to the denigration or disparaging of the worth of the human person. What this illustration shows is that those societies are bound to flounder or shrivel which belittle the social worth of the human person; those that recognize this worth are the ones that have prospered and made enormous progress in the comity of respected nation-states. In other words, the measure of a society's achievement and greatness is the measure of the value it places on its citizens. Similarly, what this shows is that communal achievement is only possible in an environment

where the human person is treated with honour and nobility. Long ago, Protagoras made the point when he made his time-honoured and world-famous statement, saying:

*Man is the measure of all things, of things that are they are, of things that are not that they are not.*

Protagoras' statement has been interpreted in different ways by scholars. In the account of Plato, the word 'man' that Protagoras uses refers to the individual human person, not to the human species as a whole. Some other accounts have it that like the fellow Sophists of his day, Protagoras had in mind that every judgment is necessarily subjective and that there is no objective vantage point from which we might see things as they are in themselves, unaffected by our perspectives. This thesis – that reality is subjective or simply a matter of individual opinion – is one, says W. I. Matson, which runs through the entire history of philosophy and which perhaps is more vigorous at the present time than ever before (Matson 1987:68). But whichever way people choose to understand what Protagoras says, what is, however, clear from his statement is the idea that it is man (no gender bias intended), either as an individual or as a human species that gives meaning to reality. In other words, the world is what it is because of the meaning that human beings have assigned to it. Phenomenologists also make this type of argument when they opine that we live in what they describe as a world of 'bare facts', where objects and events do not have any latent or hidden meanings to them apart from the meanings we have assigned to them.

To capture the matter more succinctly, Protagoras is to be understood as saying that it is human beings that give meaning to reality – to things, events and objects we have in the world. Indeed, man's regentship over the rest of nature and of the material universe does not seem to be in doubt. This is the type of argument Glicksberg (1963:110) makes when he says as follows: "man creates his own world of meaning, composes his own dream of significance" and of course, charts the course of his own life. In other words, the meaning that the world has is the meaning arises from human inter-subjective agreement or concurrence. Outside of such agreement or accord, everything is a mumble-jumble and a confused mix.

#### **4. A brief recapitulation**

As I stated in my introduction to this paper, my concern in the paper is to consider the role of the individual as well as the unique place s/he occupies in the human community. As I have explained already, in the paper I use the words 'community' and 'society' interchangeably or as synonyms to signify one and the same thing. However, in discussing the idea of *individual* and *community* in the essay, my concern will not be with trying to underscore how these have been conceived in all the cultures of the world, but with the relationship between individual and community in the African culture. And as I have already explained above, in my discussion of the African view on the nature of the relationship that

exists between individual and community, I adopt as representative viewpoint the traditional Igbo beliefs on these matters. The reasons for the choice are already provided. No matter what anybody says about the legitimacy or otherwise of choice of the culture I have adopted, the conclusion I reach in the paper is that human wellbeing, peace and order are only achievable in a communal or social setting.

To backtrack a little, three questions are central to the issues I discuss in the paper – questions that are also central in political thought or theorizing. The questions can be posed as follows: (1) what is the role of the individual in the human community or State? (2) Is community something over and above the individuals who live in it? (3) Can the individual exist outside of the social setting? As I have explained already, in answering these questions, the Cynics of ancient Greece held that it is attachment to the city (i.e. community), to possessions, and even to family that distracts one from the true cultivation of the soul. Not only did the Cynics abhor society and its norms, they also had an aversion for all established values and rules. In like manner, they saw everything conventional and artificial as false and as hindrances to happiness, which must be cast off: conventional dress, conventional food and even drink (Matson 1987:152–153). Against this type of attitude demonstrated by the Cynics, Aristotle saw society as existing to enable the individuals who live in it achieve their goals and aspirations in life. By its very nature, therefore, society is the most complete, most self-sufficing of all communities or political associations natural to human beings (see Eneh and Okolo 1998:49).

To reiterate the point again, human achievement is possible only in the human environment or social setting. Following from this argument, the answer to the last of the three questions posed above: “Can the individual exist out of the social setting?” would be to say ‘no’. To the other two questions, I provide a more detailed answer in what follows in the remaining part of the paper below. But first, I provide some explanation on the relationship or link between the concepts of society and community.

### **5. The relationship between ‘society’ and ‘community’**

A close link exists between the concept of society and that of community. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find scholars employing the concepts ‘society’ and ‘community’ interchangeably or as synonyms. Even though the two concepts are related and contiguous, I, however, need to elucidate the nature of the relationship between them. ‘Society’ in general is the totality of peoples that have existed in history. A particular society on the other hand, is a given population living in a certain region whose members cooperate over a period of time for the attainment of certain goals or ends. For example, it is in the first sense above that we can talk of ‘the human society’ as a whole. In the second sense, we may talk of say, the Nigerian society, the American society, Fulani society, or the Yoruba society, etc.

By 'community' on the other hand, we usually have in mind a sub-society whose members (1) are in personal contact, (2) are concerned for one another's welfare, (3) are committed to common purposes and procedures, (4) share responsibility for joint actions, and (5) value membership in the community as an end worth pursuing (Kneller 1971:49). Because of the difficulty with arriving at a clear cut division between the concepts of 'society' and 'community', most scholars have come to see both terms as signifying the same notion. Were we to contrast between *culture* and *society*, we might say that a culture is the way of life of a people, whereas a society is a people with a way of life. I believe this point is well made. Harping on this same point, in his book *Politics*, Aristotle argued among other things that the ideal society is that which affords its citizens the opportunity for attaining happiness or what he described as 'the good life'. The 'good life', in this context is described as the 'complete and active realization of all man's capabilities of activities', that is, those activities which contribute to man's self-fulfilment.

But Aristotle also held that proper education, both physical and moral, is needed to complete this realization and thereby the achievement of the life of well-being. Put differently, we may (following Aristotle), describe an ideal political society or state as "a consciously devised association of individuals for the achievement of deliberately defined aims." In the words of Eneh and Okolo (1998: 49), the major reason for the existence of any society is the procurement of the good life for its members. In other words, part of the reason why society exists is for the provision of human social goods of the people who make up the human community. Following this line of reasoning, the State, it is argued, is nothing but a mere natural extension of the family or community. In the words of Jacques Maritain, the State is:

*a concretely and wholly human reality, tending to a concretely and wholly human good, the common good. It is a work of reason, born out of the obscure efforts of reason disengaged from instinct, and implying essentially a rational order but is no more pure Reason than man himself* (Maritain 1951:10).

## 6. Individual and community in Africa

The Cynics have not been alone in rejecting or jettisoning the ideal of community. In Western thought in general there have been a number of movements or people who have also come to see society as a clog, a bung-up, or an impediment to human joy and happiness. The anarchists or the social deviants of contemporary Western society – the hippies and the skinheads, all maintain a lifestyle of rebellion against society and its values. Similarly, a number of intellectual movements have arisen in the West that have depicted not just society itself but also human existence as a useless drudge. However, it is not unlikely that this anti-establishment behaviour and loss of faith in community may be due to the overt-individualism that characterizes much of Western life. In a social environ-

ment where the individual sees himself as supreme, autonomous and self-governing, any slight dislocation in the social equilibrium is bound to lead to this loss of faith in community life. In like manner, in such an environment, when the individual is faced with problems of life that he cannot tackle alone, he becomes distraught; feeling existentially alone in the world, the individual becomes cranky and comes to conclude that community is a clog, obstructive and encumbering.

In contradistinction to the type of attitude mentioned above, Africans are unlikely to concede to the individual an absolutism that stands him head to head with community. On the contrary, Africans believe that it is only in the community where the life of the individual acquires true meaning. In other words, it is not in living as an isolated being but in mutually interacting with other members of community that the individual can ever hope to realize his social aspirations in life. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, as among other African peoples generally, the obvious curtailment of a person's power to do as he wills is provided by the potent force of what is known as 'the will of the community'. As T. U. Nwala reminds us, in Africa, "the being of the community is larger than, and prior to, that of any of its individual members since the being of the community as a whole is identical with the being of the total personality of the ancestors" (Nwala 1985:46). Emphasizing this idea of the social nature of existence in Africa, Opoku (1978: 92) argues that the saying is a common one in Africa which holds as follows: "a man is a man because of others, and life is when you are together, alone you are an animal."

The points made above with a particular reference to the value of corporate living among Africans find support in Rousseau's notion of the *General Will* where it is argued that the individual can only find meaning in life by submitting himself to the common will of the community and, in such a corporate capacity, becomes an invisible part of what is called the 'State'. Hegel, appropriating much of Rousseau's theory, submerges individual liberty and freedom in the collective will of the State. However, Hegel's theory fails in that it denies individual freedom and makes people mere appendages to this mystic or abstract notion called the State. But I make bold to say, however, that the African notion of *community* is more germane than that of Rousseau or Hegel in that while emphasizing the corporate nature of human existence, it does not by that token deny individual liberty or the idea of every human being as both unique and important. Agreed that some African writers often exaggerate when they stress the idea of social cohesion in the traditional African society, the truth remains, however, that in all human societies the world over, the closer bonds of human interdependence help in the creation and preservation of social security among human individuals who live together in the community.

As I have shown above, community life helps to create a sense of amity and security among the members of society. But it does this and much more: it also helps in fostering respect for each member of society as well. And if W. E. Abraham's opinion is anything to go by, in Africa, community is usually conceived as having "a sacral unity, which comprises its living members, its dead

(who survive in less substantial form) and its as yet unborn children” (Abraham 1992:25). In the same way, community forms, to a very large extent, the bulwark of the collective interest of its citizens. Abraham’s opinion finds support in J. S. Mbiti’s statement which holds that in Africa, “the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately” (Mbiti 1969:108). But to say that the individual cannot exist outside of the community setting is not to imply, as Hegel did, that the individual is a passive plaything or a mere appendage in what is abstractly called the State. Long ago, Robert Filmer had argued, in a manner similar to Hegel’s that kings ought to be obeyed in everything because they are the ‘fathers’ of their people, possessing an unlimited power said to have been inherited from Adam. Repudiating this type of claim, John Locke reasserted the teaching common to the medieval theorists, which is that, “power in society is held and exercised legitimately only in furtherance of community interests and must be subject to moral restraints”.<sup>1</sup> What the interpretation of John Locke’s statement shows is that it is a moral responsibility on the part of government to promote the interests of those who make up the society. A government which fails to do this would have failed in its duty or moral responsibility.

The relevance of the above to the present discussion is to restate a point made already, which is that human beings need the anodyne of society, or *community* to live a life of self-achievement. And sure enough, it is in society that individuals can ever hope to find social solidarity, brotherhood and mutual well-being. With particular reference to the African world, society is usually organized around several institutions that have evolved over the years to help serve the collective need of the people. The institutions include those of family and government, as well as the educational and the political. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty said, “our path to the truth is through others. Either we attain it with them, or what we attain is not the truth” (Merleau-Ponty as quoted in Droit 1995:19). Emphasizing this need for human solidarity and fellowship in Africa, Taylor (1963:19) argues that among African peoples:

*An individual who is cut off from the community organization is nothing; whereas even the most anti-social idiosyncrasies may be redeemed by renewing the family solidarity.*

## **7. Community and human well-being in the traditional Igbo culture**

So far in the paper, my focus has been on the relationship between the individual and the community in general. In what follows in the remaining part of the paper, I discuss how this relationship was viewed in the traditional Igbo culture. By the *traditional Igbo* I have in mind the Igbo before European contact or the influence of Christianity. Here, I should mention that as powerful as their influences were, colonialism and Christianity did not completely obliterate the old

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this see Matson (1987:320–322).

Igbo way of viewing reality. On the contrary, much of the social custom of the traditional Igbo still holds relevance even today. This explanation is well based. For the purposes of the discussion that follows in the paper, the two questions I pose are of prime importance. One is to inquire into the nature of the relationship that existed between individuals and the community among the traditional Igbo; that is, the Igbo people before European contact. The other is to ask if the individual was seen as possessing any great worth in the social scheme of things, or if in the manner of some Western scholars, the individual was seen as a being of no worth or significance. These questions are germane because the truth of the matter is: our conception of the human person will determine to a very large extent the value or significance we accord to him or her in the social scheme of things.

In a discussion of some of the assumptions underlying the Igbo view of reality, J. O. Oguejiofor made a point, which in my thinking bears a close relevance to some of the issues I address in the paper. Oguejiofor (1996:14) tells us that in describing the spirit of a people, one is in actual fact describing “their ethos, that is, their qualities, temperament or attitudinal inclinations, their dominant assumptions, the underlying sentiments that inform their beliefs, customs and practices”. What is here suggested is that there are some dominant attitudes or recurring elements of life, which define the cultural patterns of any given race, or people, which can be identified in the way they act, interact or behave. Among the Igbo, for example, one shared attitudinal inclination is the belief that human existence only makes meaning within a social setting. The Igbo illustrate this with the analogy of the bamboo trees and what in some parts of Africa is called the ‘iroko’ tree. While it is easy for a strong wind or rainstorm to destroy the isolated and lone-standing ‘iroko’ tree, by contrast the bamboo trees that stand together in a cluster or in unison easily withstand the onslaught of the whirlwind or thunderstorm.

Also illustrated by the analogy of the bamboo and ‘iroko’ trees is the idea that the individual needs the support of other human beings to weather the storms of life. However, this idea of human co-operative instinct is not specific to Igbo or even African thinking. The English also say, for example, that ‘unity is strength’, meaning that it is through fraternal relationships that we can find social security and protection in life. However, with particular reference to the Igbo way of viewing things, scholars are agreed that ‘community spirit’ is very strong among the people. Among the traditional Igbo, a person was only assured of security by being attached to his or her community. From the time an individual is born, until the time he dies, he is made aware of his dependence on his kin group and his community. From his earliest age, the individual is made aware not only of his reliance on his community but also of the need to make his own contribution to the group to which he owes much. Contrasting the African and Western ways of viewing the relationship between the individual and community, Theophilus Okere says that one often hears of the ‘vaunted rugged individualism’ of the West. As a counterpoise, he argues that in Africa:

*Man is not just an individual, an island, left to himself and sufficient to himself, on his own. Man is essentially community. No one ever came to being as a bolt from the blues, like an oil bean seed falling from the sky, as our proverb says, 'I am always we'. We in the nuclear family, we in the extended family, we in the village and town etc. (Okere 2005:3).*

Setting aside for a moment the sexist use of the word *man* by some of the scholars whose views are cited in the paper (a use which in some circles may not only be offensive but shows insensitivity to the need for gender balancing), the import of what Okere says above is simply to show that in Africa the individual cannot achieve much in life without the support of other members of society. This fact may not be too obvious to the person brought up in a social setting like the West where governments make provisions of social welfare packages to meet the needs of the poor or the less privileged. In Africa where such provisions are absent, it is family or community that fulfils this role of government. Returning to the discussion of how the Igbo view the role of community, I need to add that even those Igbo in Diaspora still experience this sense of being bonded or yoked to their land of nativity or home community. The dispersed Igbo, or those scattered in other parts of the globe do not by the very fact of living outside their home communities detach themselves from their kin back home. Rather, they are expected, as a social demand, not only to contribute to the development of their native communities but also to be active members of their town unions in their various places of sojourning. Stressing the value the Igbo place on community life, V. C. Uchendu remarks that among the Igbo, an individual who is not attached to the patrilineage (called Umunna) is said to be an Igbo without citizenship both in the world of the living and in the 'world' of the ancestors.

The reference to ancestors above should not be taken to mean that traditional Africans were primitive or overtly given to myths or fables. The truth is that every race has its own myths or ways of explaining reality. This is the point that Wole Soyinka makes in his *magnum opus* entitled, *Myth, Literature and the African World* when he argues that in the African world, human beings exist "in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores" (Soyinka 1979:xii). However, recourse to myths or legends is not meant merely to titillate the human imagination for the bizarre or the wacky. Rather, 'myths', Soyinka (1979:3) avers further "arise from man's attempt to externalize and communicate his inner intuitions." With particular reference to the myths on the nature of chthonic existence, Africans employ various myths to explain the relationship between those in the terrestrial world and those who inhabit the ancestral mode of being. According to this account, the so-called *dead* people who inhabit the ancestral world still maintain in spirit world the lineage system they were used to in pre-mortem existence. Like the living, "they are organized in lineages with patrilineal emphasis just as are those on earth" (Uchendu 1965:10). According to this account also, "the past is the ancestors', the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn" (Soyinka 1979:3). Similarly, the ancestors (as do the deities and the unborn) share

the same experiences with those in pre-mortem life – obeying the same laws, suffering the same miseries, uncertainties and agonies as do the living.

### 8. Human interdependence and the notion of beneficent reciprocity

Underlying the Igbo maxim of social life is the demand for what is described as ‘beneficial reciprocity’ – the realization that no individual is an ‘island’ unto himself. No individual (or spirit), the Igbo aver, no matter how strong, is self-sufficient. As Uchendu (1965:11–13) reminds us, the notion of ‘human interdependence’ is a constant theme in Igbo folklore and proverbs. To underline this truth, the Igbo would say of a person that he is “never so stout that flesh covers his nails.” The simple fact being conveyed by this saying is that a person will always have a loving neighbour or kinsman who will care enough to point to him or her the need to appear decent and presentable in public. Similarly, the Igbo expression *ikwu na ibe* (person and community) is meant to show the type of bond that exists between the individual and his community; *ikwu na ibe* refers to the entire community of kinsmen, children, women and all other relations. To underscore the importance they place on the value of social life, the Igbo would regard as a terrible punishment, the form of sanction which leads to a person being ostracized by his or her community. Again, an offence against the community is looked upon as offence against one’s fellow citizens or kinsmen. Such offence does not only have the effect of causing shame to one’s self or family, but might also lead to the severing of the link that binds the community to the ancestors; that is, the *dead-but-alive* relations who inhabit the spirit world.

In African thought generally, the ancestors are believed to have a beneficent relationship with the living members of their erstwhile communities. But whether or not the belief in ancestors makes sense is beside the point. The importance of such a belief lies in the fact that it could help serve as motivation for people to lead socially responsible lives. In particular, the belief in an ‘afterlife’ has both social as well as moral functions. For one, the expectation of an ‘other life’ in which people will be rewarded for virtuous living is an encouragement for good conduct and social responsibility among those who make up the community. For another, the hope of attaining the enviable status of an ancestor could inspire people with the spirit of hard work, industry and integrity in the community. In other words, apart from whatever spiritual values it may have, the belief in an *afterlife* has its social significance as well. And far from being a mere illusory wish that life should go on forever, such beliefs served as vehicles for social reconstruction and control for traditional Africans.

So the need for community arises from a number of reasons. Apart from helping to give the individual the needed sense of security, “it enables economic life to be more efficiently organized; it helps promote national unity, and allows for inequalities to be countered” (Heywood 1977:135–136). In other words, society (i.e. community) exists to further individual interests and social wellbeing.

Usually, in the Igbo world, in carrying out his obligations, the individual expects his community to reciprocate by providing him with the needed security and protective shield. Social anthropologists and other scholars who have studied the patterns of life among the pre-colonial Igbo society recount that it was rare to find cases of individuals who starved in the society simply because they lacked food or personal wealth. Recollecting the faint idea he had about traditional Igbo life before he was sold into slavery around 1756, the popular Igbo slave, Olaudah Equiano speaks of the Igbo social life this way: “everyone contributes something to the common stock, and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we had no beggars” (Equiano as quoted by Madu 1996:149). This opinion is probably exaggerated but the point remains that among the traditional Igbo, to beg for food or alms was viewed as a thing of disgrace not only to one’s family, but to the community as a whole. Usually, the community made special provisions to cater for the less privileged or those members who were unable to take care of themselves. The extended family system practiced by most African groups also serves as a veritable means for taking care of the needy members of the group. This communal care or *esprit de corps* attitude of the traditional Igbo was extended even to slaves. To quote Equiano’s words once again:

*With us [the Igbo], they [the slaves] do no more work than other members of the community, food and lodging were nearly the same as ours (ibid).*

### 9. Egalitarian individualism

The Igbo, like other peoples of Africa are generally said to have a strong attachment to their community, clan or village-group. But at the same time, they are also said to be very individualistic. This seeming contradiction has been termed by scholars as an ‘antinomy’; that is, the antinomy of balancing the strong individualism of the Igbo and their fierce loyalty to the village or community. Mbonu Ojike tries to resolve this seeming contradiction by arguing thus:

*Clan is the bulwark of African society. It is so clearly organized that there is not a single African who does not know his clan... We are clannish in politics, and clannish in religion; social discipline and social structure follow a clearly distinguishable family structure (Ojike 1946:138).*

However, to argue that the Igbo have a strong attachment to their community or clan does not detract from the fact the individual is also seen as a unique being in the sense that he cannot be completely submerged in the collective or the anonymous entity called ‘community’. The African concept of family, community or clan does not, according Mbonu Ojike, prevent the development of the individual or discourage personal initiatives and self-reliance. On the contrary:

*What it does in contrast to western ways is place the right of the family above that of the individual. That is why there are many social customs which bind an individual (ibid: 138–139).*

Corroborating the opinion above, Achebe (1975:98) says that the Igbo postulate the concept of man as both a *unique creation* and the work of a *unique creation*. The concept of a *unique creation* simply suggests that every individual is matchless and special and inimitable. A number of other scholars have marvelled at the range of Igbo egalitarianism and individualism. According to one such scholar, J. O. Oguejiofor, on the personal level, the Igbo are noted for their self-confidence and for the strong conviction that one person is as good as another (Oguejiofor 1996:20–21). In interpersonal relationships as well, the Igbo, we are told, are not noted for cringing servility – a trait, which Oguejiofor (ibid) says, has often been misconstrued for pride and lack of respect. This fierce egalitarian attitude of the Igbo is also said to be a marked feature of traditional Igbo political organization. To emphasize this idea of self-assurance and poise among the Igbo, Richard Henderson, an American anthropologist who studied the Igbo community of Onitsha a few decades ago wrote a book about the Igbo and titled it, *The King in Every Man* (see Henderson 1971).

The concept of every man as unique is observed in the Igbo belief that a person should work, that s/he should be independent of others as much as possible, and that success results from frugality and industry. But Achebe suggests that the Igbo concept of individualism differs from the Western type in which the individual often thinks he is totally free and existentially alone in the world. This Western attitude; we are told, is different from the Igbo type since in the latter, the individual never sees himself as absolutely supreme in the sense that he has nothing to do with his fellows. The Igbo, Achebe (1975:98) tells us, are unlikely to:

*Concede to the individual an absolutism they deny even to chi'. The obvious curtailment of man's power to walk alone and do as he wills is provided by another potent force – the will of his community.*

From the above, we notice one of the major shortcomings with the existentialist movement in contemporary philosophy. The movement set out to defend the individual against the depersonalizing effect of what in society is called *the collectivity*. However, the movement ended portraying the individual as so unique as being able to exist without the protective shell offered by society. Against this type of opinion, in Africa, the individual is defined in reference to the environing community. This is the point that Omoyajowo (1975:45) makes when he declares that the “dread and dereliction of isolation” is usually felt by Africans on both the individual and corporate levels and that to be cut off from one’s natural relationship with the soil or society, is akin to the curse laid upon Cain in the Bible. According to the argument:

*It is the African's incorporation in society that really makes him a man. And in this status, he recognizes also his individuality, for he cannot exchange his place with anyone else... For this reason, man in Africa is a responsible man; he is social man and moral man who lives according to the accepted norms of society and the code of conduct within his community (Omoyajowo 1975:45).*

### **10. Some critical commentary on the complex of individualism and egalitarianism**

One can hardly doubt the logic of relevance regarding what the scholars or social anthropologists have said a propos the nature of the relationship that exists between the individual and community in the African cultural environment. However, much of their findings in this regard could be refined and given a scientific status if they are critically re-examined from the psychoanalytic perspective, especially the aspect on the complex of individualism and the role of society in moulding human character. Be that as it may, the need still arises to challenge some of the sweeping assumptions of the scholars and anthropologists on the matter. With particular reference to the Igbo people of Nigeria, the aspect of the discussion that is of special interest to us in the paper is the aspect on individualism and egalitarianism. On this matter, one observes a sense of intractable analytical paradox with regards to the overt emphasis by the scholars on the complex of individualism and egalitarianism. Here, I should admit that there is probably nothing wrong when a people or group of people are said to possess these character traits or dispositional qualities and/or persona. The only problem with what the scholars say on the matter is, in my thinking that they often fail to define their terms or give a sense of what it means to say of a society that it is *egalitarian*, or of an individual that s/he is individualistic, unique or idiosyncratic, etc.

To be individualistic could mean one of two things: it could mean that a person is independent, unique and distinctive. Or, it could be interpreted to mean that an individual is inhibited, inscrutable and enigmatic. To be unique is often a sign that an individual is living authentically – that s/he does not allow his or herself to be submerged or swallowed up in the anonymous crowd. To be inhibited or enigmatic, on the other hand, is often symptomatic of mental obtuseness or derangement. In other words, to be overtly individualistic is not honorific; rather, it is often a negative attribute and a sign that a person is a psychopath. More importantly, *individualism* as a human tendency or quality is not peculiar to the Igbo or even Africans, but is a universal human quality. Indeed, one major problem that the Western civilization faces today is this overt emphasis on the ideal individualism over that of communalism and social co-operation.

### **11. Summary and conclusion**

As I conclude this paper, I sum up by restating the opinion expressed by the late Nigerian sage and thinker Emmanuel Onyechere Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe on the way to achieving social development and economic well-being in emergent African societies. While not deprecating modern developmental strategies as posited by the scholars, Anyiam-Osigwe however argues that these have to be complemented, reinforced and sustained by pristine African values as their viable components. According to this argument:

*In the quest for holistic and sustainable human development [in Africa], it is essential to engender and sustain symmetry or correspondence between the individual and community such that the interest and identity of the individual is absolutely integrated into the collective interest and identity of the community (Anyiam-Osigwe 1999:2).*

The aspect of Anyiam-Osigwe's remark that is of immediate relevance to the issues discussed in the paper is the aspect that emphasizes the issue of the interdependence that exists between an individual and a community in the African world. And as the paper has revealed, in Africa, it is believed that human well-being and rapprochement can only be achieved in a social setting. Emphasizing the same point, long ago Thomas Hobbes had posited a natural state of things in which the lives of humans were characterized by incessant fear, war, and abject insecurity – necessitating the establishment of a civil order to address the ensuing social disorder and tension. What is here suggested by the Hobbesian notion of a *state of nature* is the undeniable need of community to moderate between citizens in situations of social disagreement or discord. To put the issue succinctly, it is only in society (i.e. community), more than any other association that human sociability is nourished.

For while the Cynics, as we have seen above, would show aversion to community and all human social ties, in Africa, it is by being attached to his or her community that the life of an individual is said to have meaning or find value. And while in the Nazi and Stalinist societies the life of the individual only added instrumental value in the sense that people were seen as tools to be used and discarded, in Africa, the life of the individual is seen as possessing great value and worth. With the Igbo in particular, T. U. Nwala informs us that the individual human being is not only seen as the 'main actor' in the drama of existence, s/he is also regarded as 'the most important aspect of creation' (Nwala 1985:41). In holding this position, the African would not, however, argue that the individual is higher than his or her community or on an equal pedestal with it. On the contrary, it is believed in Africa that the individual can only be defined by reference to the environing community.

Against the belief of those who think that community is unimportant, the truth of the matter is that among the ties necessary for human social development, the most essential appears to be community. And even though socialization is not without its dangers, its advantages far outweigh its dangers and problems – it is the only method for strengthening human relationships and mutual wellbeing. Both as individuals and as groups, people need the protective cover that community life offers. Again, community is essential to achieving human social goals and aspirations. The African, more than any other, understands this truth. Hence, K. O. Opoku makes the important statement that in Africa:

*A man is a man because of others, and life is when you are together, alone you are an animal (Opoku 1978:92).*

The truth of what Opoku says above is hardly in doubt; for as the history of human experience shows, it is only through fraternal relationships that human life

can progress or flourish. However, the idea of fraternal relationship is only meaningful in a social setting where people interact together or have mutual concurrence with one another. In the same way, the relationship that exists between the individual and the community is mutual rather than antagonistic. In the words of Ruth Benedict, society (i.e., community):

*Is never an entity separated from individuals who compose it. No individual can arrive even at the threshold of his potentialities without a culture in which he participates. Conversely, no civilization has in it an element which in the last analysis is not the contribution of an individual* (Benedict 1946:234).

Explaining the point above, Ruth Benedict remarks that it is society or community that provides the *culture* from which the individual gets the raw material to build his or her life. It is for reasons such as the above that Africans argue that it is in community that the life of the individual gets its meaning or significance.

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