BASIC TENETS IN IGALA ONTOLOGY

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Abstract
It is generally taken for granted that human actions are anchored on their thinking system and subsequently determine the way they live. In other words, the way a group of people think and act tend to be determined the way they live their lives on their daily basis. It is against this backdrop that the paper argues that some practices such as African humanism, African kinship systems, African brotherhood, communalism, and negative ones such as tribalism, exploitation, assaults, segregation, embezzlement of public funds, corruption, manipulation, nepotism, and the sort are common place. This paper attempts to establish that that these behaviours are embedded in the ontology of the people. It tries to bring the issues to the fore by studying the Igala ontology which serves as a lens through which the study and the discourse are unravelled. It goes to discuss the influence of the Igala ontology on their ways of life and it relations with the thought systems enunciated above. In the process, it examines basic tenets of the Igala ontology before proceeding to trace the roots and development of the people's ontology and how they have continuously influenced the way the people live, think and act. It is hermeneutical in nature, critical in approach and expository in outlook. It is discussed: introduction, Clarification of concepts, Igala ontology, social dimension of man in Igala ontology, evaluation and conclusion.
Keywords: Igala, Ontology, Africa, Nigeria, Brotherhood, Communalism

Introduction
According to Placide Tempels (1969: 9) human actions are based on some fundamental principles. Such principles are noticed to be persistent in and through a corpus of logically coordinated intellectual concepts. Accordingly, human behaviour can neither be universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man and of the things which surrounds him, of existence, life, death and of the life beyond. In essence, most often, human actions or inactions do not take place by accident but rather they are to a great extent, product of systems of thought. Whatever a group of people do is based on their world views and their thought systems. According to the Igala people, 'the mosquito lava that one sees swimming (dancing) on the surface of stagnant

water has a drummer that is hiding somewhere deep down the water container (*itakekele k'itoju omi atido le, an'uba gwugwu ogane omi*).' In essence, the Igala people think that the seeming appearances are not the reality. To understand the reality the person needs to dig deeper than the immediate appearances.

The Igala people's conception of a being is centred on their world views. The Igala world views divide the universe into three worlds. They are: the world of God (which is in the Heavens), the world of man (which is on the earth) and the World of the dead (which is beneath the earth surface). These three worlds are there for the joy, happiness and fulfilment of man. The people belief that all the beings that exists on the planet earth are not just there by accident but that they have their particular function to perform towards making life comfortable for the being of man.

This paper examines the basic tenets in Igala ontology and in the process, ramifies some of the central issues in African metaphysics, then proceeds to define and clarify the concept of ontology and Igala ontology particularly before examining the basic tenets in Igala ontology such as human being, things, place and time and modality. It goes further to examine the place of Igala ontology in the light of the contemporary realities in their society.

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: 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 (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: 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: 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.

Clarification of Concepts
According to Ben Eboh (2002: 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. The word ontology is a combination of two Greek words, *onto*, meaning 'being' and *logia*, which means study. The common meaning of ontology is the study or science of the nature of all existing realities. The fundamental meaning of ontology is a systematic understanding of the nature and inherent principles in all existing realities in human experience. It is a branch of Aristotelian metaphysics that deals with the nature of all that is intelligible to man. In other words, it is the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence and reality as well as the basic categories of being and relationship among them. 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: 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 particularly (and African in general) places man at the centre of being among all things that are in existence and everything that exist are there for the good of man. According to Ikenga – Metuh (1992: 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. In the light of bantu philosophy, man is categorized as *muntu* in view of which, man is thought of as a force, among other forces that occupy and control the universe. Man as a living force is active and interacting with other forces in the universe. Isaiah Negedu (2014: 11) says that "though all human beings are *Muntu,* not all *Muntu* (Bantu) are human beings, as *Muntu* includes the living, the dead and spirits." Masolo (1995: 89) clearly explicates the concept of *Muntu* as it embraces the living, dead and spirits. Humans are different from other physical beings by their ability to reflect, compare and invent. The Igala society views man as 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 built around their world view which appears 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 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 men. This Almighty God (*Ojo Odoba Ogagwu*) has other instruments such as thunder (*akpabana* and other deities), which serves as lesser gods with him. 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 man could use for his own good.

The third segment of existence is the world of the dead (*Efu Oja Egwu*) popularly known as 'the abode of the dead'. 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.

One of the most important aspects of the Igala ontology is the thought that the Supreme Being (God almighty), the lesser gods and his messengers are known to exert their forces and influences on the world of and in most of the activities of man. Sometimes, they could be thought of acting 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 concept of being views beings (*enwu*) in relation to man (*One*), the most important being. Man is viewed as the master of all beings. Every being that exist 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?). Who owns it? (*Ene ne*)? Having asked such question, the next question to be likely asked would be: *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 beings in relation to their natural endowment. By natural endowment, we mean what nature has embedded in such beings. 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 beings based on their 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: 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 beings in the universe to which he is linked by a network of relationships.

Man in Igala thought is therefore best studied as a life force in the midst of other life forces. This is experienced much more in the African which sees man as a unit and does not admits of the dualistic thought among the Greeco – Roman culture which sees man as composing body and soul. Neither does the African ontology see the body as the prison house of the soul. But rather African anthropologies generally conceive man as a unit and see a number of principles in man. These principles bind man together. Some African anthropology 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.

Egbunu (2013: 33) holds that in the Igala Ontology of Being, the human person is said to be made up of the " *Anọla*" (Body) and "*inmi*"(Soul). The latter, which is easily equiperated with life (*ọlai*) is often translated as breath and most often rendered as "*afu*" (air). Therefore, a typical Igala person holds the notion that God created the human person; he filled him with "*afu*" (air, spirit or breath) which is life in itself. It is likened to the manner vulcanizers pump air into a deflated tyre or blowing of air into a ball or balloon. This invisible part of the human being is described in terms of a "vital force". In which case, the spirit is said to have sway, control over or rule over the entire physical body, even the "*ẹdọ*" (heart) which is said to have the capability of working as the seat of love, functions along with the "*ọkọtọ*" (brains) which is the seat of decisions. The heart and the brain are said to be working hand in hand with the spirit of man to bring about "*ibe*" (thinking).

Another element of the vital force in man is said to be the "*Ẹbiẹ*" (blood), which makes the link with the ancestors (consanguinary affinity) through the nuclear and extended family line possible. So that, when an Igala person says, "*anọla akọla nwu-i*" (he is being spoken to by his body) what it means is that "*Ẹbiẹ*" speaks (idiomatically the blood in his veins makes him feel). This happens especially when something negative has occurred to a family member and there is some kind of premonition. In this respect, the "*Ẹbiẹ*" (blood) and "*anọla*" (body) are inextricably related as one. Invariably, to talk of a living body is to refer to an active living flow of blood.

Egbunu (2013: 33) goes further to state that "*Ẹdọ*" (heart) which pumps blood is seen as the engine-room of life, courage, zeal, fervour, determination, candour, kindness, generosity, love, attentiveness, compassion, forgiveness, conversion, change, etc. The heart works with the "*afu*" (breath) in man to determine one's level of social, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, economic, cultural and other

spheres of life. Central to this whole array of functionality is that the "*afu*" (spirit, air, breath or soul) is what gives life. When the Creator takes the "*afu*" or "*inmi*" (breath) back, the body becomes helpless, motionless or inactive and man ceases to be a person because he is physically dead. However, the soul of a person is said to be immortal or indestructible.

According to Egbunu (2013: 33) there is also a sense in which an Igala person may assert that someone is "*okwu onẹ*" (dead person) without the physical death occurring. In this case, it could mean social, spiritual or some other form of death. An indecisive person or a hardened criminal, for instance, could be considered dead in the Igala worldview. It is the spirit (*afu*) of a man which works in conjunction with the heart and brain and precipitates the action. The "*ọkai*" (sense of agreement) of the person then works with forces surrounding the destiny of the person to lead to the execution of whatever has been contemplated.

Social Dimension of Man in Igala Ontology
Igala ontology, being one of the most distinctive features of Igala philosophy shares in the fundamental thought of the Africans that is the element of sociality which, in many cases, has given rise to such concepts as African personality, African identity, African solidarity and many other virtues that attest to the humanistic character of the African and the Igala man precisely towards his fellow men. Virtues like patience, optimism, mutual sympathy and empathy are eminently characteristic of the Igala way of life and certainly point to a peculiar mode of existence that extends the realm of the individual potentialities to embrace the life of others and their concerns. In fact this mutual concern, the lifeblood and backbone of the African sociality, has been recognized variously by many writers on African communalism such as Edwin Smith, Senghor, Kenyatta, Sekou Toure and many others.

There is a notable proverb in Igala that says that (*One ki dab' ikwu*) man is like a chain. This conveys the idea that man is socially and communally linked like a chain. Thus, the expression – no man is an island. The Igala people see themselves as originating from the same ancestor even though they are currently split along family and clan lines. It is in this light that they see themselves as brothers and sisters.

Egbunu (2013: 34) opines that there is a sense in which the living is often said to be in communion with not only the living but "he lives, moves, marries and dies

within the family of the living and the dead" (Nwoko, 1985, p.279). That is why when Mbiti says "I am because we are" it refers to an additive collective we" (Menkiti, 2011, 179). As Richard Bell (2002:60) rightly expressed it, "Africans do not think themselves as discrete individuals but rather understand themselves as part of a community." It is in this light that John Mbiti's famous statement that the individual owes his existence to other people. Accordingly, He is simply part of the whole. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. As a result, he holds that the individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am (Mbiti 1969:108)."

Egbunu thinks that this viewpoint enunciated above seems to be very central to the African view of man. For the Igala "*ikẹrẹ bimọ ikẹrẹb'eju, ikẹrẹbeju ila ikẹrẹbimọ*"(what affects the nose equally affects the eye and vice versa). It is in this spirit parents can easily "*dẹwn kpalugba*" (offer up their needs) in order to satisfy their children. This is because in the spirit of sacrifice, the Igala parent is ready to offer anything within his/her reach in cash or kind so as to remove shame or embarassment from the family. As it is often said, "*Igala tene achukatan*" (the Igala person abhors embarrassment or literally, anything that entails removal of their crown or destiny). As it were, the capacity for moral personality in the society largely has to do with the ability to stand against anything which has to do with blatant breaking of acceptable moral norms or values.

The communualistic nature of the Igala society could be seen much more clearly when one examines the authentic expression of mutual concern and personal involvement in the fate of others. If an Igala man notices that the countenance on the face of the other person is not so good, pleasing and welcoming, he will want to know what is wrong and find possible ways of assisting in finding solution to such problems. This appears to show the fellow feeling attitude of the igalas which goes a long way to attests to the communalistic nature of the society which, in the words of Ruch and Anyanwu (1984: 142) signifies that "being sick, being feeble, being happy, being strong etc., is not a solitary, solipsistic and individualistic affairs but always and at the same time a destiny concerning primarily the 'Us'. This point is made more explicitly by Ruch and Anyanwu (1984: 143) when they state that:

> The whole African society, living and living-dead is a living net-work of relations almost like that between the various parts of an organism. When one part of the body is sick the whole body is affected. When one member of a family or clan is honoured or successful, the whole group rejoices and

shares in the glory, not only psychologically (as one would rejoice when one's local soccer team has won a match) but ontologically: each member of the group is really part of the honour.

This being with all and with everything in the Igala ontology in particular and African ontology in general, strongly characterizes and distinguishes African philosophy from the Western philosophical systems whereby the individual and the reality of the individual enjoy a distinct status of autonomy vis-a-vis the non-self. In contradistinction to the reality and autonomy of the individual, the Igala society derives its full realization and autonomy from the community in a way that one might rightly contend that because the community exists, the individual exists also. This contention should however be interpreted cautiously since it could convey the impression that the individual as such does not exist or even count since it seems that the individual is submerged in the reality of "others". On the contrary the Igala society believes that the individual exists not exclusively for himself but for others as well in the sense that his independent existence would neither be a reality nor a factor in the absence of concurrent forces of the community. For in the community the individual can claim his individuality and personal autonomy. Thus in the words of Elder Joseph Akagwu:

> The member of the community also claims his autonomy to affirm himself as a being. But he feels and thinks that he can develop his potential, identity, personality, and originality, only in and through the society, in union with all other men.

In a society where man finds his full dimension, in a community, there is this inevitability that that society will display such values as solidarity, togetherness and strong family ties connecting both the living and the dead. This society of living and living-dead is intrinsically a network of relations stretching out in a vertical and horizontal manner and in a hierarchical order. It is a vital union which Vincent Mulago (1989: 26) aptly describes as:

> A relationship of being and of life of everyone with descendants, his family, his clan-brothers, his ascendants and with God, the ultimate source of all life; an analogical ontical relation of everyone with his milieu, with his foundations, together with everything they contain and produce, with everything that grows and lives in it. We might say that the 'vital union' ... is the vital link which unites between them, vertically and horizontally, the living beings and deceased; it is a vivifying principle in which they all share.'

This vital ontological mystical union according to Mulago (1989: 27), is the ontology of the Africans particularly, south of the Shahara and the Igala people and such depict their mythical conception of existence. It is characterized by a vision of totality in which beings, which perceived as distinct, are nevertheless ontologically and intimately related with each other. This relationship or relatedness leads to a world-view which puts a greater emphasis on the active and passive links between beings than on the beings thus linked. The concern is more immediately with the current that passes through the network than with the individual power points. It is in this sense that we have qualified the Igala and by implications, the African mythical conception as primarily a dynamic philosophy.'

Evaluation and Conclusion
It is obvious that the African reality demands even more of such a mode of social existence. The reason for this contention should provisionally provide a clue as to what constitutes the ultimate explanation of this peculiar mode of existence among the Africans. The African like everybody else is a social animal except that his sociality is both unique and transcendental. In the African mythical world, it is conceivable that the first Africans that ever were and ever lived in a social setting have not actually passed out of existence. They are here, so to speak, with us as invisible spirits strongly involved and always influencing us in getting us to conform to the tradition that they themselves forged or inherited.

Furthermore, in this mythical conception of reality, the death of a tradition or the falling into disuse of some positive traditional norms that is invariably accompanied by the loss of vital life-force that must always regenerate itself in the cycle of unbroken chain of horizontal and vertical relationships. Thus my own individual life-force I think is mine by a gratuitous conferment from the ex-post facto reality of those who already enjoyed it and who jealously safeguard it for purposes of continuity, social cohesion, social harmony, social and physical integrity and for the sake of realizing the teleological good of human (African) existence.

Igala ontology obviously has to do with the Igala concept of being. From our earlier discussion, African ontology which the Igala ontology forms part, is primarily centred on the people's world view. The Igala world view could be seen to have divided the world into three worlds – the world of God, the world of Man and the world of the Dead. These three worlds are thought of to be

interwoven with various forms of interactions going on among the beings that inhabit these worlds. The African world view also holds that the world of Man is central and all other world exist and are active for the joy and progress of the world of man.

Igala ontology could be seen to have remained virtually intact in spite of contact with other cultures and world views. It is not out of place to notice some modifications in the people's thought system but one fact that remains at the background is that the people still exhibit their relational ways of life. In view of the above, the Igala ontology could have had some modifications but the fundamental tenet still remain intact and is seen in the daily lives of the people.
Having raised and discussed the basic tenets in Igala ontology, one of the obvious issues in the thinking system of the people that the people appear to be primarily conscious of their being in relation to their living, non-living and future beings. They seem to think of their existence in relation to their diverse clans, villages and the community at large. Whatever may be thought of appears to be thought of in relation to their community. It could be inferred that they see seem to think of themselves alone. In essence, the thought of the people looks like it is centred all around their society alone. It is not spread out to other communities that are not part and parcel of their community.

It is also evident in the discourse above that the Igala people appear to be conscious of the presence of their ancestors and other members of the living dead as being active and participative in the activities of their particular family and community alone. It seems as if the activities of their ancestors are only limited to their family, clan and community. The protective function of the living dead are only experienced in and through the family, clan and the community.

The Igala conception of God, his place and function in the Igala thought systems seem to be their particular understanding and relationship with the divine alone. It looks like the people's conception of God is circumscribed to their community alone. All their conceptions and descriptions of God are based on their personal experience of God. And such excludes other people's experiences of God.

It could be inferred from the on-going that the Igala people's conception of morality (which is an offshoot of the people's ontology) is thought to be under the guidance of God (the almighty being in the sky, who keeps watch over everything and everyone, who protects everybody), their ancestors (who are their fore-fathers, fathers, deceased elders, that have gone to the land of the dead,

who are always available to protect, defend, save and deliver their family members from all forms of throes and crises, who have laid down rules and regulations that guide the families, clans and the entire community) and the Elders, family heads and community leaders (who are the representatives of God, gods and ancestors in the community) have laid down their instructions which are enforced by the leadership of the community towards leading the people through the right path to their ancestral world. It appears obvious that enforcement of moral laws are only carried out by the community (God, god, ancestors, community elders and leaders) through the community leaders and for the communal development of the said community and not the entire nation.

It is my thinking that a people's ontology is only limited to such people and community and tends to determine the mode of thinking, living, acting and behaviour of such people. Their consciousness is viewed in and through their ontology. Similarly, their perception, taste, judgement and their understanding of life and living, are anchored, expressed and experienced through their ontology. It therefore means that since we have numerous ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, similarly, we have diverse ontologies, social systems, administrative systems, moral systems, etc. In view of the above, there is need to study the ontologies of the different communities so as to foaster co-operative communal existence. Similarly, there is a need to understand and harmonise our different ontologies for national development.

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