



# A philosophical rationalization of initiative-democracy and covenant-based authority as inspired by Igbo non-philosophy

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## Abstract

The paper studies some aspects of the Igbo non-philosophy, which include elements such as cosmology, myth, language, culture, belief system, folklore, and so on which, though not philosophy, can offer materials for philosophical reflection. It then goes ahead to conceptualize 'initiative-democracy' and 'covenant-based authority' as implicit in Igbo non-philosophy. By making explicit what is implicit in Igbo non-philosophy, the author hopes to offer some grounds for answering the question of why political centralization was/is resisted in Igbo society. Initiative-democracy is a form of social structure, while covenant-based authority is an ordered or prescriptive way of securing the well-being of persons and communities. Both social engagements, as existential and dispositional attitudes, will foreground the organization of human affairs within the Igbo environment of occurrence. The Igbo are a people for whom reality is hugely encountered from the standpoint of process; hence, one thinks they are primarily inclined to abhor a centralized system of control. The method of hermeneutics is adopted in this study to reveal the philosophy hidden in the non-philosophical corpus of some aspects of Igbo life.

"Onye ma akwa okwa na-achi ya," that is,

"One who knows the dove/partridge's eggs collects/directs them."

**Keywords:** non-philosophy, covenant, initiative-democracy, authority, chi, eke, Igbo

## Introduction

At the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle's claim that all men "desire to know" is a clear attestation to the universality of an in-born propensity in all humans to acquire knowledge (see Aristotle, 1984, Chapter 1, 980a25). The unquenching desire to take an intellectual journey into discovering aspects of that ocean of wonder about the universe is what one finds in persons of all ages. Worthy to note is that this universal human desire in all begins to be expressed from within one's environment of occurrence. This means there is always, at least as a starting point, an aesthetic gateway through which one perceives and accesses the horizon of human knowledge.

The Igbo saying, *nku no na mba, na eyere mba nri*, which translates as, "the firewood in a place, cook for the people," has an intuitive appeal if one wants to pay closer attention to the reality of one's study. One notices that this kind of attentiveness or perceptiveness was expressed by Aristotle, who classified governments/constitutions – monarch (or kingship), Aristocracy, and Polity – that have common interests; their deviation forms are tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy, in corresponding order (see

Aristotle, 1984, *Politics*, Book 3, 1279a30–1279b10; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1160a31–1160b1–21). He did not explicitly state his preference about which type of government was ideal among those that aim at common interest. Instead, he asks, "What form of political community is best of all for those who are most able to realize their ideal life?" (Aristotle, *Politics* 1984, Book 2, 1260b25–26). Aristotle's question calls for some knowledge of the people, their environment, and propensities which will yield a certain political arrangement that can then help them realize their ideal life.

It is important to relate the type of government to people's identity and condition; as the Igbo saying warns, *aburu na-eri okpulu anaghi agwo onye oria*, that is, "people who are interested in a dead man's property would not be disposed to treat one who falls sick." This is not an insistence on biological or political determinism. It is rather a pointer to the fact that a good knowledge of a people's dispositions or natural propensities would school one on the best way to communicate with them, and probably give an indication as to the kind of authority or governance that they will be at ease with, or the political

arrangement that they would be inclined to.

A philosophy of African political theory should pay attention to African peoples in their particular environments of occurrence. In this way, one sees how the facts of non-philosophy (elements outside of philosophy that can serve as materials for philosophical reflection) can help one conceptualize a political system or authority that derives from the world, and the identity and propensity of the people. This is what Gyekye (1995) has done in his book, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. After a careful study of the Akan people, their world, metaphysics, and social set-up, he maintains that there is no need to create tension between the individual and the community. The overarching aim should be to bring about the common good of all. This resonates with the idea that African social order is communal; hence, the theory of communalism as an ideology can fittingly characterize African society. From the findings of his study, Gyekye prefers to say that the African social order houses both features of communality and the individuality, and they should not be set in opposition to each other (see Gyekye, 1995, p. 154).

And to insist on communalism as a form of social arrangement leans on the claim evident, in Gyekye's study, that "in spite of individual talents and capacities, the individual ought to be aware of his or her insufficiency to achieve his welfare through solitary effort," (p. 156) as interdependence and collective effort are a sine qua non to the good of the individual.

The process of articulating Akan philosophy, followed by Gyekye, is very commendable as it takes off from the study of Akan non-philosophy, making explicit the philosophy implicit in it. The present writer intends to take the same journey to conceptualize a form of government and authority that is implied in Igbo non-philosophy. I have indicated some of such materials in my *A na Atutu: Igbo Philosophy: An African Perspective on the Problem of Identity and Conflict Resolution* (2009) for Igbo socio-political reality. Since socio-political theory is about a people and a desirable societal arrangement that can resolve coordination problems in working for the common good, it is important to keep in mind the Igbo adage: "*Onye ma akwa okwa na-achi ya*," that is, "he who knows the partridge's eggs collects/directs them." The word '*na-achi*,' in the Igbo

expression, can mean 'to collect' or 'to direct.' One who sees fire woods or mushrooms or some other things in the bush can collect them; there is no need to remind one to collect or to go ahead to stress the action of collecting. The same word '*na-achi*' also means to direct, which is the deeper meaning the present author thinks the proverb veils or unveils and one must go beyond the periphery of everyday world to grasp it.

This paper is divided into three parts, namely:

- I. The possible philosophical echoes from Igbo non-philosophy;
- II. Summary of some implicit philosophical projections emanating from Igbo non-philosophy; and
- III. The emergent conception of Igbo political society and authority.

The paper will expose some aspects of Igbo non-philosophy and apply the hermeneutical method to reveal the meaning implicit in the non-philosophical corpus.

### *I. Possible philosophical echoes from Igbo non-philosophy*

*Some Igbo sayings, World and the Individual*

It is a commonplace belief that language is a mirror of reality (see Imbo, 1998, p. 99); and people mainly dissect reality along linguistic lines because different environments warrant linguistic varieties or differences in vocabularies (see Okoye, 1982, p. 259). Language is a carrier of meaning (Lonergan, 1973, p. 78; Kelly, 1981, p. 88; Njoku, 2014, pp. 66-71), and the Igbo language houses significations that are important for understanding the Igbo and their world. A good study of an Igbo reality must pay keen attention to the Igbo to discern how acts, feelings, concerns, views about the universe, and ideas about persons and events are mirrored in the language of the people. The point of the proverb we referenced earlier, "*onye ma akwa okwa na-achi ya*," is that wisdom is very important in judging human affairs. The partridge's eggs resemble those of snakes, and a mistake in identifying them or a particular knowledge situation would be disastrous. Besides having wisdom, one must be able to apply it. The conviction one has about the correctness of one's judgement arouses a sense of practical reasonableness about how to control or handle certain situations.

Again, the partridge being a very clever bird lays about twelve eggs, buries about

nine, covers the ground with dry leaves and sticks, and leaves three on the surface. An inattentive scavenger comes and takes the three eggs his eyes have immediately come in contact with, and continues on its journey without noticing what is hidden behind the dry leaves. The Igbo strongly believe that their beliefs influence practical judgments and rules of action that are possible. Reality is more than what meets the eye.

Knowledge about human beings and their affairs is connected to a certain legal anthropology. A good demonstration of practical reasonableness is evident in good laws and order in leading the people. Leadership or direction of human affairs is a matter of having the appropriate perception and the attendant *ako na uche*, that is, "wisdom and practical reasonableness." It does not naturally come to people because they have power or are more physically built than others; it is not something believed to be endowed on some because of their pedigree, blue birth, or privileged position in society. The authority of wisdom/knowledge and practical reasonableness is not a reserve of the mighty or the usurper through physical threat and control. In centrally controlled systems, there's a tendency not to

actively seek talents or ideas from the broader community. Instead, the prevalent practice is that ideas originate from a select few at the center and are then distributed to the rest of the people on the periphery. The Igbo seem to have a natural aversion to such state of affairs.

A very significant backdrop against which one can profitably begin to study the Igbo is from Igbo myths of origin. Of all the myths available to us, the *Nri* myth of origin is, I think, the most instructive. *Eri* – the proto ancestor – was landed by *Chukwu* (God) in a very swampy land. *Eri* complained about the unsteady cosmos and the chaos encountered, *Chukwu* advised him to seek the help of his neighbors: the Awka goldsmiths, who later helped him use bellows to blow the messy earth dry (see Isichei, 1977, pp. 22-23).

The human reality, from the point of view of the Igbo, is in a process, that is, a task delivered in his hands that must be humanized and harmonized through collective effort. Both humans and their environment are not finished products. If reality is a process, it cannot be administered or harnessed from a purely controlled and static thought frame. The Awka people – a nation of goldsmiths – did what they know best in the Igbo myth

of origin: to bring form and stability to the material order. And no one central authority can have the last say about it. Reality will rather be constitutive of talents of all sorts within the existential frame. And the role of any appeal to central or organized authority will come to be redefined.

Chidi Osuagwu describes the Igbo as a "randomly moving thought particle," (Osuagwu, 2003, p. 9). The entity called the Igbo individual was landed in a chaotic universe with his *chi* (assigned lot) to collaborate with *Chukwu* in ordering (*ichizi*) the world as a process. Participation in the ordering of the cosmos is destiny that individuals have received differently in their unique ways. The commission from *Chukwu* gives rise to two ontological rights: the right of identity (to be in motion); and the right of space, that is, property (to claim the space gained by the imprint of identity in all its extensions) (see Njoku, 2009 (a), pp. 42-44).

The view that reality is a process, for the Igbo, has further implications for the reading of the world. Ontological processes do not remain in actuality for a very long time to allow the senses to make permanent and settled judgments. Entities and processes keep hitting the

human mind with surprises, innovations, and new realities that succeed in each order at an interesting speed.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon that the Igbo people say "*Uwa kere oba oba*," that is, "the world is a kaleidoscope of colors." The human reality in a process is delivered in a potpourri of colors: manifestations, ideas, different conceptualizations, and understandings, and are differently delivered to, and understood by, each person's mind. The various understandings and appreciations of it form a community of meaning and values to which individuals have contributed from their unique points of view. This interpretation has a kindred spirit with another allied saying: "*anaghi ano ofu ebe ekiri mmua*," translated as "one does not stand in one position to watch the masquerade perform." The masquerade is like a spirit, a veiled existence on the move, and cannot be pinned to one location in space. The best way to enjoy being a spectator of it is to follow its performing process or world.

Another saying that resembles *anaghi ano ofu ebe ekiri mmua* is "*anaghi ano n'ulo efota ero ukwu*" meaning that "one does not harvest big mushroom while sitting still at home." Life, success, and achievements are adventures. Knowledge,

both material and spiritual, is not given without some effort or activity. Since reality is a process, it cannot be fully and profitably accessed and assessed from a static point of view. In fact, the Igbo person's spirit of adventure is a logical consequence of the disposition of his person and environment of occurrence.

Furthermore, the Igbo people utter: *Uwa bu esee*, that is, "the world is a game of probability." *Esee* is a kind of moonlight game played by children. They organize themselves in a circle, cupping their left hands by the side of their left laps, one of them will have a bead in their hand. The person in the center of the circle will then attempt to find the person who has the bead. Tracing the person with the bead is not an easy one. Everyone, including the person in custody of the bead, will pretend to shuffle the beads between their right and left hands under their laps. The *esee* game is training in attentiveness or practical reasonableness because the one who identifies the possessor of the bead emerges as a leader, a guide, the interpreter of reality. The person is the "participant-observer" of the human condition and its changing shapes. With wisdom, the participant-observer makes practical judgments about the situation. (see Njoku, 2009(b)

pp. 91-92). This task is not given by fiat. It is a practical virtue to be learned, exercised, and maintained. One who proves oneself in this regard earns the respect of others; and hence, can be listened to.

*The non-homogeneity of Igbo groups*

Echeruo (1979) writes that the account of Igbo origin reveals many migratory routes; consequently, it indicates that there are continuities and discontinuities found within and outside the Igbo in their present location. This fact attests to a lot of incoherence in painting a picture of Igbo origin. How does one explain this? Echeruo affirms that "the explanation – or part of the explanation for this – may lie in our refusal to acknowledge a common ancestor, in our centripetal search for origins. From Onitsha and across the Niger, the claim is of the Benin ancestry – which allows us to share in the glory of that well-known empire," (Echeruo, 1979, p. 13). The Bini story claims ancestry with Ife, pointing to a possibility that the Ofala's model and descent might be traced to the "Igue festival at Benin," (p. 14).

Whereas the Onitsha people are said to have lived "in the realm of the Oba of Benin," some Onitsha people do not agree with this claim but rather assert an

"affinity with Igala people farther north. Indeed, many well-known families in Onitsha assert with pride that they were descendants of Igala princes" (p. 14). There are Igala influences that one observes in Nsukka Igbo. The Northeast part of Igbo traces its origin to "the Ogoja and Ekoi people," and "Arochukwu itself is said to owe more to its Akangbe and Ibibio ancestors than to the Igbo. The point is that Igbo people are not historically a homogenous group. There are continuities and discontinuities in the migratory routes and claims among other groups from the Western to Southern parts of Nigeria, as "we appear to lack the cohesiveness which a common theory of origins provides for a people." Certainly, a people with continuous and discontinuous migratory roots and origin would not tend to maintain a centralized system of managing themselves or telling their stories. This is not to say that small and knit-together families, groups, and communities cannot have quasi-central authorities to manage their affairs as they desire. Some kindred groups and communities do have Eze (king); but such an administrative structure, if it ever was, could not be imposed on the rest of the Igbo-speaking peoples.

### *The Igbo abhorrence of the Bini (Benin) type of centralised authority*

There is an Igbo connection with the Bini (Benin) kingdom with a centralised authority; it is undoubtedly true that the Igbo people had the Eze institution. And the institution continues today. Now, why is it that someone who has Eze institution that is original to him still claims that the Igbo people have no kings? The *Igbo-enwe Eze* (Igbo-people-have-no-kings) mentality gets indelibly enshrined in the average Igbo person. Igbo tales refer to the King of Bini as *Eze Idi na Oba*. It is said that the Igbo group left the Bini kingdom because of its oppressive rule, and that experience left the Igbo with a negative notion of central authority. Echeruo reports Archbishop Crowther's assessment of the Igbo as possessing independence that is akin to lawlessness, hence putting them in a very disadvantaged position and making them difficult to rule. It is a "great drawback," which contrasts with the Yoruba's respect for law and constituted authority that almost matches that of civilised nations (p. 12). For the Igbo, it is not a contradiction to admit having no kings and, at the same time, deny having kings. They want to make the point that if kingship is that of the controlling and oppressive type of the Benin kingdom, then Igbo people have no kings! The same reality performatively



constructed/constituted by language can also be dismembered, deconstructed, or destroyed through the same process of language if it does not perform its proper function.

### *The Igbo traditional society*

Since the migratory story of the Igbo shows that, although they speak the same language, they are not a homogenous group, it is understandable that people lived in small hamlets or communities with their socio-political organisation and security. Communities had limited and shallow knowledge about each other. All that mattered to groups was survival, and another distant group was considered separate and distinct. In this situation, one would not be looking for a centralised authority in an environment of attendant hostility and suspicion among groups. If there was a possibility of any centralised authority, its extension would certainly have been very limited. The absence of evidence of a centralised authority all over Igbo land suggests a lack of inclination towards such a structure among the Igbo.

### *Entities sit alongside others in the forest of existence*

Here is an Igbo folktale that is very instructive. Once, during dry season, a snake – *bor constrictor* – was under an

*ogirishi* (a sacred tree) cooling off; on top of the tree was a squirrel that was squeaking loudly. The snake advised the squirrel to exercise some caution so that it did not draw attention; the squirrel did not heed the advice but continued squeaking. The snake tried again to convince the squirrel that its continued indiscretion would bring disaster to all, but that did not make the squirrel change its mind. It was not long before the hunter heard the noise of the squirrel. He went closer, spotted the squirrel, aimed, and shot the squirrel. The squirrel fell dead at the foot of the *ogirishi* tree. The hunter approached to find his kill; as he bent down, he saw the snake; then, using his machete, he cut down the *ogirishi* tree and used it to kill the snake. So, the indiscretion of one entity brought death or disaster to all, thereby upsetting the harmony or mutual benefit of all in the forest of existence. All entities – good and odd alike – can be bedfellows for harmony and mutual benefit. The human project is partly a product brought about by the coincidence of opposites or compromised desires for mutual survival. Human harmony or survival is a task, a decision that rests in the hands of all stakeholders to be sustained, as entities seat along others in the forest of existence (see Njoku, 2018, p. 14).

*The constitutive principles of the individual*

Igbo people refer to God as *Chukwu*, *Chineke*, *Chi*, (Nwoga, 1984, p. 33), and so on. What concerns one presently is the word '*chi*' as a principle that designates something in the Igbo universe of being, a *lot (oke)* one has received from the *Chukwu* (Creator) which, at once, exemplifies each entity's identity as unique and connected to other entities, (Ilogu, 1985, p. 72). After all, the *lot/share (chi, oke)* one has is part of a larger portion coming from the distributor or sharer/giver of lots: *Chukwu*. Each has received unique and different lots; yet each entity's share is part of a larger participation in a greater and more extensive being of *Chukwu*. It is important to argue then that uniqueness is not an imprisoned or closed system of encounters. It has a subjective and an objective projection. Nwodo agrees that *chi* depicts the essence of each singular entity manifested in its multiple propensities (Nwodo, 2004, p. 247).

Again, that which one has received from God as one's share also doubles as one's destiny, that is, one's order of operation, functionality, and realisation of one's gift in the world. Achebe writes that "a man does not only have his *chi* but is created by it and no two people, not even blood brothers, it seems, are created by the same *chi*," (1998,

p. 69). In other words, *chi* is a principle from *Chukwu* that creates and designates its subject. God gives destiny and fixes it as contained in the *chi*-principle. If the received principle – *chi* – from *Chukwu* can create and designate its subject as it desires, it means that each entity could have been otherwise; it is simply that the designated lot is a primordially settled choice embodied in *chi* and as received from *Chukwu*. It is correct then to say that in the Igbo concept of *chi* are "interconnected principles of individuality, destiny and achievement," (Edwards and Shaw, 1989, p. 149).

But the choice made by the primordial creating principle (*chi*) results in the entity designated that is landed by *Chukwu* in the human order. In the *world* of action then, *chi* emerges as *eke (share)*, another principle closely related or reducible to, *chi*. Achebe writes that the "Igbo language by having the same root word '*ke*' for *create* and *share* does encourage this notion," (Achebe, 1998, p. 70). It is just that whereas *chi* is a primordial creator or 'identifier,' *eke* is the existential creator. *Eke* is what Ezekwugo designates as a second-mediator principle that constitutes its subject within the existential plane, (1987, p. 142). In becoming *eke* in the human-existential axis, *chi* does not lose its power to create; and the power of creation expresses the idea

that lots, destines and shares can be altered, grouped, and regrouped. It is in this sense that "*chi* gives *eke* a choice and whatever the *eke* chooses for its god-son is decisive" (Ezekwugo, 1987, p. 142). The gift-task principle is projected, at a second order of engagement, to establish progress and maintain the stability of identity within the existential mutability of human reality to which one is essentially bound.

*Socio-political implications of Chi and Eke*  
*Chi* and *eke* can double as the same word, since they are principles, at first sight, that are not in dualistic opposition.

However, as a matter of identity, there might be tensions in some specific fields of operation. The etymology of the word *Chukwu* or *Chi* derives from the verb *ichi* (to lead, to guide, to order); "*ichizi*, to rule aright" (Osugwu, 2003, p. 3). One directs that which is created. The two constitutive principles – *chi* and *eke* – in their individuality mirror *Chukwu's* being: to order, guide, and lead; and "*ichizi ihe ekereke*" means "to lead, guide, order, rule or organise well that which is created." Every person bears this task and responsibility, and it is not the pride of one person or group. The human task – given variously as gifts, lots, or talents – is a cumulative project; everyone has received something, given that each has a

unique capacity, share to contribute. The management of the tasks is not achieved by centralised control because each gift might have a different dynamism; it is achieved by positive allowance of space and enabling conditions for entities to give their best. Against this background, the Igbo management of coordination problems requires a different art of management other than a purely centralised or monarchical structure, as encapsulated in the story below that expresses how the Igbo people see the Eze/King or the leader.

An Igbo folktale portrays a King whose only daughter could not accept any of the many suitors asking for her hand in marriage. This attitude got the King worried. Consequently, the King proclaimed in his kingdom that any young man of any nationality who would win the heart of the princess and marry her would receive half of his kingdom as a gift. Young men in their numbers visited the palace, yet the princess could not be moved. Having heard the news in town, a sea python disguised as a human and handsomely stormed the palace in style. The princess was madly in love with him, to the king's delight. The sea python paid the bride prize, the King kept his word, and the King's cohorts were on the

way to escort the princess and her new husband to their new home. When they got to the sea, the son-law turned into his true nature and disappeared with the princess. The news got to the King, who ordered a rescue mission. He assembled talents of all sorts – the boat driver, hunter, thief, diviner, swimmer, carpenter – that collectively and successfully brought back the princess. And since every member of the rescue mission uniquely contributed to the successful operation, the princess could not be given to any in marriage; instead, the King absorbed the bearers of such talents as members of his cabinet.

Here is the clear manifestation of the power of diversity, and contribution of the identity of the particular, which reinforces a similar saying in the Igbo, *"ekowa/akuwa ulo, echeta onye ogologo,"* that is, when it is time to install the roof of a building, one remembers the tall person." Igbo society is constituted by various identities and competencies which form an adequate group that responds effectively when the need arises. The inference from the story regarding whether the Igbo lack centralised authority is nuanced and can be both yes and no. It leans toward yes if centralised authority implies a monarch

or an arbitrary leader who dictates without regard for the diverse talents and capabilities of others. It is a *no* because it's not accurate to claim that the Igbo entirely reject a centralised organization rooted in authority that addresses coordination issues through wise consultation and effective talent management. Importantly, it should be noted that some Igbo communities still have their Eze or kings to this day.

## ***II Summary of some implicit philosophical projections emanating from Igbo non-philosophy***

This part of the paper summarizes some of the philosophical projections inspired by the non-philosophic corpus, which are already indicated in Part 1.

*Chukwu* did not give humans a perfect world. Instead, he assigned them the challenging task of collaborating with others to navigate through the apparent chaos and establish an implicit order. This requires the use of human intelligence and practical reasonableness. The resulting 'ideal' is the product of humans' *ako na uche* (practical wisdom). The world is a task, project. The human person is tasked to collaborate with others to

navigate the apparent chaos and bring about an implicit order, using his intelligence and practical reasonableness. The Igbo people never anticipated a utopian world of flawless harmony. They have always been pragmatic, acknowledging the reality that "*odighi ebe uwa kwara ute*," meaning "there is no place the cosmos or world has primordially laid a mat, bed, or comfort." The world is not inherently comfortable; instead, comfort is a task to be pursued and achieved.

By participating in ordering a marshy earth into an atmosphere conducive to human living and order, humans pool their talents and resources together to survive. The Eze's role crystallizes in recognizing and harnessing skills that contribute to sustaining the economy and managing violence to protect the people and their property. Society or political economy is not a perfect state of virtuous men and women but a network of insightful organizations where individual talents and lots are managed. In

such a collaborative fashion, 'aberrations' can take on a positive outlook or impact when seen from the point of view of community needs and attendant rules. This is a situation where the leader combines intelligence and practical reasonableness in managing the identity of particulars and their lots. Any workable Igbo economy must allow this flexibility and freedom of exercise.

In its presentation to the human mind, the world is a kaleidoscope of colors, a mirror of moving colors whose appreciation cannot be made against a static background. Given the attendant circumstances and natural propensities, a family, a nation, a form of government or a society is a choice. No one view exhaustively explains the world, as one must flow along or progress with the moving process of reality. Even the view of the leader or king is just one tiny aspect of the whole picture of human affairs; therefore, leadership is perspective.

The fundamental source of the socio-economic process is the person: the individual. The person is the basic unit that establishes socio-political engagements. The Igbo individual is an existential gatherer: first, *onye na-atutu* (one who gathers), who has existentially assumed a state of being; second, and more deeply, *a na atutu*, a state of gathering that has become a life, a being, an identity, where a functional mode of existence is identical with being or life itself. It is in this regard that *a na atutu* is more than *onye na-atutu*; it is at once an existence and identity of being. The existential gatherer (*onye na-atutu*) is not just participating in gathering, but in life as a unit of being or energy, identity becomes co-extensive with being or existential gathering: *a na atutu*. *A na atutu* is, therefore, a normative manifestation of being as existential engagement. The individual is an *a-na-atutu creature*, that is, an existential gatherer who must make a living in a world where order is mixed with disorder, a world of shifting

currents where the individual swims along as "randomly thought moving particle," (Osuagwu, 2003, p. 9). The Igbo is in motion, that is, in a process; hence, the economy or economics of mutual enhancement of a people for which life is a process must be dynamic and perceptual. As far as the Igbo are concerned, the human project has no finite answer yet; it does not mean that there is no possible order to be pursued.

There is the identity of the particular, given the special gifts it possesses. Entities have received gifts from *Chukwu*, which help them realise their proper function and purpose (see Nwoga, 1984 (b, p.19; Umezurike, 1992, p. 42). Having acknowledged this, nothing exists in isolation within the forest of existence. Entities intertwine and share spaces for mutual survival. Both the community's well-being and individual talents must be effectively managed. Having said this, nothing, however, sits in the forest of existence alone.

The fact of philosophy of the particular projects a certain conception of Igbo economics: everyone is relevant and functions in solving the jigsaw puzzle of existence as everyone needs to contribute to the general welfare. Individuals grow the society/state by investing and harnessing their gifts, which best naturally fit into the social fabric. This type of economics is not the trickle-down of the post-World II period that claimed that the wealth racing from the West would trickle down to the periphery. Rather, individuals, in their gifts and functions, represent at once the being of the individual and the community. There is no community without the individual, and there is no individual without the community. Each human person is given the gift to organize, lead, guide, and direct like *Chukwu*.

The individual mainly receives the world as a task, and recreates it as a gift. The imprint of human existence in *Chukwu*'s inherited universe is the person: *mmadu* (the beauty or totality of life/all). The individual embodies order and capacity to

collaborate with *Chukwu*; the task of humanization is first given to the individual before it is given to a group. It is the individual that seeks the group, for collaboration. It is the fact of each individual talent that prompts the assemblage of groups of talents. The individual, coated in his uniqueness and identity, is the initiator of the human search for survival and need to connect with others. What political society and authority then will suit the Igbo people identified in their environment of occurrence, given their identity, beliefs, and propensities? The present writer characterizes such a political society as "initiative democracy"; and authority as "covenant-based authority".

### ***III The emergent concept of Igbo political society and authority***

#### *Initiative democracy*

'Initiate,' according to *The Reader's Digest, Oxford Wordfinder*, means "(1) begin; set going; originate. 2 a (usu. foll. by *into*) admit (a person) into a society, an office, a secret society, etc. with a ritual. b (usu. foll. by *in, into*) a person in science, art, etc." The adjective/noun – initiative – is "the ability to initiate; enterprise"; it also means to take a "first step," or "the power or right to begin something." Initiative is then an act/art

of beginning, a beginning that comes from one's own volition without being complied or forced by others. And some of the synonyms or correlatives of 'initiative' presented in *The Reader's Digest, Oxford Wordfinder* include "leadership, enterprise, resourcefulness, self-motivation, aggressiveness, drive, push, dynamism, energy, vigor...."

The cosmos in which the Igbo person/child exists is not an abstract space, but a humanized space called family, community or nation/state, a space rescued from chaos through *Chukwu's* direction. That space is at once a natural and negotiated venture. According to Igbo myths of origin and folklores, family emerges from the union or covenant between a man and a woman, while the community is formed through covenant relationships between individuals or families. The ritualization of a newborn baby's space occurs when its umbilical cord (*alo*) is buried at the base of an economic tree, symbolizing a connection to identity, indigene-ship, and citizenship within the space, and establishing rootedness in the land. Within the human space in the Igbo world are sub-spaces, apart from family and community/nation, like age grades, male societies, women societies, medicine

men/women (*dibia* groups), and so on. Traditionally, at the point of entry of these groups, one is ontologically (like being born in a particular family, in a certain age grade) and existentially (like belonging to male, female dance societies, and so on) ritualized or initiated in the human society.

Conventionally, democracy means rule by the people or the people's representatives. The people unite with their diverse forms and talents, and each person occupies a distinct space or role within the foundation of the Demos (People). Initiative democracy originates from the individual, who serves as the cornerstone of social relations. In this context, democracy is not solely a numerical or majority-based rule; rather, it revolves around the people (the demos). The lot of every individual count; hence, this form of political organization begins from the grassroots. *The Reader's Digest, Oxford Wordfinder* explains "grass-root" as the "fundamental level or source" of people's power. This is "the people" as the *Oha*, constituting reality within the palaver through dialogue in Igbo society. *Oha* serves as a central hub for aggregating people's opinions in the construction of reality. Since reality is dissected along linguistic lines, the Igbo



palaver method maximizes the contributions of critics and sympathizers in any aspect of engagement that concerns the community. After all sides of the argument have been thoroughly heard and evaluated, the *Oha* assembly is presented with the collective input. In the final analysis, the skilled individuals within the *Oha* assembly articulate and summarize the opinions expressed. Then a unanimous decision is taken by the *Oha*. Unanimous decision does not necessarily mean that everyone has agreed on all issues; it largely means that the community's final stand on the issue emanated from considerations which, in the light of the community's good, demands a moral obligation to be respected by all.

The collection of the necessities for existence in the concept of *onye na-atutu/a na atutu* as part of the functional exemplification is a nature. This gathering, this living or life is made in the forest of existence with, and alongside, others who ply the same existential highway to fulfil their own tasks. Sometimes, the tools or necessities one needed to accomplish one's function are 'hidden' with others; hence, the Igbo realization that while maintaining identity one naturally cuddles into others'

spaces in order to survive. Even enemies and people with irreconcilable opinions/views can collaborate over common interests. Every entity indulges in this act of existential necessity because an entity, in North Whitehead's words, is "determined by subjective aim." This aim is an ontological urge to arrive at final integration and satisfaction through the process of prehension (see Whitehead, 1978, pp. 19-20). The process of prehension or appropriations of feelings from others is an entity's "subjective form" or identity of being while sitting in the forest of existence alongside others. In this ontological way of being-with or relating-to other entities by cuddling into one another's spaces, the African sees the interpenetration of entities as collaborative. And this, for him, exemplifies "a kind of osmosis" that embraces all beings in the cosmos; creating a "cosmic unity" which keeps any being that breaks it "rent and mutilated," (De Paul Neiers, 1965, p. 117). One, here, begins to entertain the idea of covenant symbolized in a symbiotic relationship.

#### *Initiative democracy as rooted in Ibu anyi Danda*

There is even better subjective fulfilment when entities, in addition to the

ontological pull towards each other, work together as social animals. The Igbo figuratively say that when people urinate together, their urine bring out much foam! The understanding that the best outcomes emerge when people collaborate underscores the appreciation of Igbo social theory articulated in my inaugural lecture titled: "The philosophical grid of Igbo socio-political ontology: *Ibu anyi danda*," (2018). *Ibu anyi Danda* literally means "no load is too heavy on ants" or "heave together, no load is too heavy." In our philosophical ratiocination, the Igbo expression – *ibu anyi danda* – is made up of three words: *ibu*, *anyi*, and *danda*: "*Ibu*" literally means load; but in a metaphoric sense in which it is used within the Igbo linguistic setting, *ibu* refers to a category of relational tasks, work, action, engagements, and exertions. In short, it represents the horizon of life and its activities in general (that is, the totality of engagements)," (Njoku, 2018, p. 34). The word "*anyi*" expresses the verb "to make light," "to lighten" or "to make less heavy". *Danda* designates small ants, and in a metaphoric sense, it depicts "those who engage in tasks (that is, the 'engagers') – those who are aware of facts because of their constitutive mental

consciousness or representation" (Njoku, 2018, p. 34).

The individual that is an *a na atutu* is a social animal. Social animals are so called because they do things together such as bonding in the good, the just and the right for it is such bonding that makes a family a state, according to Aristotle, (see Aristotle, 1984, *Politics*, Book 1, 1253a9–15). In a situation where identities of particulars, endowed with *chi* and *eke* principles, bond together to safeguard rights of identity and property, they principally enlarge the horizon of a free way to remain in motion and to claim the space occupied by each. Consequently, justice consists in safeguarding right of identity and property in the gathering of persons and groups without impeding their process and propensity for movement or change. What kind of authority should address coordination problems in and around a human entity that is an existential gatherer in a process, a process that is a being? How does one deal with life inserted within a network of collaborations and relationships in a world of kaleidoscope of colors, where order is mixed with disorder?

*The concept of covenant and conditions towards civil society*

Covenant is "a solemn promise made binding by an oath, which may either be a verbal formula or a symbolic action," (Mendehall, 1962, p. 714). Whichever form it takes, it aims to establish a closeness of trust and mutual support that is typical of brothers. True brothers harbor fewer suspicion toward each other; they have each other's back, and there is always the conviction that someone who treats one as a brother or as family has their best interests at heart. Given that Igbo communities and groups that decide to live in peace with their neighbors were products of a near-state of nature or war where there was no lasting security, every group suspected the other, and treated the rest as enemies unworthy of their trust. With covenant, a new order of mutual trust and relationship was created for the covenanters to go on and secure their life and property.

It must be recalled that the colonial administration in Africa put in place a set of rules that helped people easily traverse one another's territory unlike before. And such rules came to override any set of tribal rules to/with which people initially oriented their action; and the attendant

colonial rules were enforced "with a reasonable degree of success," (Crowther, 1968, p. 335) at least as planned by the colonialist. The environment created by European administration made mass mobility easier across the territories for economic motives or for simply escaping tribal restrictions (see Crowther, 1968, p. 336).

On the contrary, in pre-colonial Africa, it was not easy and safe to cross to another's territory where one was unfamiliar or a community in which one had no blood relationship or any other form of social ties. It was almost like Hobbes' state of nature outside one's known environment. Consequently, to broaden their ties and survival strategies, the groups, families or persons that warred against each other began to adjust to create a new order of engagement, at least convenient enough for some peace or survival. One agrees with Echeruo when he affirms:

All the earlier travellers who visited our part of the world never failed to comment on the fact that there did not appear to be any kind of central pan-Igbo authority among us. Every man, they said, was a god in his house;

every village was an autonomous community; federations and alliances, were exactly that: affiliations of convenience which did not pretend to be new political entities capable of transforming the primary pattern of political sovereignty in the federating units, (Echeruo, 1979, pp. 11-12).

Alliances, ritual, or social affiliations became ways of navigating the world where order is mixed with disorder, thereby creating an enabling environment for human affairs in relative order and security. All the dialogue, negotiations and trust building for peaceful co-existence among persons and communities who were previously strangers or enemies to one another previously can be captured by, or symbolized in, the concept of covenant.

Usually, in a covenant-making situation, there are parties and a witness. The witness might be a human being or any symbol or God himself who is the ultimate guarantor of all covenants. The witness is not part of the covenant but is an impartial judge to the conditions of the covenant. When any party neglects the conditions of the covenant, they are

called to order. If the violation of the of the covenant conditions persists after warning, the witness is invited to intervene as an impartial judge between the parties involved, reinforcing the terms of the covenant.

#### *The emergent theory of government from covenant*

As established earlier, a covenant situation involves two sides namely, the covenant parties, and the witness. Let us for the sake of argument designate side 1 – the covenant partners – as the first-person perspective; and side 2 – the witness – as the third-person perspective. These two sides can, in my rationalization, yield two models of governance that emerge from people's or grassroots initiatives (see Njoku, 2004, pp. 178-180).

*The First-Person Perspective:* This perspective makes one think of a form of government where a member of the covenant is appointed or elected to pilot the affairs of the group. As a member of the covenant community, it is hoped that with wisdom and practical reasonableness, the member will prioritize the well-being of the group without sabotaging it. Recognizing their role as beneficiaries of the collective good, it is deemed unreasonable to

sabotage a common good in which one has an equal share. Such a person internalizes the importance of the collective well-being of all.

*The Third-Person Perspective:* The third-person perspective depicts a situation where someone who takes the point of view of the witness is appointed or elected to oversee the goods of covenanting parties. The reason for choosing a person with this point of view is to maintain justice between/among covenant partners and avoid partiality. The witness model of administration is like the *podestà* in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy (see Skinner, 1978, pp. 3-4) where a person from another city was invited to administer another city. Serving as a paid official, the *podestà* was expected to carry out their duties in a fair and just manner. After their tenure, they were required to provide an account of their job before departing the city.

Whether one adopts the first or the third person perspective in administering for the welfare of the political community that has emerged within a genuine social contract, like that of a covenant, the community will undoubtedly experience a degree of fairness, security, and mutual trust in navigating its existence. This is achieved through following the ethics or

law of covenant. From any of the two perspectives, distribution of goods and services, and security can take their proper place in securing equity and equality within the egalitarian structure of Igbo society.

One does not intend to imply that the group or community borne out of covenant bonding in Igbo setting is an argument for inclinations toward centralised authority. Echeruo has already reminded us that travelers to the Igbo part of the world earlier spotted the apparent lack of such an intention (Echeruo, 1979, pp. 11-12). Could it be said then that the traditional Igbo society was not interested in "founding states" as bringing about "civil societies" among the various Igbo autonomous units and their neighbors so that people could securely interact, inter-marry, and conduct their trade in (relative) peace? Marriage ceremonies bring lineages together and expand boundaries of communion through *in-law* relationships (Amadiume, 1987, p. 71).

### **How not to compare some points raised in the paper with some Western ideas**

Before I conclude this paper, the significations of some points made earlier have to be highlighted and situated in their proper perspective.

*About the claim that order mixes with disorder:* The statement that "order and disorder are mixed together in Igbo world" is a claim about the challenging state of the environment and the human condition in the Igbo environment of occurrence. It is not immediately a moral judgement as one could find in Machiavelli (1952) and Hobbes (1968) who present human nature in a poor light, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau who taught that education brought the subsequent confusion in society. Rather, it is a perceptive outlook or 'descriptive understanding' of the Igbo world from within, which can help both an outsider and insider come to a greater appreciation of the Igbo and his environment of occurrence. Machiavelli insists that men, naturally or anthropologically, are wicked; and in the world they are in, one cannot expect virtuous actions or attitudes from others, (see Machiavelli, 1952, p. 22). He rejects spiritual values or any appeal of metaphysics beyond matter; his anthropology presents the individual as selfish and focused on his survival by any means available to him. Machiavelli, therefore, does neither encourage good faith among people (see p. 77) nor virtue, as he portrays in *The Prince*; hence, he insists on his denial that people are

fundamentally good (p. 25). The Igbo will not go all the way with Machiavelli's assertion that people are naturally wicked. The Igbo primordial order is structured by *Chukwu*, who intends the collaboration of humans in bringing about or discovering the order they can create.

Hobbes portrays people as fundamentally selfish, asserting that although reason exists, it is devoid of intrinsic rightness; for him, there is no right reason, albeit there is reason (see Hobbes, 1968, pp. 110-111). He goes further to state that the chaos that envelops people results from inherent motion and desire that compel them to compete and war against each other over the same thing everyone wants (p. 186). For Hobbes, everything is matter in motion which is divided into "voluntary motions" and "vital motions" (p. 118). As all are in motion, they collide with one another for they all want the same thing, and violence ensues; insecurity envelops everyone as continuous "fear and danger of violent death," according to Hobbes, haunt everyone. Therefore, man is faced with a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," (p. 186). On the contrary, motion or process as an attribute of Igbo identity is a metaphysical way of being

that does not necessarily lead to collision because entities have their intrinsically allotted lots and spaces based on which they can negotiate. The claim that order is mixed with disorder is not necessarily a denial of fundamental order in the Igbo universe. It is just that it has to be discovered as it appears, sometimes to the mind, alongside disorder; hence, the virtues of *ako na uche* (practical reasonableness) are needed to navigate the world.

Rousseau's claim that "man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains" (Rousseau, 1968, p. 49) expresses constraints that are akin to the reference to a challenging world in the Igbo cosmic order. Like in the thought of Rousseau, the Igbo recognizes freedom as inherent in his nature. Moreso, the freedom of movement and thought helps the Igbo to navigate his challenging world. Rousseau, however, sees man's trouble from another angle; instead of a human soul being improved by education, it was the cause of its undoing in the state of nature, when he moved into political society, which was not as brutish as Hobbes painted it. Entering association with others in civil or political society, the Igbo proto ancestor (*Eri*) employed the help (information/education) of his

neighbors to stabilize the earth and relationship with others. So, education had an enhancing and liberating effect in the Igbo and their environment. For Rousseau, on the contrary, education brought a bad alteration of the soul (Rousseau, 1992, p. 10). The savage man that left nature's hand was peaceful, according to Rousseau; it was participation in society and the enlightenment of education that brought confusion, as man learned to use his freedom through education to deviate from his proper end (see p. 25), disobeying nature by his freedom, despite "freedom that the spirituality of his soul is made manifest" (p. 25). Whereas the Igbo will accept Rousseau's freedom element, they will certainly reject Rousseau's understanding of the role of freedom and education. It was learning through association with others (education), in the Igbo person's thinking, that the human condition improved in the primordial society. The cosmology and anthropology of Machiavelli and Hobbes are somehow in opposite directions to those of the Igbo.

*Regarding the implication of a culture-specific claim:* Certain ideas argued for in the essay might be said to be culture-specific. One allows the expression

"culture-specific" in the sense that individuals in their cultural environment begin to know and access reality from that perspective. However, it should not be claimed that because some experiences are identified with a culture, they, therefore, cannot be universalized; consequently, they are regarded as relative to it. An experience is considered human because it is indulged in by humans irrespective of their tribe, race, and place. Human beings, regardless of their location, engage in reasoning, experience emotions, and form beliefs about the universe and its origins. They then shape these beliefs into principles of action that aid in their survival within their environment. On a positive note, culture-specificity alerts us to pay attention and understand the heartbeat of reality being presented to us from a perspective of human experience within the common world of human experience. A culture-specific experience then can largely point to internal statements of those who navigate human experience as insiders from within their environment of occurrence; it is not a denial that other cultures can have the experience of the same human reality in their way. When, for example, the Igbo subscribe to making decisions by consensus as a treasured way of constructing reality through

dialogue, they do not invariably exclude the possibility that some other cultures can have such preferred option in their own way with the instrumentality of language.

One would reject the tendency to simply think that culture-specificity lends itself to ethical or cultural relativism. The relativist argument has been overtaken. We can listen, for example, to the usual ethical relativist position: that moral codes differ from culture to culture, and in different places and ages. Gould can affirm that "the moral code of Chinamen is quite different from that of Europeans, that of African savages quite different from both. Any morality, therefore, is relative to the age, the place, and the circumstances in which it is found. It is in no sense absolute" (Gould, 1992, p. 107). Different moral beliefs, according to the relativist, lead to different judgements; hence, there are many standards and policy-responses to the same issue by different peoples and cultures (see Rachels, 1999, p. 44).

One does not deny relativism of judgement. People can judge according to what they know or feel about a situation; and on this there is allowance for different judgments. However, that people disagree about what something is



(judgement) does not mean that they are talking about different standards (Rachels, 1999, p. 44). Disagreement on the basis of people's judgement is, therefore, not a strong claim to argue for the relativism of moral codes. In other words, culture-specific elements as judged by a culture do not necessarily justify the claim that other cultures are using different standards from others in judging similar situations.

Besides, evidence from cultural studies challenges even more the relativist obsession with cultural differences as basis for his argument. The Stoics of ancient Greece observed that in spite of the fact that customs varied, "there was some vague resemblances as though all had come from some common source" (Barrow, p. 211). Furthermore, by the 1970s, some anthropologists noted that there are basic elements or features of the human community that are common, namely: systems of taboos or what is and is not accepted in the group; systems that maintain life, and permit or sanction accordingly; education of offspring; various division of tasks in society in order to enhance and ensure survival; and sufficient security provided to guard against anti-social behaviour. In fact, it is acknowledged that certain institutional

forms are present in all societies, "such as the family with its responsibilities for training children and caring for the aged, division of labour between the sexes (and occupational differences in more complex societies), games or art or dance, and so on," (Rachels 1999; see also Murdock, 1945). Kluckhohn corroborates that all cultures have all forms of acts that are either encouraged or prohibited for the survival of group (see Kluckhohn, 1955, p. 52 and pp. 63-67). Although "culture-specific contents" can specially help people to have proper handle on certain aspects of reality, such as indigenous knowledge, they are still part of universal deposit within the human horizon of knowledge.

*Does the Igbo then definitely abhor a central authority?* The Igbo person's concept of identity, world, and their approach to viewing reality distinctly leads them towards a unique social and political framework. The Igbo may not refuse a good centralised authority that nurtures the conditions and engagements that bring out the best in them and their surroundings. So far, the Igbo brief engagement with the Bini kingdom in their migratory history, as well as their experiences with military rule and various

democratic dispensations in Nigeria, has led them to hold a contrary perspective.

Ifi Amadiume makes a curious comment against the backdrop of Nnobi experience. According to her, it was the British who were looking for a centralised authority in Igbo land. When they did not find one, they created one "after the military expeditions and firm establishment of colonial presence and rule. Ignoring the different indigenous political systems, from 1891 to 1929 the colonial government established a universal system of local government throughout Igboland in the form of the warrant chief system" (Amadiume, 1987, p. 137). This is seen in the provision of warrant chiefs by the British across Igbo communities as Afigbo writes in his *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (1972); yet people continued to resist British control or sovereignty over them (see Afigbo, 1986, p. 17). The Igbo world certainly does not abhor a center; after all, the family has the father as a center, and when the father is not there, the eldest takes charge, and oversees the household, as seniority is mostly structured biologically, and along patrilineal lines. Amadiume writes that "Nnobi, in fact, appears to have been centralized during

the period of Ezike (roughly during the first half of the 19th century) as Nnobi was said to have been called Nnobi-Ezike during that period" (Amadiume, 1987, p. 56). However, the case of Ezike was more of an instance involving a generous and patriotic individual who mobilized his resources to protect his people from harassment and intimidation by a neighboring town. The hierarchical sharing of roles within the traditional society was organized along the lines of descent groups or patrilineages. It is essential to recognize that this should not be construed as a universal representation of the idea of centralized government in Igboland (see Amadiume, 1987, p. 52).

### Conclusion

If centralised authority supposes a monarchical leviathan or superman who exercises control based on some power possessed, the Igbos will continue to reject that kind of authority because it does not agree with their ontological and political chemistry. Headship in government for the Igbo society represents a constellation of attributes such as wisdom and practical reasonableness exemplified in the figure of a leader as manager of talents and spaces where the exercise of freedom

flourishes. Physical control or brute application of power cannot guarantee an Igbo person's allegiance to the center when required. It is the leader's exemplification of the values of freedom where space is given to persons and groups to thrive and succeed. Each person with unique functionality mutually complements everyone in the effort to build a stable community.

In other words, rulership or statecraft does not focus on a person, figure, or institution but the participation of *chi*-principled individuals in the horizon of goodness that *Chukwu* has endowed them to bring about. It has to be emphasized again that "to rule or lead" in Igbo means *ichizi*; the root of this word is *chi*, that is, lot/share. The shares, lots or talents are housed by entities, and society/association/collaboration is a place for ordering them well. The focus on governance is on what we can bring about in our contributory roles; the leader becomes that stand that encourages all to bring their best. As narrated in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, the people can take a decision or pursue a line of action that isolates the so-called 'leader' and whatever his believes is right at the time. The people reminded the stubborn Ezulu - the leader

- that their deity (Ulu) was a consensus god. And Ezulu, the Chief priest of Ulu might risk abandonment together with his god. Nwaka, a great unfriendly critic of Ezulu declares: "If a man says yes, his *chi* also says yes. And we have all heard how the people of Aninta dealt with their deity when he failed them. Did they not carry him to the boundary between them and their neighbours and set fire on him?" (Achebe, 1974, p. 28).

Igbo pragmatism, which is an offshoot of the *eke*-principle of ratiocination, consequentially, thinks in terms of the person and community goods or benefits, and not about prominent figures, kings, and leaders. Ezulu thinks about allegiance to a god (Ulu), and insists on maintaining a 'right' and 'faithful' relationship with it, while the people are concerned about their survival, and abandon Ezulu and his deity, as the strangers - the missionaries - invade their land (see Achebe, 1974, p. 216). Knowledge and practical reasonableness - *ako na uche* - continue to search for grounds upon which to place some proper handle on the reality about the Igbo and their institutions.

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