

BEING QUA BELONGINGNESS: TOWARDS AN AFRICAN CULTURAL REDEFINITION

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Abstract

Iroegbu's concept of being as belongingness answers the question of: "what is being?" from an African perspective. The philosophy of belongingness is one that touches virtually on every aspect of the human life, be it political, economic, social, ethics, etc, and demands an inextricable reciprocity with the act of acting, relating and communing. It is also one that identifies with the categories of the African people. As an idea, it is substantive, egalitarian, communalistic, transcendental and yet concrete. At a time when globalization with its weapon of individuality, among others, is eating deep into Africa and her values, the philosophy of belongingness is in tandem with the call for an African cultural renaissance. Above all, the philosophy of belongingness answers the fundamental question of the reason for existence, not just abstractly but concretely: the reason to be is belongingness.

Introduction

The fundamental question within the parameters of enquiry in metaphysics has been on the nature of being. It is one that has remained evergreen right from the Pre-Socratic period to the Contemporary Era¹. This enquiry was set in an articulated motion by Parmenides when he argued that whatever is, is being. He further said that being is one, eternal and unchanging, meaning that whatever changes is not being². This notwithstanding, Heraclitus of Ephesus was chiefly famous in antiquity for his doctrine that everything is in a state of flux, as such, being is characterised by flux³. Plato, while disagreeing with Heraclitus on his doctrine of flux, agrees with Parmenides that reality is eternal and unchanging, however differs from Parmenides in arguing that being is multiple rather than

¹ Andre Anah, *Belongingness: A Redefinition of Being*, In *Father Kpim: Philosophy and Theology of Pantaleon Iroegbu*. Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2005, p. 240.

² Joseph Omoregbe, *Metaphysics without Tears*. Joja Educational research and Publications, Lagos, 2002, 1.

³ Bertrand Russell, *History of western philosophy*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1975, 59.

one; and these are the forms in the Platonic World of Forms. Aristotle who defines Metaphysics as the study of 'being qua being' identifies being with God, it is therefore not surprising that in Aristotle, Metaphysics becomes theology⁴.

The emergence of the Medieval Epoch did not alter the centrepiece⁵ of metaphysical enquiry. St Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle in identifying being with God, an argument which Duns Scotus rejects and proposes that creatures are beings in the real sense of the word and not in an analogical sense as Aquinas had taught. During the Modern Period, the problem of being did not feature prominently as philosophers were more concerned with the problem of substance. The problem however emerged in Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel, in whom being became a mystery⁶.

These notwithstanding, in recent times, African thinkers have tried to redefine being, moving away from the elusive and unsubstantive concepts employed by their Western predecessors and counterparts. They have tried to define being using the categories common to the experience of the African. For African scholars like Pantaleon Iroegbu, *to be is to belong*, thus *Being is Belongingness*. The burden of this piece is to explore the provenance of his redefinition of being and its dimensional implications.

Igbo Ontology as the Provenance of Being Qua Belongingness

Pantaleon believes that the Igbo world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny⁷. Without any choice of its own, with neither interrogations nor dialogue, the child is made to be an Igbo in its prolixities. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world⁸. The communal individuality of the Igbo is expressed in proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the

⁴ Joseph Omoregbe, *Metaphysics without Tears*, 2.

⁵ Izu Onyeocha, *Beginning Metaphysics*. Enugu: Victojo Productions, 2009, 74.

⁶ Joseph Omoregbe, *Metaphysics without Tears*, 4-5

⁷ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*. Owerri: IUP, 344

⁸ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 345.

individual belongs⁹. The Igbos, like the Akans of Ghana believe that “when a man descends from heaven, he descends into a community”. The community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group¹⁰.

During one of the feasts organized by Okonkwo in the work *Things Fall Apart*, his uncle Uchendu prayed into the open the essence of the Igbo philosophy of belongingness:

We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him¹¹.

After the feast, when one of the eldest men of the *umunna* rose to thank Okonkwo, the reason for the Igbo philosophy of belongingness is revealed with a different shade of insight,

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so¹².

Mbiti has classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am”¹³. The community, according to Pantaleon, therefore gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible

⁹ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 345.

¹⁰ Uchendu V. C, *The Igbos of South East Nigeria*. London: Rinehart and Winston, 1965, 34.

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. England: Heinemann, 2008. 132.

¹² Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 133.

¹³ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1970, 108.

only in a community¹⁴. It is from this background that the Pantaleonine concept of belongingness is born.

The Ontology of Belongingness

Pantaleon defines belongingness as ‘the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness’¹⁵. In this case, the recipient-subject of belongingness is involved: something belongs and it belongs to something. Belongingness is a special noun from the verb ‘to belong’. It means to be part of, Daisein-with or to be a member of a group. For Instance, I belong to Arondizuogu community, this gives me rights and privileges that others who do not belong to this community do not have. There is also a possessive nuance of the verb ‘to belong’¹⁶. I can say that the soap belongs to me. In the first nuance, to belong creates a situation of participation and in the second, it creates a situation of possession. There is an ontological nuance of belongingness, which specifies that a thing is because it belongs. To be is to belong and to belong is to be¹⁷.

The Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch) re-enacts the contents and significance of belongingness as the essence and hermeneatic core of reality¹⁸. Pantaleon believes that what a being is, is its activity of perching (belonging). To perch is to be. To be is to perch. To be is to belong and to belong is to be. In a diagram, Pantaleon shows the relationship between perching, belonging and being¹⁹. And this diagram reveals that when one perches, one belongs and when one belongs one becomes. All the three dimensions of perching, belonging and being are all fundamental and indispensable to being.

¹⁴ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 347.

¹⁵ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 374.

¹⁶ Pantaleon Iroegbu, “Being as Belongingness: A Substantive Redefinition of Being. *In Ekpoma Review*, Vol. 1, 2004, 7.

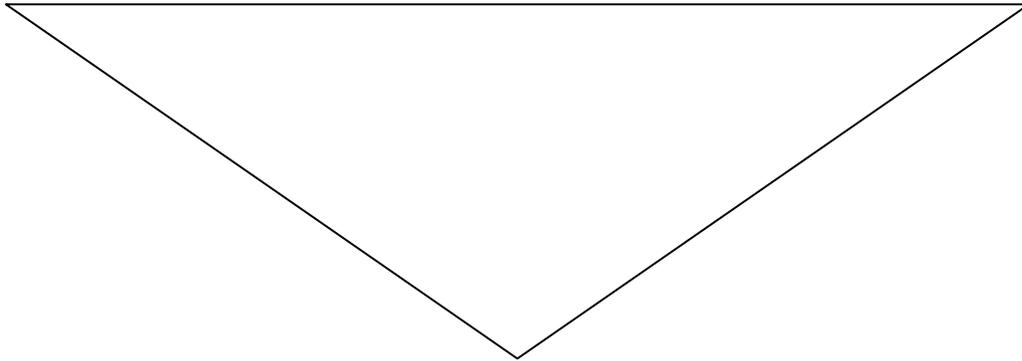
¹⁷ Andre Anah, “Belongingness: A Redefinition of Being”. *In Father Kpim: Philosophy and Theology of Pantaleon Iroegbu*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2005, 241.

¹⁸ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 378-379.

¹⁹ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 379.

To perch

To belong



To be

When *Egbe* perches and *Ugo* perches, they come face to face with each other. They are with each other. They are present to each other. They relate to each other deeply and directly as well as have relationships with other inhabitants of *Uwa* (world). To relate is to share something: to give and take. They have common projects, needs and desires. Together they struggle to overcome their difficulties and share their joy²⁰.

Obviously, the idea of 'To be is to belong and to belong is to be' may sound tautological, but it is the definitional circle involved in any description of being as being. This circle will however be clarified as the four Pantaleonine analytic connotations of belongingness is explored.

Be-(I)-on (Be on)

In this case, 'to belong' involves 'being on' in the *Uwa* (*Uwa* is the world in English, but in Igbo it takes up a meaningful depth. It is the entirety of existence, from God the highest being to inanimate beings of our cosmos²¹) from which all concrete realities derive their being. To be on in this sense is to escape the contrary of being off. For either one is on or he is off²². To be off is to cease to exist and to be on is to be.

²⁰Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 381.

²¹ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Ewisdomization and African philosophy*, Owerri: IUP, 1994, 144.

²² Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

Be- (l)-on-going

Having been given existence in the *Uwa*, this aspect of belongingness speaks of the being now going on in its *Uwa* and *Uwaness*²³. In this case, Pantaleon suggests that *Uwa* is the underlying principle in Igbo Metaphysics. This particularly speaks of the process of being, for to remain in being is to proceed in being and not out of being. In this process of being, Pantaleon makes a difficult synthesis of change and permanence. As the being goes on in being, it maintains its identity even though something in it changes. In ancient philosophy, change and permanence was a bone of contention between Heraclitus and Parmenides, but in Igbo Metaphysics it is no problem at all. For *uwa naeme ntughari* (the world changes), even though, in the midst of the change *Uwa bu otu* (the world does not change).

Be-long

To be-long means to abide, to stay or live long²⁴. In this case, it means that belongingness lives long. As such, the subject of *Uwa* lives long. This brings in the issue of space and time, for belongingness is expressed in space and time. Be-long extends into eternity in Igbo ontology; it goes beyond the present dimension of the *Uwa* to the *Uwa* of the ancestors, such that to be and not to be-long is not to be at all²⁵. While *on-going* belongingness may be open-ended, *being-long* belongingness stretches into everlastingness. As such, in Pantaleon, one becomes through being-on so as to be-going, in other to be-long.

Be-longing

This speaks of being and longing to be. It stresses the longing for life and being. It is founded on the awareness that nothing is higher a value than life. Expressions in Igbo bring this home: *nduka* (life is greater); *Ndubuisi* (life is the principal thing). To long for life is to want to be, not in the abstract *Uwa* but in the concreteness of what *Uwa* offers.

The Multi-Dimensional Implications of Being Qua Belongingness

²³Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

²⁴ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

²⁵ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

From the Pantaleonine concept of belongingness as ‘the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness’²⁶, it is obvious that the idea of belongingness touches on every aspect of reality. It extends to the political, economic, social and ethical dimensions of being.

The political implications of belongingness

The political implication of belongingness is that each citizen be given a sense of belongingness in the political arena, and democracy has no other purpose than the realisation of belongingness for all²⁷. The neglect of this dimensional implication of belongingness is at the base of most ethnic and political violence in Africa. Belongingness helps a government to discover the circumstances that can link human beings who inhabit a country, igniting and increasing in the led a feeling of personal security and group preservation²⁸. Belongingness proposes a system of government which will concede coexistence to all linguistic groups, on the basis of equality, within a framework of political and constitutional warrantees. Such a system of government would protect individual freedom under the rule of law and thus preserve and sustain linguistic groups²⁹. Once there is a failure in political belongingness, then loyalty to the tribe would replace loyalty to the nation³⁰. The level to which each member of the political society belongs determines the future of a successful politics.

The economic implications of belongingness

The twenty first century is characterized by the creation and expansion of economic opportunities. Virtually, every activity is geared towards economic interest. When people meet, it is for economic reasons. Friends are made based on economic interests. The yearning for a global village was born out of economic needs³¹. But as long as people are robbed of their economic belongingness, situations of conflict would always arise. The Niger Delta crisis is born out of the feeling by a few that they have been robbed of their economic

²⁶ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 374.

²⁷ Pantaleon Iroegbu, The Political Significance of Belongingness. *In Journal of Philosophy and Development, Vol.6, Nos 1, 2000, 3.*

²⁸ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 278.

²⁹ Nnamdi Azikiwe, “From tribe to Nation”. *In Themes in African Social and Political Thought*. Malta: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978, 278.

³⁰ Nnamdi Azikiwe, “From tribe to Nation”, 278.

³¹ Andre Anah, “Belongingness: A Redefinition of Being”, 247.

belongingness. A situation where few have and many do not have, in relation to resources that is meant for all, is against the principle of economic belongingness. Every people who desire a glorious future must employ the ideology of belongingness while taking decisions that border on economic interests.

The social implications of belongingness

The society is the perching ground for belongingness, and the sense of belongingness it is able to offer its members is very significant. When people who are members of a society do not feel the sense of belongingness, it affects their contribution towards the development of the society. The social dimension of belongingness would call for the jettisoning of all forms of prejudice, be they racial, national, tribal, societal, political, ethical, etc. To postpone the breaking down of all forms of barriers of tribal prejudice, be they inter-tribal or intra-tribal is to postpone the social unity and advancement of a society. The social significance of belongingness is solidarity, which would create a society where everyone would relate and contribute to the well-being of the other.

The ethical implications of belongingness

When people do not have the feeling of belongingness, lots of anomalies abound, such as suicide, abortion, armed robbery, etc. When people feel that they are part of a system, they would carry out their duties responsibly. For instance, situations of suicide arise most of the time when the sense of belonging is lost, mutual trust betrayed, kinship bond broken. When a person undergoes this experience, he sees nothing to live for and as such no desire to go on living³². At a time when we are fast losing much of our values of comradeship, the ethical consequences of belongingness needs to be emphasized.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The idea of belongingness in Pantaleon's metaphysics can be criticised variously. First of all, the idea of being as belongingness speaks of the characteristic of being and not of being itself. Being pre-exists belongingness, for a being would have to be before it can belong. Some Igbo philosophers have also proposed *chi* as an alternative concept for being. If the purpose of bringing in *Chi* in the debate

³² Bernard Azeez, "Belongingness as a solution to the problem of Suicide in Africa: Insight from Pantaleon Iroegbu". In *Father Kpim: Philosophy and Theology of Pantaleon Iroegbu*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2005, 256.

of what being should be called, it does not seem to work. The idea of *chi* has created more problems than it set out to address. The argument is that *chi* is preferable because everything in Igbo, whether animate or inanimate has a *chi*. These philosophers easily forget that what we are looking for in Igbo metaphysics is not a name for a thing that is contained in everything in the Igbo world. *Chi* would better serve as an underlying principle in Igbo metaphysics than as a name for being in Igbo. The idea of *chi* takes us back to the arguments of the Ionian Philosophers who speak of water and air and fire as the underlying principle in every reality. There isn't enough ground to conclude from here that reality is water or air or fire. It is difficult to conclude that because a thing, say 'A', possesses another thing inside of itself, say 'B', that 'B' is now 'A'. For instance, as human being possesses blood in his veins, it is not a sufficient reason to conclude that because every human being has blood therefore every human being can be called blood. *Chi* cannot stand as a concept for being. That 'all things possess *Chi*' does not easily translate into 'all things can be called *chi*'. In this case, Edeh's *Ife* better serves the purpose in view than *Chi* and Belongingness.

Furthermore, the idea of being as belongingness in Pantaleon is central to human beings, and even when he tried to apply it to other created things, he did that in relation to human beings. This constricts the power and capacity of being, as its capacity to encompass all that exists is limited. Pantaleon's opinion that existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community raises questions about the extent of the power of the community over the individual. Pantaleon presents it as though it is the community that gives being to the individual. Contrary to his opinion, it is more reasonable to argue that the community cannot give a being its existence, but can only give meaning to existence. Pantaleon gives to the community powers it has no audacity to exercise. His equation of individual being with the community being raises difficulty as regards differentiating the individual from the whole. This is a problem of identity, with the potentiality of causing traffic in the order of being.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the philosophy of belongingness is one that touches virtually on every aspect of the human life, be it political, economic, social, ethics, etc, and demands an inextricable reciprocity with the act of acting, relating and communing . It is also one that identifies with the categories of the African people. As an idea, it is substantive, egalitarian, communalistic, transcendental and yet concrete. At a time when globalization with its weapon of individuality, among others, is eating deep into Africa and her values, the philosophy of belongingness is in tandem with the call for an African cultural

renaissance. Above all, the philosophy of belongingness answers the fundamental question of the reason for existence, not just abstractly but concretely: the reason to be is belongingness.