

## **IGWEBUIKE: THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN IGBO-AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

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### **Abstract**

*Generally, the concept of beauty has become a recurrent decimal globally and this has over time paved way for beauty pageantry-a competition held to determine the most beautiful, both of male and female categories. The idea of beauty or the beautiful connotes a pleasing personal appearance or an attractive impressive personal quality. Accordingly, the idea of the beautiful has become a paradigm that is employed to determine what is fashionable and the pace of fashion as well. However, the concept of beauty is appreciated differently from culture to culture, thereby leading to a variance in fashion globally. This piece focuses on Igwebuiké, which is an Igbo-African philosophy of complementarity and the substratum of African traditional values, philosophy and religion; to explain how the concept of beauty is perceived in Igbo-African philosophy. For the purpose of this study, the indigenous holistic method of inquiry is adopted.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuiké, Philosophy, Complementarity, Igbo, African, Beauty or Beautiful,

### **Introduction**

The question of beauty is crucial to several people despite racial, cultural and gender boundaries. In fact, much of humanity is continually in search of beauty and the beautiful. Christians and Muslims alike emphasize on preparing for transition into a place called 'heaven' or 'paradise', which they describe as most beautiful. Paradise as it were is described as a place that has streets paved with pure gold garnished with most sparkling metals and precious stones. The Buddhists and the Hindus, also spend much time preparing for a beautiful place.<sup>54</sup> Heaven and paradise are described as a place of happiness and peace, induced by the beauty which surrounds or envelops the place. In contemporary history humanity has spent lots of money in building opulent enclaves in pursuit of happiness that it induces. Beauty or the beautiful is an essential and luxurious commodity. Thus, this is an indication that the subject of beauty is one of the most important aspects of human reality. However, despite the universal pursuit of the beautiful, the concept of beauty is not universal, rather it is conceived

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<sup>54</sup>Lewis, J. *The Religions of the World*. (New York: Cadillac Publishing Co. Inc. 1958), 26- 30.

differently and it is embedded in the cultural milieu of various communities<sup>55</sup>. This sets the approach for this work, as an inquiry into the conceptions of beauty; particularly in African philosophy and Igbo cultural thought will be discussed. This paper therefore, investigates beauty or the beautiful as it is conceptualized in African philosophy. To proceed with this discus, it is expedient that the main concepts employed are clarified accordingly for better understanding.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

*Igwebuike* is the heart of African thought, and in fact, the modality of being in African philosophy. It is taken from the Igbo language, which is a composite word made up of three dimensions. Therefore, it can be employed as a word or used as 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. The three words involved: *Igwe* is a noun which means number or population, usually a huge number or population. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is another verb, which means *strength* or *power*. Thus, put together, it means 'number is strength' or 'number is power', that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force.<sup>56</sup> Its English equivalent is 'complementarity'. At this level, no task is beyond their collective capability. It is a concept that was employed by African traditional philosophers of the complementary school of thought to discuss the nature of the observed African reality.<sup>57</sup>

**Igbo:** the Igbo people are located in southeastern Nigeria and found, mainly, in Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Imo, and parts of Bayelsa, Delta and River states of Nigeria. The Igbo land shares boundary on the north with the Igala, Idoma and Ogoja peoples, on the east with the Ibibio, on the south with the Ijaw of the delta region, and on the west with the Edo-speaking peoples of Edo State of Nigeria. Igbo group is one of the three major ethnic groups in the country. The River Niger divided the Igbo land into two unequal parts: The Eastern Igbo, which is the larger part, on the eastern bank of the River Niger and western Igbo,

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<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.* 26-30.

<sup>56</sup>Kanu, A. I. (2016a). *Igwebuike* as a trend in African philosophy. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 2. 1. 97-101.

<sup>4</sup>Kanu, A. I. (2016b). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African hermeneutic of globalization. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 2. 1. 1-7.

the smaller portion, on the western bank of the Niger. The two sections, nevertheless, share many cultural affinities. Today, the word 'Igbo' is used in three senses, as Uchendu has rightly noted, namely, the Igbo territory, the native speakers of the language, and finally a language group.<sup>58</sup> The Igbo language belongs to the 'kwa' language group of the Niger-Congo language family.<sup>59</sup> Igbo land is not a homogeneous entity but characterized by different sub-cultures with significant differences among them. While Forde and Jones distinguished five cultural sub-groups of the Igbo culture area, Onwuejiegwu identified six.<sup>60</sup> For instance, Forde and Jones (1950) division is as follows:

- (1) Northern or Onitsha Igbo which includes towns like Awka, Udi, Enugu, Enugu Ukwu, Nsukka, Aro Ndizeogu, Onitsha, Agukwu Nri, Igboukwu, Nanka, and Ihiala.
- (2) Southern or Owerri Igbo, which includes towns like Aba, Umuahia, Owerri, Ahoada, Okigwe, and Orlu;
- (3) Western Igbo, which is the part of Igboland in Delta State and includes towns like Asaba, Agbor, Kwalle, Ilah, and Aboh;
- (4) Eastern or Cross River Igbo, which includes towns like Abam, Ohafia, Afikpo, Arochukwu, and Abriba.
- (5) North-Eastern Igbo, which includes towns like Ezza, Uburu, Okposi, and Abakkaliki.

The differences noticeable among the Igbos are as a result of various influences ranging from historical contacts with their neighbors to migration. The Cross River Igbo (Eastern Igbo), for instance, are assumed to have adopted their specialized age set system and double descent system from their Ibibio neighbors<sup>61</sup>. However, drawing attention to the great fact of differences is not to deny that there are overwhelming similarities uniting all the sub-groups. Such similarities are in the institutions and language. For instance, the basic cultural uniformity shared by the Igbo includes one Igbo language, kolanut and white

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<sup>58</sup>Uchendu V.C. *The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria*. (London: Holt Rinehalt and Winston. 1965), 13-15.

<sup>59</sup>Forde D. & Jones G.I. *The Ibo and Ibibio Speaking Peoples of Southeastern Nigeria* (London: International African Institute, 1950). 44-46.

<sup>60</sup>Onwuejiegwu M.A. *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom & Hegemony*. (London: Ethiopie Publishing Corporation, 1981), 8-11.

<sup>8</sup>Chinyere U. Self-identity and chieftaincy titles among the Igbo's of Southeastern Nigeria. *LUMINA: Holy Name University*. Vol. 20, No.2. 1-23.

chalk customs, the vigor in Igbo music and dance movements, highly developed arts of wall decoration and delicate body paintings, pottery designs, and 'mmuo' (masquerade) institution. Socio-political institutions like the age grade system, and 'umunna' (patrilineage) groupings, are also common to all Igbo culture areas. Again, the honorary chieftaincy conferment is also a common practice among the Igbo people.

**African:** an African can be construed as a native of Africa, one who can be biologically traced to Africa. Africa is one of the continents in the world; and it is the second largest continent both in area and population, having an area of 11,699 square miles, more than three times the size of USA. In 1990, Africa had a population of 642 million representing 12% of the world's population. Africa is made up of over fifty nations with an estimated one thousand different languages spoken and as many distinct ethnic group. Africa is perhaps the most linguistically and ethnically diverse of the entire world's continent. Africa is endowed with immense natural and human resources, as well as great cultural, ecological and economic diversity. In terms of natural resources, Africa is the world's richest continent. It has 50% of world's gold, most of the world's diamonds and chromium, 90% of the cobalt, 40% of world's potential hydro-electric power, 65% of the manganese, millions of acres of untilled farmland and other natural resources such as crude oil and gas.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, the land mark bordered by the Mediterranean Sea, Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean and the red sea is known as Africa.

**Beauty or Beautiful:** the concept of beauty or the beautiful denotes something that possesses a pleasing and impressive quality. It is combinations of appealing qualities that makes something attractive and striking to look at, listen to, smell, taste or touch. It is against this back drop that the concept of beauty in African philosophy shall be discussed.

### **On the Notion of Beauty in Africa - Igbo Perspective**

The philosophy of beauty or philosophy of the beautiful is a developing discourse in African philosophy; however, this does not imply that there was no African conception of beauty. Rather, African philosophers are now beginning to earnestly have more than a passing and non-technical interest in the reality of the beautiful. In the context of African cultures, the concept of beauty or beautiful is

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<sup>62</sup>Kwame, Y. 2011. "The Impact of Globalization on African Culture". Retrieved online at [www.africanresource.com](http://www.africanresource.com) on July 3, 2019. 4-16.

indeed unique.<sup>63</sup> In Africa beauty is generally associated with women and every woman feels inadequate if she is not beautiful, regardless of all her other achievements. In a sociological field study conducted by Arden Haselmann in Senegal, some of the male participants associated beauty with women. African conceptualizations of beauty are in feminine terms;<sup>64</sup> and perhaps every usage of the word “beauty” or “beautiful” is usually constructed to celebrate womanhood or feminine spirit. Beauty connotes celebration of worth, value, quality, essence, and desirability. Hence, the concept of beauty in Africa is quite broad, and varies from one cultural community to another. However, as Vimbai Matiza rightly observes, the concept of beauty in Africa tends to indicate external and internal qualities of a person or object. Moreover, the concept of beautiful in Africa bears some moral underpinning beyond teleos. For instance, in the language of Shona in Zimbabwe; the word “*kunaka*” (beauty) denotes good manners and physical endowment. Among the Igbo’s of Nigeria the word “*o chakomaka*” is used metaphorically to refer to a woman who is only endowed or physically attractive, but lack good manners. A woman described as such is usually avoided, despised and not desired or valued despite her sparkling physical beauty.<sup>65</sup> Although, from a sociological field study conducted in Senegal, abstractions from the responses of the participants affirm that “inner and outer beauties are not mutually exclusive”.<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, a woman who has good manners (*agwa oma*) but is not physically endowed or attractive is not often desired by the le crème of the society; and despite her good behaviours, if she attends a function she is given a relegated place away from public glare. As a result, a woman who is bestowed with inner beauty (*ezi agwa*) but not endowed with outer beauty (*mma ahu*) would usually pad up her body with oils and accessories in order to appear to have a complete beauty. Such act is described as “*ihe ndi eji edozi akpukpo ahu*”, meaning beauty enhancement or make-over. By applying make-up or cosmetics on her body, she becomes attractive and it is believed that she will earn upward review of her value in terms of beauty judgment. Thus, among the Igbos in Africa, beauty is defined as unison (or harmony) of physical attractiveness (*o mara mma*) and good

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<sup>63</sup>Haselmann, A. “All Women Talk” – A Study of Beauty and Female Identity in Senegalese Culture. (Dakar: Wheaton College Peace and Conflict Studies Africa. 2014), 12.

<sup>64</sup> Matiza, V. M. African Social Concept of Beauty: Its Relevancy to Literary Criticism. Asian Journal of Social Science & Humanities. Vol. 2 No. 2, 61-70. (2013), 28

<sup>65</sup>Greer, G. The Whole Woman. (London: Transworld Publishers. 1999), 42

<sup>66</sup> Haselmann, A. “All Women Talk” – A Study of Beauty and Female Identity in Senegalese Culture. (Dakar: Wheaton College Peace and Conflict Studies Africa. 2014), 65

manners (*agwa oma*) – this is to the extent that it applies to people. Also, note that in the African contexts there are two ways about it, there is the internal beauty which is usually seen through someone’s deeds and the external beauty that is seen by physical eyes<sup>67</sup>. A person can therefore be said to lack in beauty if they lack one of the halves that constitute the beautiful.

More so, functionality is another quality that characterizes beauty in African context. The concept of “beauty” is not for the sake of being beautiful; instead it has a social or communal inclination, rather than being individualistic. Also, from African perspective, the ‘concept of beauty’ has to have a purpose which it fulfills. Beauty must serve to communicate values, norms, morals, and purpose; in other words beauty must edify the community. In investigating the concept of beauty among the Sudanese, it was observed that beauty is found in “good behavior, skills, knowledge, and dress” as well as in “physical features”. There cannot be beauty for its own sake; beauty must be intended to serve the society or the cultural ambiance it stems from. This means that any kind of beauty that a person or thing intends to achieve as beauty; void of the sensitivities of others in the community is ‘un-African’. Thus, beauty in an African context implies working together. In other words, beauty must reflect the communalistic nature of African societies. The general idea about beauty in Africa is that “a person or a thing is considered good, and thus, beautiful, if directed toward achieving or enhancing harmony and order in reality of which the community, people, and things are a part”.<sup>68</sup> The beauty of a person or thing should be participatory and depict interconnectivity rather than individualistic; and it should be meaningful only in the context of the acceptable standards of the community. Usually, if a person’s action is seen as “fostering or leading to disharmony in the community and in nature or reality at large, then it is considered as bad or ugly”. The Ubuntu dictum for example states that “I am because we are”; this can be construed as a person’s beauty communicates universality. To this extent, the concept of beauty in Africa is objective in that it communicates a communal standard such that I am beautiful because my community members affirm my beauty as such, but outside my community the affirmed beauty may be disavowed. What is considered beautiful is meaningful only to the people in that context. But then it is also subjective in that the standard of beauty is different from community to community.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 61-78.

## **The Idea of Relational Theory of Beauty**

Relational concept of beauty is an Afrocentric theoretical perspective that objects derives their beauty from other objects proximate to it. Other objects are the source of beauty in another object. As the saying goes “a tree does not make a forest beautiful”<sup>69</sup>; without other objects an individual object cannot be said to be beautiful in a meaningful sense. For example, without the moon and stars sparkling objects at night cannot be that sparkling. Plants and animals are radiant because there is the sun and other objects that also contribute to its radiance, etc. In fact, it is only in comparing oneself to the other that one come to appreciate personal beauty in terms of its gradient and meaning. The other individual mirrors the beauty of the person either negatively or positively. An object is considered beautiful to the extent that it co-relates and inter-relates with other objects within the cultural axiom it belongs. Without the other, a person or object cannot affirm its beauty.<sup>70</sup>

The general concept for Afrocentric relational theory is “I am because we are”. This means that persons, objects, phenomena and concepts do not exist alone, individuated and isolated; rather they exist in relation with other persons, objects, phenomena and concepts. In fact, an Igbo proverb which states that; “Ife kwulu, ife akwudebeya”, meaning if one stands, another thing stands by it, clearly captures this view. One of the African philosophical theories that best explains this ontological experience is called *Ibuanyidanda*: a theory of being developed by Innocent Asouzu, based essentially on Igbo metaphysics. The most essential proposition of *Ibuanyidanda* (which is also reflected by other African ontological theories) is that being exist as a cohort or cluster. This is captured in the statement: “to be is to be in mutual complementary relationship (ka so mu adina) and its negation is to be alone (ka so mu di)”.<sup>71</sup> Deriving from this, Asouzu renders a normative account of his theory thus: things do not only exist as cohort or cluster, but they equally exist to complement each other – hence, they are fragments of the whole.

The most important concept in *Ibuanyidanda* literature is “missing links”. Asouzu posits that “anything that exists serves as missing links of reality”; that no existent can uphold its being solely on its own but “can do this only with reference to the whole and in complementary harmony with other missing

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<sup>69</sup> Asouzu, I. I. *Ibuanyidanda and Philosophy of Essence*. (Calabar: University of Calabar Press. 2011), 23.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>71</sup> Asouzu, I. I. *Ibuanyidanda: New Complementary Ontology Beyond World-immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Impositions*. (Zurich: LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien. 2007), 50-63.

links".<sup>72</sup> This means that an object serves to announce other possible objects in the horizon. It is for this reason; Asouzu argues that "there is need to consider the diverse units that are involved in any given context, not only with regard to their historical conditions". This is important, given that being always manifests itself in relation with other beings. The lesson in the Ibuanyidanda approach to the study of phenomenon is that no existent can be individuated without taking into account the correlative objects it relates to. That is, an object is never individuated rather it is interconnected with other objects in the horizon. To fully understand an object, therefore grasp its essence, it requires that an individual study it in relation with the correlative objects to which it interconnects and complements or appear together.<sup>73</sup>

On the basis of this, for one to grasp the aesthetical essence of objects he/she has to analyze it not in isolation to other objects or as isolated individuated object, but as "object-with-objects", in relations with other objects it complements or that coexist with it in the overall framework of the horizon that projects it.<sup>74</sup> It is in judging beauty this way that one can grasp the truth or comprehensive meaning about beauty. In the African philosophy, objects are seen as an interdependent whole in order to manifest their aesthetics values; and it is only in this manner that the aesthetic value of a person or an object can be realized. The life forms and art objects, taken individually, do not manifest their aesthetical value as it should. Experience of beauty has to do with wholeness and interdependence; and recognizing one's place in the connective web of other existents. In Africa, the term "beauty" is used in a communal/communitarian sense. Beauty involves feeling of a complexity of relations and complementarity, rather than a feeling of opposites and isolation. Beautiful implies self-realization in communal sense, that is, the tendency to want to flourish and realize oneself in harmony with other existents. In sum, relational theory of beauty holds that beauty is a category that belongs to the definition or basic constitution of the relations between two or more persons/objects considered as complementary whole, so that without the relation, persons and objects lose their individual sense of beauty.

### **Art Beauty and Personal Beauty: An Over view**

Through time, studies have shown that the ontological progression of person's beauty is different from the kind of beauty that subsists in objects; the beauty-in-

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>73</sup> Asouzu, I. I. 2011. *Op.Cit.* 23.

<sup>74</sup> Ikuenobe, P. *Good and Beautiful: A Moral-Aesthetic View of Personhood in African Communal Traditions. Essays in Philosophy*, (assessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2019), 32.



person progresses directly proportional to a person's age in a positive direction until middle age, and progresses inversely proportional to a person's age as he/she gets older, i.e. a person gets more beautiful as he/she grows older from birth. However, beauty-in-person declines or deteriorates when the individual gets to the peak of the prime of his/her age; and declines further as he/she gets older. The peak of the prime of a persons' age is the middle age which ranges from 50 to 55 years in male and 45 to 50 years in female. Once a person passes the middle age, beauty-in-person starts to diminish. Meanwhile, beauty-in object progresses directly proportional to an object's age in a negative direction. That is to say, that an art object gets uglier as it gets older in age; except perhaps when care attention is continually given upon such object.<sup>75</sup> An art object attains the peak of beauty at the point of complete creation. But then the beauty-in-object starts to decline from that point it is fully crafted, all things being equal, until the beauty wears itself out in the object. It is noteworthy that beauty-in person and beauty-in-art can be amended in upward direction.<sup>76</sup> However, beauty-in-art cannot be amended to attain the prime stage which it was when the moment it was definitely created; and beauty-in-person, once it passes its prime, cannot be amended to be like the state it was before its prime.

From the fore-going it can be deduced that beauty is neither eternal nor immutable whether in person or in object. That is to say, beauty is time bound or dependent. The beautiful is always subject to depreciation.<sup>77</sup> Since beauty is a form of art, it means beauty can be perfected by external agency independent of the object of beauty; or by immediate agency in the case of beauty-in-person.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

This study examines the concept of beauty or the beautiful in African philosophy. It indicated that the concept of beauty in an African context is communal and functional, unlike individualistic conception of beauty in Western philosophy. Hence, the communal conception of beauty means that whatever is judged as beautiful must not be socially disharmonious, but it must also enhance community balance. The functional conception of beauty implies that beauty, in an African context must serve to lead to some purpose. In Africa, beauty is linked with the development of moral awareness; there is no beauty for beauty's

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 6-126

<sup>76</sup>Sartwell, C. (2012). *Beauty*. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Accessed: June. 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019). <http://www.plato.stanford.edu/edu/entries/beauty/>, 234.

<sup>77</sup> Muhammad, B. B. *The Sudanese Concept of Beauty, Spirit Possession, and Power*. *Folklore Forum*. (1993), 88.

sake, it must serve some good. Finally, the beautiful is a two-fold reality: the inner beauty and exterior beauty. Inner beauty refers to good conduct; exterior beauty refers to physical attractiveness. A person or thing is judged beautiful if and only if it reflects both aspects; for the absence of one nullifies the other. This means that beauty in an African context is complementary in the sense that good conduct must complement physical attractiveness and vice versa in order to render an aesthetical appearance complete, because both aspects are relevant to valid aesthetic judgment.

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