

## THE PRINCIPLE OF *EGBE BERE*, *UGO BERE* AS IGBO CONTRIBUTION TO HARMONIOUS CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

by

Ekwealor, Paul Emeka

Department of Social Studies

Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

Anambra State-Nigeria

### Abstract

Values are essential for shaping not only the personality of individuals but they also serve as bedrock for achieving integral and sustainable development in any country. In a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, multi-culturalism promises to be a store house of values for national growth and progress. Harnessing the richness of cultural principles provides the best ideas that will lead to the required quality of development plans that will extensively impact the lives of the citizenry in the key sectors of societal living- political, economic, educational and religious. The end-product of it all is social harmony, which ensures peaceful co-existence. This article advocates the Igbo principle of *Egbe bere*, *Ugo bere* (live and let live) as an inestimable socio-cultural value which the Nigerian multi-ethnic country needs: as Igbo contribution to enhancing unity in diversity in the country.

**Keywords: Principle, Egbe, Ugo, Harmonious and co-existence.**

### Introduction

The Igbo have a very popular proverbial saying: *Egbe bere, Ugo bere. nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya* (Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch; should any of them not allow the other, let its wings fail). Rational imputation among the Igbo of the christianised generation tend to add a moralizing undertone by saying ‘*ya gosi ya ebe o ga-ebe*’ (let it show the other where it would perch) instead of ‘let its wings fail’. Considered from either the pre-christian or contemporary version, *egbe bere, ugo bere* is so fundamental in Igbo tradition and existential living that it cannot be easily overstepped without serious apprehension among interest

parties or stakeholders in an Igbo socio-cultural setting or environment. It is a principle that can be justifiably understood as the bedrock of Igbo societal congenial existence.

This paper postulates and actually proposes, that the principle will go a long way in turning the multi-ethnic diversity of Nigeria as country which so far has been an aggregational mishap into a viable socio-political heritage. The writer will thus go from a brief meaning of *egbe bere, ugo bere* to presenting some previous authors’ understanding of the expression. The practical dimensions of the principle among the Igbo will

introduce us to what it would imply for the Nigerian nation if adopted and implemented in our national context. There will also be some recommendations before conclusion.

### **What is *Egbe bere, Ugo bere*?**

In the commonest understanding, it means 'live and let live'! In a more technical and conventional perspective, it means equal justice for every person. The Igbo will again say: *Emee nwata k'emere ibe ya, obi adi ya mma*, meaning that if you treat a child the way you have treated the other one, he will be happy. It can even be adduced that truth and justice are like two sides of a coin in Igbo moral thinking. The reason is that neither truth nor justice can hold sway independently of the other, hence the Igbo expression *ofo n'ogu*, meaning truth and justice.

In a more practical perceptive, justice understood as a virtue of the political order refers to giving everyone his due. It's inseparable link to truth as a value in Igbo cosmology cannot be underestimated as Ogugua (2003) quoting Ekwunife, submits that the concept of "*ofo* is used to translate and transform Igbo idea of truth and justice into concrete reality."

Thus *egbe bere, ugo bere* conventionally understood in its simplest meaning as justice among the Igbo is a basic principle in the Igbo existential and communal world. It underscores the importance which the Igbo attach to cognate communal living which characterized (and still characterizes) the many sub-cultural people of the Igbo, all of whom trace their roots directly or indirectly to a single ancestry or progenitor. The overriding important of justice as a value is such that any reasonable discourse on it in the Igbo world should take into consideration the diverse interests of individual members of a community, as

well as communities that add up to a mega community. Hence, Ekei (2001), describes justice as "the most basic and most embracing moral disposition within the (Igbo) communal setting".

### **Some Authors Perspective on Justice**

When Aristotle (384-322BC) concluded in *Politics* (1962) that any human being who is not able to live in a societal setting is either a beast or a god, he was not only alluding to man as a political animal but more importantly to the social nature of man which compels him to live in society. For him, the political arrangement which makes a society what it is presupposes justice as its bedrock.

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), a French existentialist philosopher of the modern period, is popular for his discourse on interpersonal relationship, very likely inspired by Martin Buber in: *Between Man and Man*. In his *I-Thou Relationship* (Accessed 12.7.2019), Marcel reasons that any authentic, meaningful existence should consist in the correct response to the question "what am I?" and that is the subject 'I' in search of meaning: meaning for itself as such and meaning for its existence. Man as a subject necessarily has to live in relationship with fellow subjects; in other words, in a community. It is Marcel's idea that these relationships which, put together, constitute the essence of societal living ought to be built on trust and fidelity among the relating subjects. Trust and fidelity among members/groups of a society will generate the attitude of live-and-let-live (justice) among constituent members/groups of the society. It is in such a society as above that Mbiti's (1969), 'I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am' finds stringent expression and concrete relevance. Of course that is only a recapitulation of Julius Nyerere's principle of African brand of

communalism which can be equated to egalitarianism, priced so highly in the African world. In typical African societies, individuality (of persons and/or groups) is neither subsumed in, nor suppressed by the community. The latter rather encourages the former to attain the fullness of its identity and actualize its maximum potentials. That is justice.

Thus, when Ekei (2001), discusses Justice-in-communalism as an indispensable aspect of Igbo ethics and justice which dismantles the human “natural tendency not to care about to be indifferent or even actively hostile to the welfare, needs, wants, interests of other humans”, his driving force and end-in-view was the understanding of justice as giving to each person his due. His conclusion is very significant “that any reasonable discourse on justice in the Igbo world would take into consideration the diverse interests involved in the community”. Nwala ha (1985), earlier enunciated that even as *ofo n’ogo* (truth and justice in Igbo concrete existence) overlap. Justice is that which rules the relation between man and man and between man and things in nature. Pantaleon Iroegbu simply calls it *egbe bere, ugo bere*, describing *Egbe* and *Ugo* as representing the different individuals (or groups) in the community who must be allowed to perch/live without unnecessary hindrance. That is the Igbo principle of justice which is of an inexhaustible value to Igbo communal existence.

### **Practical dimensions of Igbo notion of Justice**

Among the Igbo, justice tends to be the highest value, second only to life. Thus, it is not just a ‘notion’, a ‘term’ or a ‘concept’. It is a ‘good’ which, concomitant with a person’s right to life, is inalienable except for the grave reason of offending against communal welfare.

The Igbo almost equate justice to life itself; such that a denial of the former reduces the ontological status of a human being to that of ‘a thing’ (*ife/ihe*), no longer ‘a person’ (*onye*).

This ‘communal goal’ attitude among the Igbo in relation to justice informs a sort of democratic approach which they exhibit in the administration of justice, even the type often described as ‘jungle justice’ among Nigerians. If a thief, an armed robber, a kidnapper, a witch or wizard, etc, is being mobbed to death, the crowd arrogates justice to itself in place of those whose duty it is to maintain wholesomeness, law and order in the particular society. Virtually every member of the crowd agrees to the action being taken, even if he does not actually join its execution.

Looking at justice in the Igbo world from the existential perspective, therefore, one can identify the following as its practical dimensions:

#### **i. Justice as Concern**

Either by natural order of things or through misfortune, there are some people who find themselves on the margin of existence and economic survival. These include the physically challenged, the mentally handicapped. Numbered among such are also those in the two levels of poverty whom Ekei (2001), ingenuously designated as the poor (*ogbe-enye*), the destitute (*ubiam*) and the indigent (*ogbenye mkpaku*). From his idea, we interpret further that *ogbe-enye* depicts the sustenance which the community (*ogbe*) provides to its members at this level of existence as an act of social justice. Agbo (1991), expands showing concern as justice in the Igbo (especially traditional) society to involve “not doing any harm to any person in his name, in his

property, or any of his family members and friends.”

#### **ii. Justice as Care**

Closely linked to justice as concern among the Igbo is their dispensing justice as an attitude of caring. When one diligently performs one’s duties in an ideal Igbo society, one is doing so in the spirit of caring for the well-being of the entire society/community. And it is considered an act of injustice should one either fail or totally abdicate such a responsibility or duty. This understanding of justice-as-care probably informs the way the traditional Igbo co-ordinate themselves in tackling problems and executing projects confronting any of their community members who, left alone, would be overwhelmed by such a problem or project. This attitude of justice-as-care among the Igbo ideally discourages evil tendencies not only among themselves but also in relating with strangers, especially those living in their midst.

#### **iii. Justice as Hospitality**

The foregoing dimensions of justice in the Igbo world comfortably land us on the Igbo attitude of portraying justice-in-hospitality. Igbo mythology is replete with this idea of justice, as well as Igbo folklores and proverbs. Thus, in an Igbo traditional society, justice is appreciably contained in being hospitable, sociable, generous, and in neighbourliness, most especially towards strangers. In fact, what Sofola (1973) succinctly stated in his work *African Culture and African Personality* is so ad rem in describing this understanding of justice among the Igbo as incorporating “wholesome human relations among people, respect for elders, community fellow-feeling...hospitality.” This is very informative on how the traditional Igbo society lived happily and in peace.

#### **iv. Justice as Acceptance**

Although most pure culture communities (pure in the sense of being free of cross-cultural influences) are homogenous, such a community in the Igbo world hardly rejects foreigners. He or she will however, be expelled as soon as such a person turns into an ‘intruder’. And he or she becomes one by offending against the customary norms of the community or group that accepted him or her. Culturally, the Igbo are among the top “receiving peoples” of the world. As they are very hospitable, so are they ready to accept, and accommodate non-indigenous elements into their midst. This may be one of the contributory factors to the phenomenon of fast-developing status that characterizes many Igbo (even local) communities today.

So, ordinarily the Igbo consider it an obligation in justice to accept-and-protect foreign elements in their midst: as long as such people relatively uphold the socio-cultural status quo instead of turning themselves into societal nuisance.

#### **v. Justice as Co-existence**

The Igbo name *Somuadina* (that I may not be alone/ a loner) goes beyond the level of mere family/domestic favourite to that of pan-Igbo cultural delicacy. It has been admonished (though yet unverified) in certain circles that if you find yourself in any place in the world and happen to discover there is no single Igbo person there, you should leave. It is either that natural environment is too inimical to human survival, or the socio-cultural atmosphere is too harsh to allow adaptation. Besides this innate trait in the Igbo to adapt and live anywhere among peoples of other cultures, he considers it a duty in justice to accommodate and live with foreigners. It is of note that among the ethnic peoples of Nigeria, the Igbo are the most friendly, and he is ready to make

great sacrifices for peaceful co-existence and harmonious living in both the immediate and larger society.

The Igbo man values belongingness, convinced that no man is an island, and that a tree cannot make a forest. His philosophy of life in this regard is premised on the principle: ‘the larger, the better’! His sense of unity and love of community propel him to value co-existence and promote it, even at great costs.

The foregoing five dimensions of how the Igbo conceptualize and exhibit justice, among other ways, constitute the basis for the high level of socio-cultural homogeneity noticed in many Igbo societies. Except in very recent times when few Igbo communities are engulfed in inter-communal crises, especially for occupying the traditional stool and headship of the town union, the principle of justice still holds many a community together, and they can still speak as one. It must be said, however, that party politics and politicking is a new omen which is not doing the highly cherished Igbo societal harmony a little harm! Be that as it may, *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* as Igbo principle of justice has far-reaching implications for the Nigerian nation-state.

### **Implications of *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* for Nigeria**

Nigerian cultural and ethnic diversity is a self-evident phenomenon. But what Nigeria can make out of this inescapable reality depends on the peoples of the country (even if not nation-state). The diversity can be either a curse or a blessing, depending on which option is made and, more importantly, the quality of the socio-cultural engineering machinery put in place by leaders and policy-makers of the country. The wise words of Harrison and Huntington (2000),

that “cultures and civilizations are encouraged to remain diverse while everyone gets a piece of the pie” are very instructive to the Nigerian leadership and followership. And this is the first thing Nigeria as a nation-state should learn and imbibe from the Igbo principle of *Egbe bere, Ugo bere*. Ethnic and cultural diversities, religious differences, political persuasions, and divergences in our levels of civilization notwithstanding, every Nigerian can still receive “a piece of the pie” and be comfortable in a socio-cultural atmosphere of peace and harmony.

Every ethnic nationality and/or cultural people cannot attain the same level of civilization, growth and development. It has never happened anywhere in human history. This does not negate the fact, however, that sociologists and experts in development studies are agreed on the assertion that the level and quality of development of any nation can best be assessed in relation to the quality of life in its suburbs/hinterland, and not by appraising its mega cities. Thus, despite the glaring differences in levels of civilization, growth and development, despite variety of religious beliefs and commitments, political affiliations, and indeed overhaul cultural heritages and practices, *egbe bere, ugo bere* (live and let live) can still serve as the bedrock of harmonious communal living in Nigeria. The foregoing submission does not, however, deny the possibility and need for equitable (fair and reasonable) development in all parts of Nigeria.

Among the good qualities of the traditionally republican system of the Igbo society is the belief that justice is a public good to which every member of the society can validly lay a claim (except in a few situations). It can be said without

fear of contradiction that justice, in its fundamental quality, is not classified in the Igbo world. It is no respecter of social status in an ideal Igbo society. In the face of justice, all men are equal; and there are never some who are more equal than others! In a popular Nigerian slang, there are no 'sacred cows' in matters of justice. Okonkwo's exile to his motherland in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* depicted the finality of justice in traditional Igbo societies, although things have changed a lot today. This writer still believes, however, and proposes that the level of aberration which justice has suffered in contemporary Nigeria can only be remedied by a recourse to the Igbo traditional principle of *egbe bere, ugo bere* (live and let live) in all its dimensions.

In line with the above proposal, Abyssinia Nwafor Orizu (1999) exhorted that "So long as different areas in Nigeria have different languages and cultures, so long will all these be preserved and duly respected; but they must not be magnified in such a way that a part should be stronger than the required whole." Failure to heed this wise counsel in Nigeria by successive leadership has given birth to 'marginalization' as the brand name for summation of injustice suffered by whole sections, groups and ethnic nationalities in a country that prides itself on unity-in-diversity. *Egbe bere, ugo bere* (live and let live) as Igbo principle of justice can assuage the apprehensiveness with which most parts of the country approach the project-Nigeria today.

### **Recommendations**

For the Nigerian-Project to be achieved in such a way that unity-in-diversity will remain a blessing rather than a curse for the country (which is the main aim of this

paper), the following recommendations are put forward:

1. The Nigerian leadership architecture as it is today, and as it has been for nearly two decades, needs to be systemically overhauled.
2. Closest and indispensable to the above is the issue of a moral imperative for leaders who, of necessity, ought to remove themselves from the lowest level of morality (criminal, disregard for other people's rights, overturning the legal system) and adhere to the highest level which makes the leader altruistic and self-denying.
3. The traditional Igbo understanding of justice which transcends the 'now' and projects into the future should be imbibed by the leadership and integrated into our national development plans. This notion prioritizes distributive justice which mainly involves the interests and welfare of future generations as against what obtains in Nigeria today whereby our propensity to consume rather than save reflects our emphasis only on the 'now'.
4. Nigeria as a country, like many leading countries in contemporary world, and the leadership, should be characterized by a pragmatic emphasis on rationality. In such a socio-cultural arrangement, the leader derives his satisfaction, in the final analysis, from his achievements instead of self-aggrandizement. This is the only way progress/development which results from "a vast sum of small achievements" can come our way.
5. One final recommendation which, as it were, is a resume of all others is that our vision and notion of democracy must change in Nigeria. Hitherto, a resistant political tradition, and indeed culture, of absolutism has dominated

our polity. We rather need a progressive, parliamentary democratic culture wherein political power is distributed among sectors, arms of government and constituting zones of the one, organic Nigeria where the law of the land is the supreme authority.

### Conclusion

The basic assumption of this paper is that Nigeria as a multi-ethnic – and that by a multi-cultural nation has not reasonably harnessed the socio-cultural values with which she is endowed, which harnessing exercise “can be very useful in minimizing some of the risks associated with “difference” and multicultural life” (Harrison & Huntington 2000). Another claim evident in the discourse is that Nigeria is a retrogressive rather than a progressive society, hence in Nigeria “justice, like personal advancement, is often a function of who you know or how much you can pay” (Harrison & Huntington: 300). Finally, the third claim and contention of the writer is that the Igbo socio-cultural principle of *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* (live and let live) and the high value placed on it in the Igbo world is a gift for the country towards peaceful, harmonious co-existence which has so far eluded the country.

What has been done in this paper is an advocacy for the Nigerian leadership, and all policy makers in the country, to approach issues of development and progress with such an open mind whose constructs can go beyond ethnic cleavages and cultural myopia and access the bountiful gains that can accrue from multiculturalism. This, it is believed, is the only step towards salvaging the fast-collapsing nationhood we have always claimed to be our collective patrimony.

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