

©IDOSR PUBLICATIONS

International Digital Organization for Scientific Research

ISSN: 2579-0757

IDOSR JOURNAL OF CURRENT ISSUES IN ARTS AND HUMANITIES 4(1):31-39, 2018.

An Examination of the Concept of Good and Evil in Igbo Culture

Umezurike Grace

Department of Philosophy and Religion Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki.

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the concept of good and evil in Igbo culture. The paper recognizes that the culture of any society permeates the worldview of her citizens and as such considers the problem of good and evil from the religious and ethical perspective of the Igbo person. The Igbo's been an ethnic group in Africa are known for their ultimately locating the ontological foundation of their philosophical and social problems within the religious context thus the belief by many scholars that Africans are "notoriously religious", therefore an objective appraisal of the concept of good and evil within the Igbo philosophy must as matter of necessity take into account the religious dimension of the problem. It is the submission of this paper, that the Igbo's just like other ethnic groups within Africa acknowledges the presence of evil as a social problem but unlike some other group did not locate the source of evil from God (Chi-ukwu) rather sees it as a product of man's action in the society or a punishment from the gods for man's disobedience.

Keywords: Good, Evil, Igbo's, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Evil in general is "any experience that is injurious, painful, hurtful, regretful or calamitous [such that]... impedes or obstructs the achievement of goals, ideas, happiness or general well-being"[1]. According to the Igbo-African worldview, "the essence of evil...consists in doing harm to others"[2]. Evil does not necessarily have a religious connotation. Such a perspective tends to be different from the Western conception of evil that

identifies, for the most part, the religious agency of evil. In the Igbo-African context, evil is a matter of morality and has little or nothing to do with religion [3]. Therefore, the argument that heaps the blame of evil on God does not hold water with the Africans. Like the Igbo's, Placid Tempels, while reflecting on the notion of evil in the Bantu society, notes that "the performance of evil act or its avoidance is chiefly derived not from the world

beyond or from gods.”[4] Tempels state that the Bantu idea of evil or good is based on man’s reasoning and not on religion; it does not rely on a power over and above man, but it rather depends entirely on man.

However, Such an attempt to understand the nature of the problem of evil and good within the Igbo culture has divided Igbo scholars interested in the problem into three major camps, namely: the Igbo cosmological optimistic view; Personal God and destiny view; and middle course view[2]. The first view states that man is solely accountable for the evil in the world; the second speaks of personal god and destiny, while the final camp combines the two views together and includes some spirits as responsible for the evil in the world. This paper tends to encapsulate how the individual views seeks to give a philosophical basis on which the problem of good and evil are founded while suggesting that the majority of the Igbo’s believe in the principle that evil is a product of man’s action in the society.

The Igbo’s and their Worldview

[5] has seen cosmology as “the sum total of people’s opinion concerning life, happiness, fears, purpose of life, death and after-life. It is the fundamental commonalities of a given culture such as folkways, mores, language, human productions and social structure” [5] describes a people’s worldview as “the complex of their beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, nature, structure of the universe and the interaction of its beings with particular reference to man” (2006: 4). There are two major categories of worldview namely, the material worldview and the religious worldview. The material worldview sees the cosmos as a product of chance which has no meaning and has no end. For those who adopt this kind of world view, every occurrence, whether sickness or natural disaster is a product of chance. On the other hand, the religious worldview sees the cosmos as having a great meaning and purpose, therefore every happening is interpreted based on what the people perceive as its meaning or purpose.

Redfield in his description of worldview adumbrates:

Of all that is connoted "culture", worldview attends especially to the way a man, in particular society sees himself to all else. It is the properties of existence as distinguished from and related to the self. It is in short, a man's idea of the universe it is that organization of ideas that answers to a man with questions: „Where am I? Among what do I move? What are my relations to these things? (1952: 31).

A cultural group such as the Igbo is able from their worldview, to explain reality, life and the human environment, and predict space-time events, and finally exert control over them. In this way, the force of Igbo Religion as of any other religion or ideological system rests with the cosmology, which undergirds it. In the case of the traditional Igbo, all forms of individual and group religious practices occur within the broad outline of their worldview [6]. The Igbo people see their world as made up of two planes: the physical and the spiritual. Igbo

worldview, however, abhors the tendency to a digital categorization of things. They believe that there is a dual-traffic and interaction between the inhabitants of the two worlds [7]. In this way, the understanding among the Igbo is that spiritual beings and cosmic forces are highly intermingled. The activities of spiritual beings and forces often directly impinge on the affairs of humans in the human world. This fundamental religious outlook on life continues to adjust itself each time, to the changing circumstances of the life experiences of the people.

In Igbo religious worldview, the human world is three-dimensional -the sky; the earth, intricately woven with water; and the spirit/ancestral world. Each of the three dimensions operates as a viable reality or a place of habitation; with all three interconnected or contiguous and continuous in a non-hierarchical manner. This means that in such a worldview, although the Supreme Being is believed to live in the sky and major divinities such as Lightning, Thunder, Sun, and Moon are near Him, there is nothing to suggest that

the ancestors who live in the ancestral world are inferior [8]. Supporting the earlier observation, [6] asserts that:

“Analytically, a structure of Igbo perception of the universe in terms of space presents a picture of three-tiered arrangement in consonance with popular intuition. There is the sky above, *Igwe*, then, the earth, *Ala*, and finally, we have the under-world, *Ime-Ala*. Each of these layers is thought to be densely inhabited”.

Perceiving the world in this way, Igbo cosmology understands the sky as the Supreme Being's (*Chukwu*'s) palace. He is believed to dwell there with a host of powerful divinities and primordial beings like *Anyanwu* (the Sun god), *Amadioha* (the god of thunder), *Igwe*, (the sky god). In the same way, some local major divinities are equally believed to live in the sky as well. The earth-surface is seen as the abode of human beings, the earth deity, minor divinities and personified nature forces. Finally ancestral spirits, myriads of

disembodied spirits and other personified forces some of which are malevolent and capricious to the living, populate the underworld”. [6]; [2];[4] [7]; [8].

One important characteristic of this spatial ordering of reality in Igbo worldview is the due recognition extended to the exalted position and power of the preternatural order and supersensible beings over humans and the material order. Yet, humans and their world are located at the center of the traditional Igbo cosmic structure. This is because human life, for the Igbo, although received from God, is the greatest good to be fostered. In this way, Igbo traditional world-view is seen as heavily anthropocentric. In it, the activities of the various categories of spirits as well as the happenings in the other realms of the universe are seen as meaningful insofar as they relate to human life and the general welfare of humans in the environment.

The Igbo notion of Evil and Good

Good and evil are both very abstract concepts. Most philosophies accept the dualism of good and evil. Good coexists with evil and there can be no thing such as 'good' unless there is 'evil' and vice versa. From a society's point of view, whatever is beneficial to general mankind is considered good and whatever is not in the interests of the general mankind is considered evil. Therefore, labeling any action as good or evil is clearly based upon one's perception and judgment. Society has made laws based on precedents of what it has viewed as good and evil. However, these perceptions keep changing with different generations. For instance, it was once considered sacrilege by most societies and religions to keep a twin but today it is no longer so. Again, the absence of light cannot be called darkness. Just because the human eye cannot penetrate through the darkness, it does not mean it is 'dark'. What can be concluded is that the difference between good and evil is not absolute but is relative and of degree.

Good and evil also depend upon the context and results. While an action or a person may be considered good in a certain situation, the same action or person may be labeled bad in another situation. For instance, fire produces warmth during cold. When it destroys property or life, it turns evil.

The metaphysical problem of evil, despite being a perennial problem in Western philosophy, can be meaningfully discussed within the Igbo cosmological thought. The Igbo's have attempted to discuss the concept of evil in three broad dimensions, thus;

(a) Igbo cosmological optimistic view

According to this view, God as 'Okike' (creator) is essentially good in himself and that his creation is intrinsically good: evil is something external to it in the sense that evil is the consequences of some moral evil committed by man. The upholders of this view point to the myths of God's withdrawal, proverbs and other cultural expressions as traditional

grounds for insisting on this view. [8], for example, stated that:

“There is a belief in a created universe which is controlled by creator, Chukwu-Okike. Man is in the centre of this creation. He is endowed with freedom and its attendant responsibility. There is belief in the unity among beings, belief in the original cosmic (universal) harmony and order which unfortunately the action of the human being upsets (in this case as in the Bible story the woman starts confusion)”. [8].

For the likes of Igbo scholars such as Nwala, evil is the function of man himself, who is at the center of God’s creation. Man is therefore responsible for every evil that happens in this world because of his actions and mode of being in the Igbo world. This view consolidates the African notion of evil that God can never be the proximate cause of evil in the world. Although man is responsible for the evil in the world, remotely, God causes it, not as evil as such but in the sense that out of the good man causes, evil comes as part of it. However, it has been argued that this view dissociates God from the problem, clings to the assumptions of the

goodness of God and keeps quiet about the supposed power of God, which He could have used to stop evil if he truly wanted it.

(b) Personal god and destiny view

According to this view, evil is not linked directly to man but with the personal god of each man. That personal god chooses man’s destiny package at the moment the individual is born into the world. This view states that each person’s personal god and destiny are responsible and accountable for both avoidable and unavoidable evils and mistakes in life. The belief here is that the Supreme being assigns a personal god (Chi) to an individual, whose Chi in turn brings to man all his good and sometimes bad fortunes as well as poverty and sickness by choosing the destiny on which one’s lot depends to such a degree that every good and bad thing are attributed to it and also blamed for individual’s mistakes in life. To buttress this view, they even point to names such as *Nkechinyere* (lot

given by personal god); *Chibueze* (personal god makes and unmakes one); *Chibuoke* (personal makes one famous) etc. Some Igbo proverbs also support his view like “*Ebe onye dalu ka Chi ya kwatulu ya*” which loosely translates to “where a person falls there his personal god pushed him down”.

Despite the criticism of the ambiguity or the equivocal nature of the concept of *Chi*, the traditional Igbo believe that God does not commit evil against his creation. They also believe that any misfortune or evil suffered by man is interpreted as punishment for the misbehavior of man or his kin in his present or previous life. This holds because the Igbo's believe that the actions of men have consequences whether in this life or the next and also not only on those who commit them but on those who live after them. The importance of this view lies in the fact that it “sees evil in the world in such a way that it does not detract from the goodness and omnipotence of the Divinity” [8]. God in this view transcends the moral and the ontological orders and

understands Him as the ultimate source and guarantor without any of His essential characteristics being compromised.

(c) The middle course view

According to this view, personal god and destiny of humans together with some other known and unknown spirits, particularly some spirits who specialize in mischief making, are originators of evil in the world. Many modern Igbo scholars support this view and conceive evil in the world as being contingent upon the actions of man and the spirits, once again absolving God of any involvement or blame in the problem of evil. For [5], “the apparent evil in the world and imperfection in the world are not intrinsic. They are rather the negation of the perfect cosmic order usually caused by the actions of men and of the spirits.”[5]

[8], on his own part, asserts that God cannot be the proximate cause of evil and

blamed man and the spirits for the existence of evil. He said: “.....judging from our treatment of the causes of evil... the three proximate causes of evil are the evil spirits, the element gods and human beings.”[8]

This view does not sacrifice or detract from the goodness and omnipotence of God. God is still considered as the Supreme Good, all-powerful and the cause

of all things which are good in themselves. The point here is that even if God is spoken of to be the remote cause of evil in the sense that he created the proximate causes of evil, but it must not be in the sense that he caused evil as such. Rather it will be constructed in the sense that because of the good he created, evil comes as a necessary part of it.

CONCLUSION

This paper despite taking diverse routes in discussing the notion of evil in Igbo culture, echoed the views of the majority of Africans. In emphasizing that evil is unavoidably present in the world as a result of man's actions, the paper stresses that evil has nothing to do with God and does not discredit the existence of God as conceived by the Igbo culture/worldview. While the presence of evil is a major

factor when discussing the existence of God in western tradition, it is not a strong point when discussing the existence of God in the African(Igbo) context. In fact, for the Africans (Igbo), that God exists is not up for debate (it is a fact, according to them, that He exists). What only seems to be controversial is how to explain without contradictions God's involvement or non-involvement in the existence of evil.

REFERENCES

1. Fayemi, A. K. 2012 “Philosophical problem of Evil: Response to E. O. Oduwole.” *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 41 (1).
2. Oluwole, S. B. 1978. “On the Existence of Witches”, in *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*. V11. (1 & 2), 20-35.
3. Akinseye, F. A. 2005. *The Problem of Evil: Philosophical and Religious Approaches*, Ago-Iwoye: NASR.

4. Mbiti, J.S., 1969, *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann;
5. Okon, Etim E. 2006, "Ekpu-Oro: Studies in Oron Cosmology and Cultural History" in *African Journal of Religion, Culture and Society* 1(1), August, 2 -26.
6. Nwala, T. U. 1985. *Igbo Philosophy*, Lagos: Lantern Books.
7. Okafor, F. U. 1992. *Igbo Philosophy of Law*, Enugu: Fourth Dimensional Publishing co. Ltd.Redfield, R. 1952. "The Primitive World" in *Proceedings of American Philosophical Society* 996, 30-36.
8. Edeh, Emmanuel. 1985. *Towards Igbo Metaphysics*, Chicago: Loyola University Press.