

REFLECTIONS ON THE CULTURAL ORIENTATION OF *NWANNE DI NA MBA* AND THE IGBO DIASPORA

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.27419.68649

Abstract

This paper reflects on the cultural orientation of the Igbo term Nwanne di na mba as practiced by the Igbo diaspora. Nwanne di na mba points to the existential value of oneness found in Igbo tradition. Literally, nwanne di na mba implies that there is a brother in foreign lands. Thus, this paper taps into this interpretation and understanding of the term not merely for intellectual reasons but to examine its impact and significance within the Igbo tradition and beyond. The underlying philosophy of nwanne di na mba codifies the Igbo moral consciousness of oneness. It argues that this type of moral consciousness can promote unity in a world that has become increasingly diverse. This research adopts analytical and hermeneutical methods to interpret the Igbo locus and presents its modern values.

Keywords: Philosophy, Diaspora, Igbo, *Nwanne di na mba*. culture

Introduction

The issue of diaspora-alterity has become a special philosophical problem. From the dangers of security threats and indiscriminate suspicion towards one another, individuals in diverse communities live in great fear of each other. In different parts of the world and different ages of human history, this suspicion and this fear of the other have led to many cases of murder, terrorism, and imported conflicts globally. All the above general facts notwithstanding, the challenges of being in the diaspora attract special attention and call for a rational search for a solution. Therefore, this paper proposes a theoretical explanation based on the analysis of the Igbo term *nwanne di na mba* as an enabling principle for understanding the different dimensions of human interaction in diverse societies. This paper argues primarily that the concept of *nwanne di na mba* while facing the challenges of insecurity and fear of the unknown, will intersect a true social relation among individuals both at home and in diaspora. It looks at a more traditional sociological approach that uses the concept as a descriptive typological tool for valuing the humanity of individuals.

The word diaspora, however, refers to those who emigrated from their ancestral homeland to another country. In ancient times, it was commonly necessitated by a number of negative factors like slave trade, exile, loss, isolation from one's origin, etc. But in recent times, it is identified with the willful emigration of people to other parts of the world due mainly to economic reasons. It is in this context that the Igbo diaspora (or the Igbo in diaspora) is discussed in this paper. They are Igbo people who emigrated to other parts of the body world. Certain objective conditions that make people willfully relocate to other parts of the world are not actually the concern here, but the Igbo moral consciousness of oneness is found in the principle/social orientation of *nwanne di na mba*. *Nwanne di na mba* is an Igbo expression that symbolically refers to people in the

diaspora as the possible brotherhood of all humanity through exhibiting familial care to strangers. It is an approach that requires a close examination. The interest that the idea of *nwanne di na mba* generates in the Igbo context comes from the fact that an individual is not self-sufficient but has lots of things that he cannot provide for himself. His insufficiency and dependency on one another are made manifest, especially in a strange land. It is a natural phenomenon that one needs each other to live a complete life, whether in a native land or a foreign land. Thus, “as a human being, man cannot live without association. So, man's life is, to an enormous extent, a group of life. Because individuals cannot be understood apart from their relations with one another; the relations cannot be understood apart from the units (or terms) of the relationship” (Hossain & Ali 2014, 2).

The same notion of *nwanne di na mba* explains the philosophy behind why the Igbo migrated to different parts of the world. They embark on other projects, not minding that they are not in their homeland. Living in the diaspora is not considered a problem among the Igbo. They are known for settling in another place different from their original land. Ewelu (2010, 190) buttresses this conception of Igbo diaspora when he says:

...the Igbo are known as an outgoing ethnic group. They are found in all parts of Nigeria, and wherever they come, they integrate themselves, speaking the native languages of their hosts and helping to set up whatever they think is important for an easier life in the place. They do so because the others are *ibe ha* (their other part or their fellow human beings). The Igbo are not afraid of the other; they are ever ready to immigrate, not only to other parts of Nigeria outside Igbo but also to any part of the world.

This factual conception of Igbo diaspora has prompted many other Nigerians to believe the popular saying (though as a joke) about the Igbo that “if one goes to any part of the world and could not meet any Igbo man there, one should run for one's dear life. This shows that the place is not safe and comfortable for humans to live”. This practice of life is justified even as Basden (1966, 26) argues that “whatever the conditions, the Ibo immigrants adapt themselves to meet them, and it is not long before they make their presence felt in the localities where they settle.” Thus, one wonders if their own diasporic life is different from another set of people. What is so unique about their emigration style? Does their cultural orientation of emigration differ from others?

Focusing on the cultural life of the Igbo diaspora, we argue that emigration is not limited to a particular set of people neither because they do not fear their fellow human beings, as Ewelu stated above, but because they are courageous and always determined to venture for any business that will help them to achieve their goal in life. Besides, it appears natural that there is always in man a great suspicion and fear of the other (fear of that which is different from the self), especially at the first contact with the other. Instead, “flexibility, adjustment, and adaptation are the rules of the game of life in the Igbo world” (Nwabude 2001, 203). Likewise, the spirit of oneness and brotherhood that has characterized the Igbo into inter-relationship, inter-dependency, collectivism, and mutual co-existence has also formed the basis for the Igbo lifestyle as expressed in the term *Nwanne di na mba*.

Based on the analytical and hermeneutical methods, this article presents insight into the meaning and reflections on the philosophy of *Nwanne di na mba*.

Diaspora: Meaning and Emergence

The term diaspora has been of different sorts for years. The meaning of the word changes according to the context and its derivative background. But going by its development, the most remarkable definitions of the word diaspora are traceable to four broad periods: “antiquity, a time during which it has different meanings; the Middle Ages to the Renaissance; the beginning of the

nineteenth century to the 1970s; and the 1980s to the present” (Helly 2006, 1). At the time of antiquity (800-600BCE), diaspora was used to describe how the Greeks colonized Asia Minor and the Mediterranean. It was also about the expansion of trade, which, to this end, had a positive impression. But on the negative side, it was used to describe the Jewish experience of displacement to Babylon when Jerusalem as a nation was devastated. Therefore, the two words (Diaspora and Babylon) became synonymous as both of them referred to being isolated from one's origin and being compelled to live in a foreign place (Cohen 1997, 118-19). Diaspora, in effect, became identified with the idea of loss, suffering, exile from the ancestral homeland, and of religious punishment on the side of the Jews.

Subsequently, it was observed that the term changed to mean the assemblage of all Jews through the will of God (Paul 1981 & Lenoir-Achdjian 2001) when the Jews finally settled outside Palestine. As of the third century BCE, the term was translated in reference to the Jews living in Greco-Roman and Mesopotamia, respectively (Sachot, 1998). Another change also occurred to the name after the destruction of the temple for the second time in CE70. The term repeatedly became associated with exile even in the nineteenth century (when there was a creation and predominance of nation-states) (Marienstrass 1989, 120).

Moreover, there was another way the term diaspora was conceived in the 1970s and 80s. The term became broader as it was no longer restricted to the semantic domain of the Jews. The popularity of the time became so obvious that people from different regions of the universe, through their circumscribed experiences, developed the term to mean various considerable groups like immigrants, political refugees, guest workers, cultural and tribal minorities, alien residents, expellees, and foreign communities. Suffice it to say that there are many definitions of the term diaspora. In other words, it is used mostly by people who are not residents of their homeland but, in one way or another, have a different feel, maintain, or have a connection with their original land. Hence, the term diaspora encompasses some other related meaning that may not be mentioned in this paper. But what is understood so far is that a resident in his ancestral home is not a diasporic.

Be that as it may, the term diaspora in Greek words- *spiro* means to sow, and the preposition *dia* means over. The term diaspora, which means “to sow over,” is therefore translated to signify migration and colonization. The term was used in reference to the Greeks in ancient times and to the Jews after the devastation of Jerusalem. But as a social construct, the word today is no longer within the coverage of such classic groups like Jews and Greeks. Its meaning has shifted to a wider sense such that people now talk about modern Diaspora and not that of the faraway history. Sheffer (1986, 3), on that note, asserts that: “Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin - their homeland.” Currently, it is no longer within the restraints of ethnic minority groups, as Sheffer upholds. It has become a metaphoric and transnational networking that has got every part of the world involved; only that the diasporists maintain a sense of their oneness and well-being in their homeland. No wonder Safran (1991, 83) affirms that Diaspora has passed on pictorial assumptions and is used regularly by people who still have a connection with a former home.

Accordingly, the meaning and the emergence of the term diaspora have been established to vary because of its social circumstances, beliefs, and translations of solidarity. A lot of events contributed to the dispersal of people from their homeland to another. It could be social, political, religious, economic, cultural, and otherwise, which in all played an act in stabilizing a diaspora reality. Meanwhile, what matters most is not just the history of the various definitions of the term but the signification and message it is upholding for a particular group of people to be in diaspora, which this paper aims its attention at.

The Derivative Background of *Nwanne Di na Mba*

The measure at which the Igbo value the social and humane relationship among the people in the diaspora resulted in the term *nwanne di na mba*. It literally means relative in another land or society. According to Ayika (2014, 9), “the Igbo say *nwanne di na mba*, which literally means that siblings are found abroad.” This term has its derivation from the word *nwanne*. *Nwanne* in Igbo society is commonly known as brother, sister, kin, sibling, relative, kinfolk, etc. It refers to people from one marital source, whether from one mother and father, one father but a different mother, or one mother but a distant father; they are known as *nwanne*. This means that people from a monogamous family (the marital life of a man and a woman) are referred to as *nwanne*. People from a polygamous family (a system of marriage where a man can have many wives) are also called *nwanne*. Likewise, people from a family of polyandry (a system where a woman marries more than one man at the same time) are taken to be *nwanne*. However, this particular system is not functional in the Igbo community. But where it is obtainable, the people born of such families are also regarded as *nwanne*. In fact, Swann refers to the biological relation of any kind.

Another description of *nwanne* is people from the same extended family. The extended family here is expressed in the Igbo term, *Ezi na Ulo (Uno)*. *Ezi na Ulo* conveys a good idea of the Igbo meaning of extended family. Here, the Igbo speak of a family as a complete series of relationships, vertical and horizontal. Ogbalu (1979, 7) summarizes it when he says: “It is called “*Ezi na Ulo*” (the outside relations and those in the house) and differs from the English concept of the family in that it does not apply only to husband, his wife and children but also includes somewhat vague other relations such as in-laws, uncles, cousins, nephews or even maids and servants.”

Notably, people from the same community, village, or region are also addressed as *nwanne*. This is very common especially among the people that get to know themselves outside their region or homeland. In other words, they are somewhat referred to as a family. The idea of this family is captured in Nwabude (2001, 81) when he affirms: “These different classes of the Igbo family are unique; however, they form integral parts of a bigger whole to some extent, the village.”

Someone's brother is not limited to a person/s from one's village or community. They can come from anywhere in the world provided they are not troublous. *Nwanne* includes “people who care for one another; people who have the Igbo moral consciousness of oneness; control some cultural mal-adjustment and bring more about social unity in Igbo land” (Agama 2020, 17); people who have the spirit of communal support; people who are friendly irrespective of their origin, among others. This, in all, implies that the concept of *nwanne* means humanity to everyone.

Correspondingly, this conception of *nwanne* is not constrained only within the Igbo community. It also conveys the same ideology in other African communities. For instance, ubuntu (in South Africa) and *nwanne* are African concepts that are synonymous in meaning. Ubuntu means “humanity” (Shutte 2001, 2) or “humanness, the ideal of being human” (Broodryk 2008, 41). By implication, one may argue it refers ordinarily to humankind. But Shutte (2001, 2) makes it clearer when he says that “... the concept of UBUNTU embodies an understanding of what it is to be human and what is necessary for human beings to grow and find fulfillment. It is an ethical concept and expresses a vision of what is valuable and worthwhile in life”. Therefore, the idea of ubuntu represents valuing the humanity of individuals along with the community where they are, emphasizing that the “individual's whole existence is relative to that of the group” (Brack et al. 2003, 319).

Ujamaa, in a like manner, means “familyhood” or “brotherhood.” Ujamaa, as cited in Cornelly (2012, 3), affirms that ujamaa is “an attitude of mind... which is needed to ensure that the people

care for each other's welfare". Ujamaa (in Tanzania) upholds the principle of looking at one another as brothers and sisters by caring for one another. The emphasis of ujamaa towards the attitude of familyhood is mainly for social unity and accommodating others resourcefully.

Having seen the above concepts (*nwanne*, *ubuntu*, and *ujama*), it implies that they describe the principles of the African lifestyle. But the challenge among the African diasporas is that they cannot by themselves lead to the attainment of a true purpose of *nwanne di na mba*, which is the wellbeing of all people unless the people in Diaspora are infused with the spirit of oneness or brotherhood found in the above concepts and actually care for one another.

Nwanne di na mba, which is one's sibling in a foreign land, is, however, expressed in living as one, that is, togetherness and sharing responsibilities. It has a great advantage in its practice of manner of life because it transmits the need for persons to be one another's brother's keepers irrespective of the person's origin. It is in the light of this literal meaning of *nwanne di na mba* that lies its philosophical reflection.

Philosophy and *Nwanne Di na Mba*

The term *nwanne di na mba* has a philosophical apprehension of humanity in Igbo land and beyond. The Igbo originators of this term were actually making a comparison between themselves and other people outside their homeland. It is to their understanding that human beings generally are the same and not peculiar to each other. This establishment of oneness or brotherhood that is deduced from the word *nwanne* is also a result of their sharing the same humanity with other peoples and cultures. It is the worldview of the Igbo, just as Ivanhoett et al. (2017) rightly says that human beings are indefinably and inseparably connected and ration a common fate with living beings, people, and things of the earth. Regarding the commonality, the universal phenomenon, and the consciousness of oneness found between the Igbo and their counterparts, the term *nwanne di na mba* has many philosophical connotations that call for reflection and assimilation.

First, the term *nwanne di na mba* expresses the idea that what is obtainable in a particular society can also be found in some other societies. It is quite acknowledged that culture differs but still has similarities, especially when it comes to the lifestyles of groups. Each ethnic group has the conception of helping one another. The philosophy of *nwanne di na mba* is such that whatever happens or affects my fellow being happens or affects me as well. When he is in pain, I am in pain, and when he is joyful, I am also joyful. This expresses brotherhood, and it is not found only in Igbo land. It appears to be a general phenomenon, a common culture by all men. Obi (2001, 123) seconded this conception and added thus:

This ... is not only demonstrated in “nwannedinamba” but can also be discerned in other Igbo proverbs such as, “ife di be oke di be again” (what is found in one place is, also in another) and “mba na asu na onu na onu, mana akwa ukwala obulu of” (humankind may differ on account of language groupings, but they all share a common humanity).

It is believed that one does not derive joy from another person's pain or difficulties. As long as man shares in the same humanity, the Igbo believe that nobody is above the law of nature by not falling victim to what has happened to the other. One can also benefit from the other when things are going well for one. *Nwanne di na mba* is cemented for the social well-being of one and all.

The philosophy of *Nwanne di na mba* is also conveyed in the principle of friendship. The friendly attitude of the Igbo people captures the maximum ideology of the term. The Igbo are believed to be friendly-oriented people, especially when they come in contact with foreigners. No wonder Basden (1938, 163) describes them as friendly people. Jordan (1971, 143) says that they have a “capacity for lasting friendship.” Basden (1966, 80) observes further that among the Igbo, “the

friendships formed in boyhood's days continue throughout life.” Because of their friendly disposition, they believe that the friendliness among themselves, which an individual enjoys in his homeland, would always be extended to the same elsewhere. They take people ordinarily as friends. It is on the basis of this philosophy that the Igbo claim of *nwanne di na mba* enables them to settle anywhere in the world as their home as well as welcome others (foreigners) in their midst. This particular worldview summarizes the reason behind the Igbo adage *Oje mba enwe ilo* (a traveler or visitor has no enemy). It has been an old Igbo mantra that encourages one, whether as a visitor or host, to be kind to travelers or strangers that one may encounter in one's life. This sense of brotherhood depicts diasporics as cutting across the boundaries of people and societies. As a common brotherhood of humanity, it is the Igbo philosophy (traditionally) that anywhere you settle remains your home, and you have to protect it (*Ebe onye bi ka o na awachi*). This, meanwhile, has obviously justified the position of Otakpor et al. (2001, 64-65) that:

We are bathed in an ocean of human thoughts and feelings upon which we draw and to which we all contribute in our ways. When we go into our innerness, when we go as deeply into ourselves as we can, we experience an oneness at the root of all that is human, of all that is human. When we probe outside of ourselves, we approach unity at the fragile frontiers of human knowledge and understanding.

It is on the basis of the interplay of man and friendship and the universal brotherhood of humanity derived from the term *nwanne di na mba* that will promote the unity of people globally.

Another sense of the term (*nwanne di na mba*) implies that one can survive in life through others. It could be medical assistance, accommodation, financial assistance, or, in one way or another, helping others to achieve their purpose in life. When Benjamin Ewelu was analyzing the meaning and the import of the concept *ibe* (the other), he was actually discussing the philosophy attached to the concept as regards the indispensability of one another in human life. According to him:

The other person is referred to in Igbo as “ibe m” (my piece), or *mmadu ibe m* (the other person my piece; this is to say, my fellow human being). In all the cases of relationship and reciprocity, it is this nice word *ibe* that is used among the Igbo. Love one another is “Hunu ibe unu n'anya; help one another – nyere nu ibe unu aka; respect one another - supuru nu ibe unu etc. To love the other is to love my other piece, to help the other is to help my other part; the same is the case in respecting the other. By logical consequence, to hate the other is to hate my other piece; to maltreat the other is to maltreat my other part etc. this applies to all forms of relationship with the other, be it as an individual or as a group. It applies in all the persons and in all the numbers (Ewelu 2010, 188).

The philosophy embodies being part of another's problem and finding a solution to the problem with the help of others. *Nwanne di na mba* defines each person as belonging to a general group or sharing the same humanity with others. If the other should be part of me, and I become part of the other, then it means that one needs one another to be complete irrespective of the tribe or the origin. The self and the other are seen as making up a whole, a unity. If this ideology were upheld as true, then siblings would be found abroad (*Nwanne di na mba*). This is the kind of imagery the term *nwanne di na mba* tries to create. It emphasizes social unity and conscience in other people's affairs. The development or success of a person is not outrightly dependent on his effort. Besides, “harmonious interactions of beings lead to the mutual strengthening of the beings involved and enhance the growth of life. A pernicious influence from one being weakens other beings and threatens the harmony and integration of the whole” (Metuh 1992, 70). Therefore, *nwanne di na mba* is certainly a reality as long as we all share the common background of humanity.

The Igbo philosophy of *nwanne di na mba* has the qualities of the common good universally. The essence of this adage is for the promotion of the good of people coming thus from the origin of

one being. It advocates against the selfish nature of man as proclaimed by some philosophers like John Rawls and Thomas Hobbes. It is through the common good of a community, group, and individuals that one can reach his goal. Likewise, the individual's goal closely promotes the welfare and happiness of the community. Succinctly put that:

This understanding and appreciation is possible because we are one: ANYI BU OFU. We share a common origin and ancestry. We are intimately related to one another by virtue of our humanity. While our physical similarity is obvious to the eye as well as to the genetic analysis, our invisible aspects are still more closely and intimately united (Otakpor et al., 2001, 64).

It is quite realistic that the rationality behind the term *nwanne di na mba* emphasizes treating each other with humanity and dignity in all matters. But even as this model emphasizes the positive effect of the concept, some scholars have highlighted how this principle may not work perfectly in different world - communities. Johnson & Quan-Baffour (2016, 7) have argued that the lack of or absence of this principle, which is synonymous with ubuntu, “may culminate... into disorderly and crime-riddled societies”. Obi (2001, 124), on the other hand, has it that “this idea of the universal brotherhood of humankind derived from the proper name, 'nwannedinamba'...” may be misunderstood and misapplied by other cultures for selfish reasons. Besides, is this philosophy still effective in the Igbo-African world? Does the intention of which it was originally expressed still motivate people to emigrate? Is this model of brotherhood, oneness, and friendliness still efficient among the practicing communities both at home and in the diaspora? It appears that this present era lacks the operative consciousness for which it was purposely expressed. A good number of people do not care to assist their family members, nor do they have feelings for other human beings. Since this principle of brotherhood is devastating, the care for one another is no longer guaranteed, and the Igbo-Africa are becoming subverted from their true Africanness.

Meanwhile, as we propose a theoretical solution based on the hermeneutics of the Igbo term *nwanne di na mba*, granted that our analysis is in principle sound, the whole African continent, and indeed the whole world, can be the range of its practical application. Africa has the best life principles that are different from the Western literature and which retain the African values as well as the philosophical approach in use; it should play a leading world consciousness (Sebola 2019,2). The Igbo-Africa has a clear emphasis on our common humanity. What is truly universal is that humanity is one. This universalistic conception of humankind in the analysis of the term *nwanne di na mba* has made it open for all to strive for excellence. Therefore, the different cultural worlds can benefit from one another by respecting that which is not common. In Ubuntu philosophy, emphasis is also placed on being human through other people (Mugunbate & Nyanguru 2013, 82-100). Appropriately, in African thought, an individual's humanity is affirmed when there is recognition between each other as well as respect for their human relations. Therefore, the term *nwanne di na mba* is in the sense that we all emerge in human feelings upon which we all contribute in our different ways. There is no discrimination against one another, even in a foreign land.

Conclusion

The philosophy of *nwanne di na mba* is all about oneness, humanity, brotherhood, friendship, kindness, assistance, etc., that one is eager to show a fellow human being. It is the ability to accommodate others morally, materially, spiritually, and socially. It advocates for community development in a larger context. It concerns about bringing up other peoples' future. It considers the other as an integral part of oneself. Consequently, this paper is of the view that if this philosophy were accepted and implemented by every part of the world as well as taken as their value, there would be more unity not just among the Igbo (who practice it) but the world at large. The issue of discrimination and conflicts will be minimal. It, therefore, calls for proper

integration in every human life, whether black or white, citizen or foreigner, as this will facilitate and fast-track more development both politically, socially, and economically.

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