

IGWEBUIKE PHILOSOPHY IN ELECHI AMADI'S *THE CONCUBINE*

Mary Linda Vivian Onuoha, IHM, PhD
Dept of Foreign Languages and Literary Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
mary.onuoh@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

African writers of Igbo origin have not relented in showcasing the igbo world-view through their works. In these works, the interconnectedness and interdependence of both individuals and communities can not be trivialized even in the advent of some individualistic foreign culture. Consciously or unconsciously, the village or community is treated as one entity while the family and individual persons become the branches that make up the village. The Concubine is one of such novels that portrays the interconnectedness and complementarity as described above. An in depth study of this work reveals that unity, solidarity and oneness are inextricable parts of the igbo society. There are, undeniably times when one's personal chi plays a crucial role in fulfilling certain individual destiny, but even in such cases, the community has its contribution which is equally pertinent if any useful result will be achieved. Using an exploratory and an analytical approaches, this paper aims at appraising the Igwebuiké philosophy in the afore mentioned work. If Igwebuiké advocates unity, complementarity, collectivity and inclusion, then Amadi must have done justice in his debut novel by exposing an authentic igbo world-view even to his non-african readers.

Key words: Igwebuiké, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, interconnectedness, Igbo world-view, complementarity, village, society

Introduction

One of the most important aspects of the Igbo culture and world-view, which scholars from different works of life have unanimously acknowledged is, the unity and complementarity which binds the igbo man, one to another. In their works, the interconnectedness and interdependence of both individuals and communities can not be trivialized even in the advent of some individualistic foreign culture. Despite his western education and life style, an average Igbo man holds tenaciously to that oneness which Kanu presents as the modality of *being* in the African society. (Kanu 2016). Inadvertently, the African society, as it is known, may go into oblivion the moment this fraternity ceases to exist in it. Ahmed is of the opinion that “ no community or ethnic group can afford to live by its own resources or wits alone, but must find its future in a fraternity of

modern institutions such as the nation democracy, good governance, and responsible leadership, among others.” (27) This suggests that even the modern lifestyle accommodates this solidarity.

In fictions as well as in non-fictional documents, writers do not hesitate to emphasize the benefits of this unity and decry its absence which could lead to disintegration and disappearance of an African society and culture. The result of self-extrication from this solidarity is as good as banishment. Kanu has it that: “ ‘To be’ is to live in solidarity and complementarity and to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation. ‘To be’ is to be with ‘the other’ in a community of beings ” (2016). This communality existed long before the advent of colonialism and could have been a force to ward off the menace of the unwanted imperialists. Oji referring to Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* postulates that “His (Ezeulu) consulting with the elders before going to see Winterbota was a classical example of participatory democracy which Ndigbo were practicing centuries before the British came. This Igbo virtue is best depicted by the ethos “*Igwe bu ike*” (Unity is strength or literally, “there is strength in an assembly”).” (64)

This solidarity and inclusion are what the Igwebuiké philosophy which this paper seeks to analyse, regurgitates presently. Igwebuiké could be a noun (name) or a sentence which when broken in words goes as Igwe bu Ike. *Igwe* should be understood in this contest as a crowd, a group of people, people etc. *Bu* is from the verb to be. *Ike* is another noun which could be taken to mean power, strength, energy, might or force. For the purpose of this paper, Igwebuiké could be understood to mean the crowd or group gives strength or force. Some English adage has it that: United we stand, divided we fall. A tree cannot make a forest etc. These give a worthwhile explanation to the concept of igwebuiké. Kanu who in some of his recent articles has explored the Igwebuiké philosophy in many different dimensions efficiently gives a wholistic elucidation of the notion. According to him:

It (Igwebuiké) is from the Igbo composite word and metaphor *Igwebuiké*, a combination of three words. Therefore, it can be employed as a word or used as a sentence: as a word, it is written as Igwebuiké, 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 (sic), 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 or strength, and at this level, no task is beyond their collective capability. Igwebuiké is, therefore, a philosophy of harmonization, and complementation. It understands the world immanent realities to be related to one another in the most natural, mutual, harmonious and compatible ways possible. (Kanu 108).

He goes on to explain in another article that: "It is a word that is at the heart of African thought, logic and the modality of being in African philosophy. Although it is a word, it is not just a word but it carried within it an entire structure: the structure of African philosophy, tradition and culture." (Kanu 9)

The above presents then a detailed description of the concept around which this work has its focus. The novel here is *The Concubine* set in the village of Omokachie. It tells the story of the beautiful Ihuoma whose husband and suitors all died. Unknown to them all, Ihuoma was a sea goddess whose jealous sea-god husband would not allow to marry any man. The most she could be to a man is a concubine.

The setting is in a typical Igbo village. The sociopolitical dimension of the people's life forms an intrinsic part of this work. Their economic activities which center around farming, hunting, buying and selling are clearly outlined. At certain points, there are inter-village squabbles, individual differences and fights, intra and inter village friendly competitions and of course, there are deaths. Friends are devastated. Wives are shattered. Parents are traumatized. Each according to the extent of his closeness to the affected person. But the society remains united in one mentality, culture and worldview. The interest of this paper lies in examining the dexterity with which the Igwebuiké philosophy is applied in this novel *The Concubine*.

In the traditional African society, institutions like the nuclear and extended family setups, neighbourhood, village, kinfolk or community as a whole had different ways of fostering unity, peaceful coexistence, averting and controlling as well as resolving misunderstandings, disagreements and conflicts in ways that were practical, realistic, multifarious and level-headed. (Usman 106).

The above citation is undeniably the hypothetical reason the Omokachie village did not disintegrate like some other communities in works produced at the time as it is. The apt application of the Igwebuiké philosophy using the institutions mentioned above as tools, solved the riddle. Right from the first page, this ethos - Igwebuiké, runs through almost every chapter of the novel. The individual characters are not necessarily eclipsed by the community. However, the community is often treated as one entity while the individual person and nuclear families form the visible branch of the communal tree. Already in the first page, a venerable old chief died and his people kept it secret in order to go for head-hunt with which to bury the chief. (1) If the chief's son went for the head-hunt alone, he might not succeed or may even lose his own head. Therefore the youths of the village had to go in unison so that they can succeed.

With this Igwebuiké philosophy, the village constitutes an undeniable force. What the village knows, thinks and says matter. "Soon the whole village knew there had been a fight" (3) Here the village is treated as an entity, as one strong force. Madume knows the weight it carries when the whole village gets to know about the fight and its resultant effect. Anyone who killed the other would be a branded man among others despite the rites of purification. Madume fears the alienation which comes from shedding the blood of a kinsman. Therefore he maintains a sullen silence when asked about the fight he had Emenike. He still wanted to belong the Igwe (Crowd or a people).

Habitat:

Elechi Amadi, for the easy understanding of the tie which exists among the people of the same village, spared no time in giving a comprehensive description of what each village was comprised of. "Omokachi was a small village comprising eleven family groups. Each family group occupied a cluster of compounds and every compound had a path bursting into the main path running across the village." (14) Forde and Jones as cited by Nwoye lend weight to the above, by describing the Igbo habitation style as follows:

The typical Igbo settlement pattern consists of loose clusters of homesteads irregularly scattered along cleared paths radiating from a central meeting place of the village and/or village group, which contains the shrines and groves of the local earth deity or other chief spirit and also serves as the market. (305)

Families living in clusters are not just by chance. It is a deliberately arranged situation to foster unity, to checkmate each other's activity and ward off unwanted intruders. The nuclear family thus becomes the primary nest where the Igwebuiké philosophy breeds. The author also enunciates the origin of the village so that the reader will understand the genesis of this oneness among the Igbo. Igwe the founder of Omigwe was forcefully ejected from the village because his baby cut its upper teeth first. May be because he worked on the great Eke day. Later he did the necessary purifications, prospered and founded Omigwe. (14) The knowledge of this history plays a preeminent role in shaping the mentality of the people. Having one father-founder means that they all belong to one big family and that strengthens the ties. That is why family groups cluster.

Religious worships:

"Worshippers from the two villages met to offer their sacrifice jointly. It established goodwill". (14). When people do things together, it engenders goodwill and peace. The novel itself clearly avoided war. The author uses Igwebuiké's solidarity and goodwill to replace war which would have led to some kind of disintegration. If villagers worship together, it means that individuals who make the villages do as much. Just like in the following scene: "Emenike made ready to go to the Sacred Woods of Amadioha. As it was a day of general worship, several old men carrying their three legged chairs trooped towards the shrine. Emenike walked among them". (15) Religion has always been a uniting force in the life of the Igbo. Each man prayed to his Chi but there are days/occasions when the community must gather to pray with the chief priest of a particular deity for some special purposes. The religious values and norms are strictly observed and respected, and their solidarity is strengthened.

Sickness:

Another factor which serve as a strong uniting force among the people of Omokachi is the general attitude to a sick person. Each villager has a duty to visit and sympathize with the sick. " Ihuoma sat on a couch, her husband's head resting on her lap. Nnadi and other relatives ranged themselves on one side of the room. Emenike's children squatted on the floor...the first person to arrive in the morning was Anyika... but after him, a steady stream of visitors poured into Emenike's sick room." (6-7) They not only visited but also found soothing words to help the afflicted bear his pain. Many consoled Emenike by telling him that his personal god must have been away on a journey during the fight. Nwokekoro the chief priest of Amadioha left him with special protection from Amadioha.

Apart from the medicine from Anyika and the support from his nuclear family, these visits and kind words from the community also helped Emenike to cope with the pains of his sickness. The community gave him the strength to survive.

Madume was blinded by a spittle from a cobra. Despite his unpopularity and difficult character, villagers pour in to visit and lend their support until he ended his own life. One may wonder why the Igwebuiké philosophy did not lend him the necessary strength to survive. Madume was an alien to his community. He fought Emenike who already enjoyed the favor of the villagers. After Emenike's death, Madume went ahead to, not only confront but also took forcefully what belonged to his widow. Fortunately this widow was Ihuoma, the beloved of everyone. By these acts: his greed and difficult character, Madume alienated himself from the community and took his own life.

Chapters 25 and 26 of the novel are dedicated to Ekwueme's mental illness and how every man in the village joined to look for him. When he was found, the Dibia Anyika was sent for, Ihuoma his heartthrob was sent for and the process of healing began. When Agwoturumbe eventually came to appease the sea-god so that the marriage between Ekwueme and Ihuoma could go on, every one did his/her part to bring it to fruition. Adaku went ahead with the cooking, Wigwe made sure the things for the sacrifice were provide, even the little boy Nwona had to get lizards for the ceremony. Unfortunately, it was his barbed arrow that missed the lizard and shot Ekwueme, his otherwise worthwhile life was cut short. The interest here is how each person worked hard for the common good of all. That is the gospel of Igwebuiké philosophy. Ekwueme died not because he was an alien but because the sea-god did not want to be appeased.

Village Ceremonies:

Madume is huge and axe headed. However, he is greatly despised and his stature made no reasonable sense when he stands alone. But in the midst of his follow villagers, "His presence during inter village negotiations always lent a little extra strength to his village Omokachi." (4) His stature becomes useful. He gets and also lends some force to his kinsmen. The author demonstrates here, that united the people can stand.

The people live together. "Many events called for a degree of intimacy between the villagers. Take the sharing of meat after a general village hunt." (5), the Oduma dance where " young men and women moved round the instruments and sing in response to the soloist. The wrappers of the men and the married

women swept the arena... this was the time to know the top dancers.” (27) Thus: hunting, sharing of meat, and dance are some important social activities and they have many functions. The dance could be done to honor the dead as was seen in page 26 where a song was composed to honor Emenike after his death. The villagers also dance during the moonlight gatherings. The youth get the opportunity to mingle and find their intending spouses. Young men gathered to practice wrestling. They good wrestlers and the strong men amongst them are those who would defend them in case of inter village clash. The strength of the village apparently lies in these social activities. From here they choose their bests.

Burial:

In the words of Izunwa, “A typical burial ceremony in Igbo culture embraces a variety of functions and rituals to be mediated by the sons, kinsmen (*umunna*), age grades and secret societies, to mention a few. (128) No one ever organized a burial ceremony alone. It is an Igwebuike affair. A chief dies, the villagers go for head-hunt (1). The death of Emenike and the preparation for his funeral was everybody’s responsibility. Everybody had a duty to call on and sympathize with his wife. “Some callers wept with her, others look on dry-eyed and methodically enumerated the various inconveniences which she was bound to suffer as a result of her husband’s death.” (20). “ then the men were so busy arranging for the burial and its rites that it was not easy to tell who was there and who was not”, (21) neither Nnadi, Emenike’s brother nor Ihuoma his wife, could have done it alone. The igwebuike philosophy was succinctly applied here to show the beauty of complementarity which is ontological to the Igbo society. Emenike’s second burial was no less any Igwebuike affair than the first. Nnadi, helped by Ekwueme and Wakiri, built booths for the mourners. Women came and helped Ihuoma with the cooking and preparations. Old women trooped in their numbers. Old men were present. Emenike’s age group performed their rites and children were not left out. It was actually the gathering of this Igwe (crowd) and their activities that made Emenike’s funeral a befitting one. He can now go peacefully to join his ancestors.

Marriage:

Marriage as treated in this novel is another area where our philosophy of interest plays a serious role. The Igbo believe that one person does not own the child. Therefore its birth, initiation, marriage and death are the concern for the community as a whole. In the society, it is not uncommon for a parent to suggest a wife or a husband for her or his child. Okachi (Ihuoma’ mother) tells Ihuoma that she needs a man to look after her. (38) In fact it is the sole responsibility of a

father to get his son a wife. (102 &117) Further down the marriage arrangement between Ekweme and Ahurule was described. The said marriage was contracted as soon as Ahurule was born and when Ekwueme was not even old enough to draw an arrow. If either party did not like it that was unfortunate, as in the case of Ekwueme who grew up to prefer the widow Ihuoma for a wife. He dared not go against that arrangement because "The whole village would side with his father and pour scorn on him" (117). Another Igwebuike part of the whole marriage ceremony was the part where the father of the man went with his troop to open the marriage talk. The day of the formal presentation of wine "Wigwe was accompanied by several village elders. ... Wine carrying was expensive on both sides. Wagbara with the help of his neighbors prepared a great feast for his guests..." (123). Ahurule accompanied them home and "all eyes were on her, all her movements watched...she was petted, praised and overfed." (123) And finally a bridal train led her home. (129) It is important to note that it is the involvement of these family and village members that gave this marriage the grandeur it had. That is the pride of every couple, family and village. It is all thanks to the solidarity which exists amongst them. The Igwebuike philosophy could not have found more fertile soil on which to thrive.

If ever there arose any dispute in the marital homes, it was the duty of the elders to settle it. "Madume, your wife complains that you treat her roughly and we have to settle it." (73) Those were the exact words of the Chief Chima to Madume when his character was becoming unbearable. "When the old men were analyzing their quarrels, everything had looked simple. Ekwueme had come back with his wife confident that he would cope with the situation." (143) Only one elder did not do the job, many of them did. This was to ensure that an accurate judgment was passed according to the wisdom of the elders and the traditions of the Land.

At each point in the work, the village was more else treated a single entity. "A village hired Nwokekoro...(9) "Each village cleared its own half of the path" (14). This technic of considering a village made up of a group of people as one has its aim. It reveals the extent to which they are all closely nit up in their mentality, their compartment, their values and their perception of the world. Breaking this tie spells disaster. It gives an enemy a loophole to enter, it exposes the individuals to danger and prepares the downward movement of the society if not its imminent extinct.

It also belonged to the village to pass judgement on whoever does the wrong thing or goes against the values of their culture and traditional beliefs. When it come to land dispute, “many villagers had spoken in favor of Emenike.” (1) The village also banished anyone who commits murder. This shows how Igwebuike as a philosophy helps to check evil in the society. A man who fails in his duty towards his wife could be shamed before the villagers. Before Madume went to harass Ihuoma in her farm, he first considered the fact that “...Ihuoma enjoyed tremendous goodwill from the whole village. She only had to lodge a complaint and everybody would rally round her.” (53) But greed and lust beclouded his sense of reason. When Nnadi came to defend his sister in-law, the villagers said to him: “Dont fight, the elders and priests will decide this matter” (69) The village was obviously the highest judge. The decision of the elders was final. This sense of solidarity and belongingness helped each man and woman to weigh their deeds before they embark on it. Everybody becomes conscious of the possible verdict that could arise from his action. Even when a supposed charitable act was detestable to the person, the individual did it to avoid being seen in a bad light. After Emenike’s death, “At first Wolu had thought of not calling on Ihuoma at all, but that would be unheard of and in extremely bad taste. What would the other women think of her?” (19) Ihuoma dismissed Ekwueme’s love advances towards her partly for respect for her dead husband but more for fear of what the village would say. It wasn’t an easy decision for Ihuoma to call on Ahurule after the unpleasant visit from Wigwe and Ekwueme, “but propriety in the village often outweighed personal emotional conflicts...” moreover such a gesture would have engendered many interpretations. (125).

The whole village was at solidarity with one another. It was a common practice for a woman to go and ask the other for some vegetable or other small favor. “I have come to ask you to plait my hair next Eke.”(11), Nnadi built the booths for the second burial with the help of Ekwuem and Wodu Wakiri (32), the trio also worked to repair Ihuoma’s roofs. The Igwebuike philosophy as applied in this novel helps eschew both personal and group animosity especially when life is involved. After Madume’s assault on Ihuoma in her own farm. The villagers judged him wrong. Immediately he was attacked by a spitting cobra, he beckoned to them, they all gathered and “led him home.” (70) The Igwebuike ethos is so glaring that even the crowd extends the hand to rescue their own.

Conclusion

This paper has successfully explored Amadi’s unique method of the application of the Igwebuike philosophy in the land of Omakachi. Its presence is

unequivocally obvious and its usefulness is one of the strongest forces to reckon with. If this village continues in, not only portraying but also protecting its sense of belongingness, solidarity, interconnectivity, interconnectedness and complementarity, then the likelihood of falling in the advent of individualism is far fetched. Her survival propensity and her ability to preserve her core traditional values remains undoubtedly on the high side.

If igwebuike has a charism to impact, if it has a message to put across, if it has a theory to propound, if igwebuike has a doctrine to teach and a value to protect, it would be for Ndigbo to retrace their roots, find and cherish that oneness, solidarity, care and complementarity for which an authentic African society is known.

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