Igala Ontology and Its Influence on Their Social Praxis

Ebeh, John Igbogo
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Kogi State University, Anyigba
E-mail: ebeh4u@gmail.com & johnebeh2@yahoo.com
Phone: +2348067092035; +2347055599150

Abstract

This paper argues that a people's ontology determine their world-view which in turn is manifested in their outlook and attitudes towards life and existence. This view point is contrary to the popular view enunciated by scholars such as Redfield, Kraft, Gyekye, Egbunu and Mbaegbu who hold world view as synonymous with ontology and in some instances as if a people's world-view determines their ontology. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the Igala ontology which is about the people's thought system which is exposed through their world view and is experienced in and through their attitude towards life, family, society and other aspects of their social praxis. The paper is investigative in nature, analytical in outlook and critical in approach. It investigates the thought of the people and presents them for analysis with critical tools. It is organized as follows: introduction, clarification of concepts, Igala People and their world view, Relationships between Igala worldview and their ontology, Igala ontology and its reflection on their thought system, Influence of Igala ontology on their social praxis, evaluation and conclusion.

Introduction

It is generally observed that the way a group of people behave, reacts to issues and events are thought of to be determined by their ways of thinking. Most

often, the way people think determines the way they act. But the way people think is most often determined by their world views. Such world views are in turn based on the fundamental thinking system of the people. It is in the light of the above that it becomes necessary to examine the Igala people's ontology and to examine its links with their thoughts patterns and its existential reality in their daily life. We intend to examine how the people's ontology reflects in their daily activities. But the fundamental question is: who are the Igalas? What is their world view and ontology and how do they affect their social praxis? What is the correlation between their ontology and social praxis? How can a person sustain such thinking system in the contemporary society?

This paper examines Igala ontology and its existential reality as explicated through their world view. In the process, it gives a brief introduction to the Igala people before examining their ontology. It goes further to examine the relationships between the Igala ontology and their world view.

Conceptual Explication

There are three concepts that need to be clarified. They are: Igala people, worldview and ontology.

The Igala People

The Igala people stand out among the well-known ethnic groups in Nigerian society. They are found in the Eastern Senatorial District of Kogi state. They are located within the triangle formed by the confluence of the rivers Niger and Benue (Egbunu, 2004, p. 49; Ebeh, 2007, p. 92). The land area covered by the Igala is the largest geographical area inhabited by a single ethnic group in the state today.The land is bounded in the west by river Niger, on the east by Enugu State, on the south by Anambra State and on the north by Nassarawa and Benue States. It is about 120kilometers wide and 150 kilometers long. It covers a land mass of about 13,665 square kilometers, and their population is 1.6 million people going by the reports of the National Population Commission, 2006 (Egbunu, 2009, p. 8). They constitute more than half of the entire population of the state (Okwoli. 1996, p.1; Abuh, 1993, p.7; Ebeh, 2007, p. 92).

Owing to the centrality of the location of Igala land in Nigeria, it has enjoyed some influence by its neighbours especially the Yoruba, Edo, Jukun, Idoma, Nupe, Igbo, Hausa, Igbirra, Bassa – Nge, Bassa - Kwomu, and the Kakandas. It is thought that its natural location has left some indelible marks on the tradition and culture of the people (Egbunu, 2009, p. 8). The vegetation of the land inhabited by the Igala people is essentially Guinea Savanna with an average rainfall of about 1146mm. The people are predominantly farmers and grow such crops as yam, cassava, guinea corn, millet, maize, mellon, rice, and cotton, largely on subsistence level.

The Igala people are evenly distributed all over the land but with Anyigba, Ankpa and Idah known to be densely populated. The Igala people are also found in Edo (Igara), Delta (Ebu), Anambra and Enugu States. But, the bulk of the people are found in Idah, Ankpa, Dekina, Omala, Ofu, Igalamela/Odolu, Ibaji, Bassa, Lokoja and Ajaokuta Local Government Areas of Kogi State (Ebeh, 2007, p. 92).

Igala land could be described as a sort of terminus. It is strategically located at the natural cross roads in Nigeria. Due to its territorial location, it has been influenced both positively and negatively by various trends of events as it is being pulled in different directions. There have been interactions between the Igala people and the Yoruba, whom they see as their sister as they descended from the same ancestor – Oduduwa. There have been interactions going on between the Igalas and the Ibos, who see the Igalas as their brothers who ran away from their mother land and settled at their present location. There are also interactions between the Igala people and Edo, Jukun, Nupe, Hausa, Egbirra, Bassa Kwomu and Bassa Nge. These interactions have left diverse indelible marks on the people and their traditional activities.

The Igala people exist as a kingdom with their Attah Igala as their traditional paramount ruller and some other lower kings as his fellow rullers of the people at the various levels of the society. Attah, as the name implies, is seen and respected as the father or custodian of the entire Igala People's culture and tradition, and his seat of office is at Idah (Okwoli, 1996, p. iv).

Idah, the traditional headquarters of the Igala kingdom, is seen as the oldest town in Igalaland in particular and in the former Kabba province in general. It was founded in the 12th century A.D. and has the population of about 250 thousand people. The town is linked with both land and water ways. One could travel from Idah to Onitsha, Agenebode and Lokoja on water, that is, on the Rivers Niger/Benue. It is linked to Nsukka, Ajaokuta, Anyigba, Enugu and Ankpa.

Igala land was divided into three administrative divisions namely: Idah, Dekina and Ankpa. These towns stood as the traditional, political and cultural seats of the Igala people under the traditional governance of the Attah. These three divisions have some variations in the linguistic and form variations in the cultural melting points. Idah was the largest single town in Igala land and was at a time provided with air trip, used mostly by government officials.

World view

According to Nwala (1985, p. 24) worldview refers to the complex of beliefs, habits, laws, customs and tradition of a people. It includes the overall picture they have about reality, the universe, life and existence, their attitude to life and things in general. In line with Nwala's thought, world view has to do with what a person has

acquired in himself or herself that determines his or her behaviour and general attitudes to life and existence. In essence, a people's world view is at the background. The question therefore is: does a people's world view include their ontology? More so, what then constitute a people's ontology? Nwala's concept of world view appears to dwell on the people's ontology and not their worldview.

For Mbaegu (2004, p.1) a world view is the sum total of all the assumptions entertained by a people. It is a people's mental map of the universe. It is the concept of the world: physical and metaphysical, held by a people. They are the basic notions underlying their cultural, religious and social activities. Mbaegu's definition of world view as the sum total of the assumptions entertained by the people and the host of others are more of definition of the people's ontology and not their world view. Kraft (1979, p.53) defined a people's world view as their central control box that governs the application of the people's conceptualization of their relationship. Accordingly, in the context of world view, man becomes able to explain reality, his life and environment. I think a people's ontology should be their central control box and not their world view. A people's world view should be their channel of explication of their ontology.

Ifesieh (1989, p.18) sees world view as the way the world is conceived, contemplated, perceived, viewed and observed by people who live in it. Ifesieh's conception appears to be very close to it when he stated that world view is the way the world is conceived, viewed, perceived and observed by the people who live in it and not contemplated upon. Contemplation takes place at the level of ontology and not within the ambience of world view. In another development, Ifesieh defines world view as a body of belief about the universe which is existentially demonstrated in the value system, philosophy of life, social conduct and morality, folklore, myths, rites and rituals. This definition seems to talk about the people's ontology and not their world view.

According to Achebe (1986, p. 10) a people's world view is the comprehensive light as embracing the totality of a people's assumption. The totality of the people's assumption is their ontology which means that the definition of world view put across by Chinua Achebe does not capture the meaning of world view but ontology. Onuoha (1987: 11) sees world view as that which gives a people a sort of subconscious guide through life since it is not learnt but caught. Onuoha seems to be very close to it when he says that the world view gives a subconscious guide through life but a people's ontology gives this guide through their world view and not the world view itself. Egbunu (2013, p. 48) opines that a people's world view embraces the totality of their beliefs and practices owing to their particular experience of reality in their contextual situation. Accordingly, it is the people's world view that basically defines their thought pattern which in turn rules, guide, controls their social, cultural,

spiritual, political, economics, and other dimensions of their life. I think it is proper to state that a people's world view is the expression of the totality of a people's beliefs and practices. What is think embraces the totality of a people's belief and practices is their ontology.

It is in the light of the above that Achebe (1986) captures the concept of world views when he stated that "a world view is a lens through which man in a given culture views his world." Accordingly, it is a cultural lens which enables a person to see an aspect of the world. Egbunu (2014, p. 49) corroborated with Achebe when he stated that a world view is a cultural lens through which the Igala, Idoma, Igbo, Yoruba, etc., view only an aspect or perspective of the world.

As a lens through which a people view their world, their seeming world is external to them. It is obvious that a person can watch a football match. The players are external realities while the viewer another being entirely. The viewer's understanding of the external realities on the football field is anchored on his ontological notion of the game. As a lens through which a person views the world, the world is external to the viewer and his interpretation of the external world is based on his internal make up which is his ontology. It is in the light of the above that I think that what most scholars define as world view is nothing but the ontology of the people.

It is my thinking that a people's lens affects their understanding of their perception. What they see shapes their understanding of the reality of the external world. As a result, what is seen shapes their perception of that thing which is seen. In a similar vein, the resultant understanding of the reality reshapes their earlier perception of it. In essence, a people's world view affects their ontology just as their ontology reshapes their world view.

Ontology

Ontology has been defined as the branch of metaphysics that studies the essence of being. Unlike natural theology which examines the nature of religion in general and cosmology which discusses the origin, structure and space - time relations of the universe (Aja, 2001, p. 4), ontology studies reality in its most general aspect that are different from the other divisions in metaphysics. And just as there are different thought systems such as the Western, Eastern and African thought systems similarly there are various metaphysical thought patterns. The western ontology, which is part of the western metaphysics sees reality in dual structure and even in a plural manner such as the heaven and hell, body and soul and spirit, being and nothingness, substance and accident, etc. while the Eastern ontology sees reality in the Brahman (the Universal soul), in which every soul derives its existence and to which they return at the end of their existence should they live good lives. African

ontology on the contrary sees reality as a complete 'whole' and not 'in parts or pieces'. And even when the Africans discuss reality in bits and pieces, they are done in relation to the whole. John Mbiti (1982, p. 56)'s famous statement about the Africans that says: "I am because we are and because we are therefore I am."

African ontology should be seen as the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions, among beings, and reality in general. It is the totality of the African's perception of reality. And just like the African metaphysics, it will therefore include systematization of an African perspective as it relates to being and existence. This will embrace the holistic conception of reality with its appurtenance of relations, qualities, characterizations, being and its subtleties, universals, particular, ideas, minds, culture, logic, moral, theories and presuppositions.

African Metaphysics is holistic and interrelated. The logic of their metaphysics underpins their standard and expectations. This is not to go with the impression that all African communities share the same standard even though the standard is community based. Borrowing from Quine, Ozumba (2004, p. 24) maintains that each community operates from a background theory that penetrates its perception and metaphysics of reality. If you see thing other than the way the community sees them, they will demean your understanding and systematize with your "allienness." What we intend to do is to abstract the general orientation of the African in their metaphysics and general views about certain aspects of reality.

According to Eboh (2002, p. 389), Ontology is the first part of philosophy that actually belongs to metaphysics. The word itself comes from the Greek, and just means the science of beings, or properly according to the sense of the words, the general doctrine of being. Ontology has been defined as the science or study of being: specifically, a theory concerning the kinds of entities and specifically the kinds of abstract entities that are to be admitted to a language system. It is also defined as the branch of metaphysics that relates to the nature and relations of being; a particular system according to which problems of the nature of being are investigated. It is generally known as the first part of philosophy.

African ontology has to do with the African concept of being in relation to other beings. African ontology has God as the originator and sustainer of all being and Man as a person around which everything created by God revolves and for whose purpose they serve. According to Ikenga – Metuh (1992, p. 170), God is seen not only as the creator and father of each individual human race but also as the creator of each individual person. A special intervention of God at conception brings each individual person into existence. Man enjoys a special relationship with God. He is endowed with freedom and intelligence and this puts him far above all other creatures in the physical world and makes him like God. The relationship between God and man is

often defined in terms of father/son relationship and it is marked by submissiveness, obedience and resignation on the side of man to God who is rich in love, care and protection for man. African ontology also has a special place for the guardian spirit who holds in trust and dispenses the deposits of fortunes and misfortunes which has destined for each person.

Igala Ontology

Igala ontology places man at the centre of everything that exists. It is thought all things that are in existence and everything that exist are there for the good of man. According to Ikenga – Metuh (1992, p. 169) man is best understood in relation to God his creator and to whom he would return. And when viewed ontologically, man is a force among other forces in the universe. Man as a living force is active and interacting with other forces in the universe. The Igala society views man as a being at the centre of everything that exists. It is thought of as if God created everything for man alone. It is also thought that the ancestors are there for man alone and his environment.

The ontology of the Igala people is primarily expressed around their world view which presents the cosmos to be in circular form. In this world view, man (*One*) is located at the centre of the circle with God (*Ojo Odoba Ogagwu*) occupying the top most part outside the circle and their ancestors and other members of the living death inhabiting the down part outside the circle. The circle is surrounded with all other beings such as animals, plants and trees which appear to have been created for man and they occupy the outside part of the circle signifying their existence for the purpose of satisfying man's needs.

The domain of God is thought of being in the sky where he lives with his messengers (*amoma - olaika* or *amoma - olaiku*). These messengers of God are there with him and he sends them on errand to assist men on the earth. This Almighty God (*Ojo Odoba Ogagwu*) has other instruments such as thunder (*akpabana* and other deities), which serves as means of checkmating human activities. While the circle represent the earth which is principally inhabited by man (*one*) and co – inhabited by other animate and inanimate beings such as animals, trees and plant, which are there for satisfaction of human needs.

The third segment of existence is the world of the dead (*Efu Oja Egwu*) popularly known as the place where the dead live. This world of the dead is thought of to be beneath the earth surface and as is sometimes expressed in traditional songs and dirges for the dead, 'it is a long journey towards the end of the earth from where the dead moves underneath the earth.' This world is also thought to be in the form of this physical world that the people presently live in.

The most important aspect of the Igala ontology is the fact that these beings – the Supreme Being (God almighty and his messengers) are known to exert their own forces and influences in the world of man and in the activities of man. Sometimes, they could act as deterrent to misbehaviour in man. Man himself is also seen as a force so that he is part of the forces in the universe.

The Igala conceives of 'things' (*enwu*) and not 'being' and as the things relate to man (*One*), the most important being in existence. Man is viewed to be the master of all beings. Every being that exists are examined in the light of their existential importance to man. The Igala people will primarily ask question about such beings: *enwu chewn ele*? (What is that thing?). Having asked such question, he would ask: *enwu ch'ekwu nwu*? (What is its function?). The question of identity is primarily asked about the being in question and when such questions are answered, the question of the function of that being is asked. If the case revolves round a human being, they Igala people will ask: *Ene ch'ene le*? (Who is that person?) And when the first question is answered, the next question will be: *Enwu iwache*? (What has he come to do?). In essence, when the case revolves round a human being the question will not be on what it is but on whom he is. That is a question regarding his identity, family lineage, village and the clan that such a person comes from. The second segment of the question regards what he has come to do and not what functions such a person intends to perform.

The Igala people view things in relation to their natural endowment. By natural endowment, we mean what nature has embedded in such things. Some things have the curative ability such as leaves, roots, stem, and have within them. These natural powers are given to these beings by their creator. The people respect these things based on the natural powers that they have been endowed with. These natural powers are viewed by the people to be highly mysterious.

The Being of Man in Igala Ontology

The constitution of man in Igala ontology is so complex and manifold. He is an embodiment of many things. He has a body, a soul, a spirit, a shadow and an inner head. All these components work together for the good of the same man. He is a being that is in the process of becoming what he is being programmed to be. He is also a being unto others, a communal being. More so, man is a being that is an embodiment of God, the Ancestors and the family. He is an embodiment of joy, happiness and the solace of his family - both the living and their deceased members.

Man, ontologically is best viewed as a living force that is in active communion with other living forces in the world. According to Ikenga – Metuh (1992, p. 171) every person is a nexus of interacting elements of the self and of the world which determines and is determined by his behaviour. Thus, the true concept of

man is lost if he is considered in isolation. He is all the time interacting with other things in the universe to which he is linked by a network of relationships.

Man in Igala thought is an embodiment of several things. He is a creature of God (*one k'ojo nyi iche*). To that extent, he has the spirit of God his creator (*afu Ojo d'efunwu*) in him. He is one of his ancestors being reborn into the family (*oneka ef' ohikwo ohikwo nwu dabi wa*). Scientifically, he has the genes of his ancestors in his system. Man also has his own star that he came with (*I cheni ilwo enwu ki newa ef'ile*). He has his own spirit (*ichenafu enwu ki newa ef'ile*). He has his own life (soul) that he came into this life with (*iche n'olai enwu ki newa ef'ile*). Meanwhile, all the components of man enumerated above are united into one entity. It is against this backdrop that the Igala people conceive of man as an embodiment of many things. This conception is experienced among some ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and Africa at large. This thought system does not admits of the dualistic thought among the Greeco – Roman culture which sees man as composing body and soul. More so, Igala ontology does not see the body as the prison house of the soul. But rather conceives of man as a unit and see a number of principles in him. These principles bind man together with his fellow humans. Some other African ontology identifies four of such principles in man with each principle linking man to a different category of being in the ontological order. There is the 'breath' conceive as vivifying principle, life force which links man with other life forces in the universe, and is in vital relationship with them. There is the 'destiny soul' that is conceive as an 'emanation' or 'spark' of the creator inside man. The term soul is used but it is inadequate in describing the principle of African thought. This principle is variously conceived as the personification of human destiny, a personal deity, or a guardian spirit (angel). It comes from God, and subsists and returns to God after death. But it is not the vivifying principle, nor it is a part or fraction of man as the western philosophy would see it. This destiny spirit is identified as the ancestral guardian spirit called the shadow by the Bantu speaking cultures. Finally, there is the human person himself, the unique individual person created by God which is identified with the person.

Igala ontology is the basic notion underlying their cultural, religious and social activities is thought of as being religious in nature (Egbunu 2014: 49). As an underlying factor of the way the people understands their world, it forms the foundation upon which the people built their entire cosmos. It gives ultimate meaning to life and to the people's understanding of their role and prospect in the scheme of things. It is an important key to the knowledge of a people's culture and philosophy.

Impact of Igala Ontology on their Social Praxis

Since a people's ontology determines their thought system; it is obvious that whatever occupies the mind of a person is most often replicated in his life and mode

of living. It is against this backdrop that the paper argues that a people's thought system determines their life's style as well.

Igala people just like most African communities, are communal in nature will not be strange to most people who visit the area and would have stayed with there for a while. One of the practical experiences is that food are shared between families, misunderstandings are settled within the family circle, elders stay together even with the younger ones and drink most of the evenings. In fact, an appriori assessment of their house setting will betray their communual life, and a host of other expressions of communualism. That the people live in this way is anchored on their thought that they stem from one ancestor as a result of which they view themselves as kits and kins.

One of the key features of communualism in Igala land is the common ownership of public properties such lands, farm produce, marriage, children, house, cars, and others. It is most often said by the people: our land (*ane wa*), our car (*moto wa*), our wife (*oya wa*), our children (*amoma wa*), our farm produce (*enwu oko wa*), and some other similar expression. These expressions are anchored on the thought that whatever belongs to a member of the family belong to the entire extended family. The land may be branded as family land but each member of the family has his own particular plots of land that belong to him, similarly, the people could say 'our wife' the woman belong to the family but she is a wife to a member of the family. The thought is that whatever belongs to member of the family belongs to the entire family. More so, when the people say: our wife (*oya wa*), our children (*amoma wa*), our member (*amomaye wa*) and so on, one of the implications is that should any one of them misbehaves, the family can discipline him or her and not necessarily the particular husband, father or mother.

The Igala people see themselves as kits and kins. The people think that they descended from the same ancestral root as a result of which they see themselves as being linked together. One obvious fact is that most Africans who speak the same language and sometimes the same dialect are drawn together as kits and kins. But one of the key characteristics of the Igala people is that they do trace their family origin through several generations and chart it like a tree with a stem with different sectional branches depicting their linkages. One obvious thing a person notices when he listens to Igala family stories is the fact of one lineage, with different clans and with different extended and unit families. But then, should one continue with such issues, it will continue ad infinitum.

Igala communualism is a practical expression of the people's ontology that holds that the people stem from one family, live in union as one family, relate with one another as one family, plan and execute them as a singular family. The unitary nature of the family is blended with the presence of their ancestors who initiated such life style, live it, departed from the physical world, settled at their ancestral world,

active in the families and some of whom are reborn into their families. Their ancestors owned their properties together, have cherished and valued their union as a family, and would desire that their family members maintain such union.

The communual life of the Igala people could be branded as their ontology which is thought of, analysed, explicated through various channels of social and cultural activities, and exhibited in their ways of life and living. In this case, Igala philosophy, which means the thought and beliefs systems of the people is embedded in their ontology and expressed in their world–views as they carry out their daily activities.

The Igala ontology which is the foundation of Igala philosophy is also explicated in and through some other systems of thought such as the Igala sociological perspective, Igala theological perspective, Igala historical perspective and others. These other models of thought are explications of the people's ontology which is the motherhouse, the brain box, the fulcrum, the basis, the fountain, of all of them while, they (these manifestations of the thought) are some of the modalities of the visible expressions (the world views) of the thought system (the ontology).

The issue is that Igala Philosophy naturally develops out of the Igala cultural background and depends on it, determines its meaning and model for solving moral and social problems that affect the Igala people. Igala culture and tradition, in which the people's philosophy is subsumed, excels in the humanistic value which is anchored on the communual, fellow feeing ontology of the people. The understanding of the above is needed to tackle the moral and social problems of the contemporary Igala (and the entire African) society in contradistinction to the Western philosophical paradigm which has been the modus operandi of the society. Thus, Eboh (1996) argues that:

> The African's deeply religious nature and his humanitarian values would serve as an antidote to the materialism of the west. While the African warmth, spirit of solidarity and fellow feeling coupled with holism present as a model with which to sort out the moral and social problems of our disintegrating human world (p.5).

Igala philosophy which is part of the African philosophy, we mean the discipline that concerns itself with the way in which Igala people of the past and the present, make sense out of their existence, of their destiny and of their world in which they live. It is an established fact that philosophy is an academic discipline but it is primarily rooted in the people's culture – which is the people's way of life. Thus, Oladipo (2001) holds that:

> Philosophy as an academic discipline that does not exist in a vacuum…it is a social phenomenon which derives it being from the experiences generated

through the continuous interactions between human being and their environment and between human beings themselves. But just as it is the product of this experience, it also shapes it by providing the conceptual tools for comprehending human existential realities as they manifest themselves within a given socio-historical space (p. 25).

Conclusion

As a system of thought that is embedded in the life of the people, a people's ontology has been argued to determine the thinking system of the people. and as the determinant of the people's thinking system. The people's ontology could be argued as the determinant of the people's epistemology and axiology. As the foundation of the people's thinking, the people's ontology tend to the centre of acquisition of knowledge, its analysis, acceptance and rejection where need be. In the same vein, the people's ontology tends to determine the moral judgement and decisions.

Being the foundation of the thinking, knowing and acting of the people, a people's ontology is the brain box of the people. In view of the above, a people's ontology is expressed and explicated in and through their world view. In the light of the above, a people's world view is more of a lens through which the people's ontology is expressed in the society.

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