

# Ethics of Care Inherent in Igbo Traditional Practices

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## Abstract

Ethics is the philosophical appraisal of moral values, a system of moral principles which regulates befitting human conduct and gives directives on how to behave with propriety. In every polity, there are conducts adjudged appropriate or inappropriate depending on the ethical code of the society. Igbo traditional way of life (hospitality, gratuitous assistance rendered to the aged, communal commitment and support given in times of bereavement, etc.) is empathy driven. Its ethics is, to an extent, compassion-based just like feminist ethics of care. However, a faulty understanding of justice-based ethics prevails in most communities, especially in gender relations as patriarchy dominates in Igbo land irrespective of the coexistence of matriarchy. For tradition and customs tend to be flexible and mutable, except in matters concerning women where the staff of authority of the ancestors is brought to bear with full force. Given this background, this paper focuses on Igbo people and draws mostly from their traditional moral values and the lived experience of their communal ethos. This is similar to what Ramose would refer to as presenting "African philosophy through the voice from within." We shall critically reflect on some care-oriented praxis, especially respect for, and care of the elderly, with the conclusion that ethics of care defines and conveys the fulcrum of communality, the African mode of being and living, especially in Igbo land.

**Keywords:** *Igbo ethos, Care ethics, Feminist ethics, Respect, and Human beings.*

## Introduction

Every human activity has an ethical dimension. Ethics is thus the most relevant branch of philosophy needed by all in any given society. Human beings cannot but interact; ethics aims at good rapport premised on harmonization and balancing of interests, for peace to reign. Peaceful coexistence necessarily requires morality because if human interactions are not well-regulated with principles, conflict of interests could make it a fertile ground for friction. "Without moral values, gregarious life could become rapacious."<sup>1</sup> Without a regulatory discipline like ethics, society will be too permissive and too chaotic to live in. That is why moral values are put in place as very essential parameters. Ethics boils down to regard for social considerations, and mutual respect for the rights and needful aspirations of all persons. No human society can dispense with good moral values such as justice, benevolence, and a caring attitude. Ethics of care is very fundamental; care is so

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<sup>1</sup> M.P. Eboh and C.M.N. Idika, "Igbo Culture, Creative Thinking and Moral Development," In *African Moral Character and Creative Thinking Principles: African Folklores and Myths and Pedagogy of Creative and Critical Thinking for National Development* (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2019), 23-44.

indispensable that without it no neonate will survive, even the elderly will find it almost impossible to cope and life in general will be arduous. In this treatise, we shall reflectively discuss the moral foundation of Igbo polity and the ethics of care inherent in some Igbo communal praxis.

### The Moral Foundation of Igbo Polity

One of the traditional basis of morality in Igboland is *ofo na ugu – justice and innocence*. The social order is founded on respect, *ofo* and *ugu* because collaborative processes require mutual respect, justice and peace. “*Ofo*, like *ugu*, is more of a concept than a material thing. It is the symbol of justice and truth and like the ancestral staff, embodies the authority of the ancestors. It is the most significant symbol in Igbo traditional religion... It is used in ratifying new laws; and for imprecations also.”<sup>2</sup> *Ogu* symbolizes innocence. *Ome ihe jide ugu – Doers ought to act blamelessly; Ome ihe jide ofo – Doers ought to act justly*. These are normative moral expressions, just as *Aka m di ocha – My hands are clean* is a claim of innocence in the face of justice. It is only when there is justice that peaceful co-existence can be sustained in any society. Society becomes healthy, flourishes and develops when there is peace, which is the aftermath of justice.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Justice as a complete virtue is founded on human nature as a free, rational and social being. It finds expression in the being-ness of the human being.<sup>4</sup> Elechi writes:

Justice is beneath the foundation of how we relate with one another, the kind of society we have and one we would expect to have in the future, as well as how best to organize it. It has a profound effect on the lives of citizens, influencing not only their prospect but more deeply their goals, attitude, relationships and character.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, some theorists argue that ethics of care contradict the requirement of justice. This is based on a faulty understanding of justice as objective, rational and impartial as opposed to ethics of care that is associated with emotions or sentiments. According to this theory, ethics of care rests on sentiments, empathy and sympathy, and consequently, believed to be subjective, and partial. This is nothing but a fallacy of bifurcation of the human person.<sup>6</sup>

Justice is relational and as such, a social virtue. Indeed, care is justice once we consider again the idea suggested by “take care of yourself” whereby not taking care of oneself is understood in the form of not being fair to oneself. In her work, *Towards an Internormative Hermeneutics for Social Justice*, Idika emphasised that not taking care of oneself is an injustice to oneself. In the same line of thought not taking care of another person is an injustice to that other person.

<sup>2</sup> M.P. Eboh, *The structure of Igbo Logic as Shown in Dispute Settlement* (Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers, 2014), 51.

<sup>3</sup> M. Elechi., “Justice and the Politico-economic Development of Nigeria: A Philosophical Analysis”, *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal*, 13(2019), 182.

<sup>4</sup> M. Elechi, “Justice and the Politico-economic Development of Nigeria: A Philosophical Analysis”, p.186.

<sup>5</sup> M. Elechi, “Justice and the Politico-economic Development of Nigeria: A Philosophical Analysis”, p.181.

<sup>6</sup> For further argument on the fallacy of bifurcation see C.M.N. Idika, *Towards an Internormative Hermeneutic for Social Justice: Principles of Justice and Recognition in John Rawls and Axel Honneth*, Peterlang, Berlin, 2018.

One cannot rule out whether one can be just or unjust to oneself. Here I mean whether allowing myself to be sick, or over-stressing myself is an injustice to myself. This is because we use such expression as 'I am not being fair to myself as much as we say to another person you are not being fair to yourself and a correlate of saying to another you are not being fair to me. I will of course argue that I could be an 'other' to myself in a reflective sense.<sup>7</sup>

African moral theory is based on its philosophical anthropology that understands the human person as integral and relational.

Igbo ethical ground rules which make for the smooth running of the community include (1) Respect for elders. Respect for one's seniors is a virtue, a mark of good family upbringing.<sup>8</sup> Politeness and respect for elders are moral imperatives. "For instance, calling one's elders by name is unthinkable. Some courtesy adjuncts have to be appended as prefixes to someone's name making it polite to address a senior by name when necessary..."<sup>9</sup> (2) Participation in communal life. Those who absent themselves from communal activities get punished. Even when people live abroad, they still make their contributions in the village by proxy. (3) The principle of justice: *Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebele, nku kwaa ya - Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch also, whichever says the other should not perch, let its wings break*. In other words, live and let live. 4. *Ituo onwe gi mbo, ya fuo gi ufu, atula ya onye ozo - If you pinch yourself and it pains you, do not pinch another person*. In other words, hurt no one!

This last normative precept resembles the Confucian and Biblical golden rule: "Treat others the way you want them to treat you," a confirmation of the adage: "Great minds think alike." However, unlike the golden rule, it leaves no room for such questions as: If a masochist should afflict others with pain by humiliating and abusing them physically, would that be morally right given that he himself enjoys such pains and misery?

As the Igbo view humans as relational beings, the above moral principles are oil in the hinges, which smoothen movements in all directions. It has to be mentioned that modern forces are eroding traditional values, obliterating some time-honoured good foundational behaviours, leaving a trail of anomie in their wake. This is a source of great concern, and it is one of the reasons we try to document Igbo traditional *modus operandi* for the yet-unborn. The erosion of functional traditional values ought to be resisted. Only modern practices which promote sensible human development are to be upheld, bearing in mind that real progress consists in the genuine and integral development of human persons.

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<sup>7</sup> C.M.N. Idika, *Towards an Internormative Hermeneutic for Social Justice: Principles of Justice and Recognition in John Rawls and Axel Honneth*, Peterlang, Berlin, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> M.P. Eboh, *Philosophic Thought and Gynist Deconstruction of Gender* (Port Harcourt: Pearls Publishers International Ltd., 2015), 55.

<sup>9</sup> M.P. Eboh and C. M. N. Idika, "Igbo Culture, Creative Thinking and Moral Development," In *African Moral Character and Creative Thinking Principles: African Folklores and Myths and Pedagogy of Creative and Critical Thinking for National Development*, p. 27.

## **Ethics of Care**

Ethics deals with human conduct in terms of right and wrong. Thus, care ethics ought to address issues such as: What does it mean to care? Does openness, goodwill and social interactions imply care? Is altruistic cultural participation in communal affairs good or bad? Is respect for seniors and concern for the survival of cultural institutions like marriage and family a virtue or a vice? Among the Igbo, who is truly a human being and what makes them so?

There is no precise definition of care. In his article, "Nursing as Accommodated Care: A Contribution to the Phenomenology of care. Appeal, Concern, Volition, Practice," Freter observed that care is realised through the quartet of appeal, concern, volition, and practice. That is, a pitiable condition of someone appeals to your compassionate disposition, you feel concerned, you wish to help and therefore you take practical action. We show concern when we often tell our loved ones to 'take care' i.e., to take care of themselves. Sometimes, it is used in the context of 'farewell.'

Sometimes we say it, especially to children or to someone embarking on a trip or an endeavor, meaning "I care what happens to you, so please don't do anything dangerous or foolish." Or, if we know the danger is inevitable and inescapable, it may be more like a wish that the elements will let the person take care so the worst can be evaded. And sometimes we mean it as a plea: Be careful not to harm yourself or others because our connection will make us feel with and for you. We may be harmed ourselves or be partly responsible, or if you do something you will regret we will share that regret.<sup>10</sup>

The expression manifests a level of concern and relatedness. It shows a relationship and human connectedness. What we care less about is neither worth our considerations nor our concern. For instance, using an expression such as 'I do not care ...' shows itself in *laissez-faire* attitude and we pay little or no attention to such things or persons to whom or which we referred to in the use of 'I do not care ...' "Care is both value and practice."<sup>11</sup>

Although Igbo people, practise care ethics, the coinage, "ethics of care", is of feminist philosophical extraction. Care ethics is empathy-driven ethics as opposed to the traditional ethics, which is male-oriented and prevalent in masculinised theories of justice. In her *Ethics of Care*, Carol Gilligan said a feminist ethics of care is an ethics of resistance to the injustices inherent in patriarchy (the association of care and caring with women rather than with humans, the feminization of care work, the rendering of care as subsidiary to justice). An ethics of care, she said, is key to human survival and also to the realization of a global society.<sup>12</sup>

Gilligan is right and it is because of this that some feminists reject the ethics of care. However, in this treatise, we are not using care ethics in this very feministic ideological sense as "an ethics of resistance to the injustices inherent in patriarchy" because, for the Igbo, ethics of care may be key to human survival because solidarity is

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<sup>10</sup> V. Held, *The Ethics of Care – Personal, Political and Global*, 2005, p. 30

<sup>11</sup> V. Held, *The Ethics of Care – Personal, Political and Global*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> <https://ethics of care.org>carol-gil>

essential for no man is an island, but care ethos is not the preserve of females; every village community customarily cares for/about its people. We are using care ethics from this perspective; we find it an appropriate terminology to express the communal practice of compassion and solidarity inherent in Igbo system of communality which is the normal way of life of the people. In other words, we are using this feministic ideological coinage to explain a non-ideological Igbo care ethos because of similitude. The terminology matches the practice. According to a proverb, "Until the lion learns to write every story will glorify the hunter." Similitudes can only be dispensed with when apposite nomenclature for the practice is developed.

The ethics of care (EoC) is based on the conception of humans as relational beings, rather than self-sufficient individuals.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it regards moral life as a network of relationships with people, and to live well is to care about people and anticipate their needs. For instance, Igbo people have a strict sense of justice but when elders settle conflicts between husband and wife, affines and agnates, concern for the family and for subsequent good relationships are foremost in mind. Consequently, truth is sometimes tilted towards fostering renewal of love, rapprochement enduring harmonious living together or peaceful co-existence. Thus, truth in Igboland and also in Tiv land, has other referents. It is not always clear cut epistemological truth but at times socio-epistemological truth because the people are more interested in relationships than in abstractions.<sup>14</sup> Hall records that:

Everything in the world has a distinct notion. This notion contains every truth about that thing, including its connections to other things. We can analyse these connections through rational reflection. When the analysis is finite, we can reach the final truth. These are truths of reasoning. When the analysis is infinite, we cannot reach the final truth through reasoning but through experience. These are truths of fact.<sup>15</sup>

Socio-epistemological truth is akin to truths of facts, which we cannot reach through abstract reasoning but through empathic experience. The fact remains that harmonious living together outstrips strict justice of *lex talionis* type. One can win a case without winning the peace; peace is experiential and family life needs peace, love and care in order to survive. For relationships to thrive, something has to be sacrificed. The wise intervention of elders in family problems is a form of care for the welfare of the community because "the ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people."<sup>16</sup>

Igbo traditional mode of living and being is inclusive and co-operative rather than exclusive and egoistic. Relatedness or inclusivity is an existential and epistemic-moral basis of African ontology, whereby human experiences like successes and achievements are characteristic of the roles and co-operations of others.<sup>17</sup> When the Igbo say that a

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<sup>13</sup> V. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> M.P. Eboh, *The Structure of Igbo Logic as Shown in Dispute Settlement*, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> A. Hall, *The Philosophy Book* (London: Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 2011), 134.

<sup>16</sup> T. Adelekan, *African Wisdom: 101 Proverbs from the Motherland* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2004), 47.

<sup>17</sup> M. Elechi, "Inclusive Humanism and the Socio-economic Development of Nigeria", *Journal of Arts and Culture*, 2(2017), p. 4.

person *nwere obi mmadu* – has a human heart, it means that the person is compassionate. For them, to be a human being is to be kind-hearted (caring) and to rapport with others. Hence the Igbo often say to someone who has misunderstanding with a wicked person: *Hapu onye ahu, onwughi mmadu* - Leave that person, he is not a human being, just as they would say of someone who is daft: *Owughi mmadu; okpiri ka o wu* – He is not a human being; he is a stick. Consequently, one can be a human being in a biological sense but not a human being in ethical sense.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the virtue of *benevolence* - wishing others well and caring about them, is among the things that make someone truly human, while callousness makes one less human. Every human being is expected to be reasonable, caring, humane and approachable. Whoever is closed up, and neither cares nor associates with others, is always suspect and is presumed to be a bad person. Conceit is a sign of moral poverty.

Good character is acquired; it is not a datum. Consequently, not everybody has it. It requires cultivation, willpower, choice and conscientious efforts. The Igbo say: *Agwa wu mma* – Character is beauty. Thus, to be a beautiful person among the Igbo, one has to possess good manners in addition to good looks. In fact, if beauty is embodied, it is embodied in good behaviour. A person ought to be caring and respectful. Caring is a quality that easily stands someone out. Rationality, humane-ness and sociality are essential qualities that make a person a real human being in Igbo traditional thought.

It is important to note that the Igbo term for human being is *mmadu*. Hermeneutics of the term “*mma*” reveals that it means both good and beautiful. *O di mma* – It is good; *O mara mma* – It is beautiful. Thus, the term *mmadu* (human being) can be interpreted as inherent goodness and subsistent beauty. That is why if a sickly or even a dying person is asked how he/she is faring, the reply is always *Adi m mma* – I am good/beautiful. The underlying Igbo logic is: *Anaghi aju mma aju* – goodness/beauty is never rejected.<sup>19</sup> Since the human person is subsisting goodness and beauty, they are lovely under any condition. Love is the mind’s tendency to incline towards what is unique, true, good and beautiful. Love is caring attitude towards someone or something. The Igbo interconnectedness of ethics and aesthetics corroborates Wiredu’s observation:

There is an aesthetic strain in our traditional ethical thought which is worthy of special mention in this connection. As noted already, what is good is conceived to be what is fitting ...; and what is fitting is what is beautiful... There are, indeed, aesthetic analogies in the moral language of other cultures. But aesthetic analogies are taken very much more seriously and have more extensive moral relevance in our traditional thought.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See C.M.N. Idika, *Towards an Internormative Hermeneutic for Social Justice: Principles of Justice and Recognition in John Rawls and Axel Honneth*, Peterlang, Berlin, 2018, p. 46. See also Spaemann, Robert, *Persons: The Difference Between ‘Someone’ and ‘Something’* (New York: Oxford Uni. Press, 2006), 15 – 16.

<sup>19</sup> M.P. Eboh and C.M.N. Idika, “Igbo Culture, Creative Thinking and Moral Development,” In *African Moral Character and Creative Thinking Principles: African Folklores and Myths and Pedagogy of Creative and Critical Thinking for National Development*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 6.

## Care Ethics Inherent in Igbo Traditional Practices

Ethics is subdivided into general and social ethics. General ethics deals with fundamental principles that govern moral conduct while social ethics is the application of such principles to social and real issues. "... social ethics consists in regulating the conduct of an individual vis-à-vis another, in society."<sup>21</sup> Respect for elders, and solidarity in needful moments, for instance, involve applying acceptable values to life situations. Care is a moral imperative among the Igbo. It is inculcated from childhood. Thus, a child can be admonished for not caring to greet visitors and one's elders. Or for sitting down when elders are standing, etc. People can get punished for non-participation in communal activities, e.g. funerals.

### 1. *Respect for Elders as Care Ethics*

Respect for elders is one of the distinguishing marks of a good family upbringing. Generally, respect for elders starts with small courtesies like greeting one's seniors, running errands for them and assisting gratis with house chores. These, in turn, attract gratitude and benediction; the blessings given by elders are believed to be efficacious; the curses they utter when they are disrespected are equally believed to be ominous.

Respect is thoughtfulness, which is a form of care because to be thoughtful is to treat people in a kind and considerate way, especially by anticipating their needs. Respect for elders include the care of aged parents and grandparents. Africans value the aged and treasure them in both the family and the community. Though frail, elders are a source of strength because of their invaluable wise counsel and guidance. According to Wiredu, one of the rewarding ways to understand a traditional society is to go to the sages for they can inform not only about norms but also about the reasons behind them. Doyens are a beacon of light; a community without elders is regarded as accursed. Thus, economic productivity is never a just measure of the usefulness of the elderly. Igbo people do not measure the value of a human being in terms of productivity. Otherwise, they would never be philoprogenitive given that infants are not economically unproductive. Logically, parents take care of infants when they are helpless, would it then be good, just and equitable not to take good care of aged parents when they become feeble? Equity and reciprocity demand that people take good care of their parents. Care enhances life and human life is sacred and inviolable. Tender loving care (TLC) is the duty children owe their parents and grandparents. This is what Igbo custom requires of everyone.

Unfortunately, paying courtesy to elders is waning; our young people now greet only those who are known to them. They tend to forget the adage "a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness."<sup>22</sup> Contemporary youths want pecuniary gratification for all services rendered. Owing to modern work ethic, careerism and schooling, people hardly have time for aged parents and grandparents. Consequently, the aged no longer have quality time with their grandchildren. This amounts to value-erosion. Some Nigerian elders are now condemned to spend the rest of their lives in old

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<sup>21</sup> G.J. Wanjohi, *The Wisdom and Philosophy of African Proverbs: The Gikuyu Worldview* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 86.

<sup>22</sup> C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1963), 18.

people's homes, which is very un-African. Away from kith and kin, village gossips and community gatherings, such elders are bound to feel alienated, lonely and abandoned because elders expect to age gracefully in their own homes and villages surrounded by grandchildren, whom they love to instruct, to advise and tell edifying stories. Is it from old people's home that the aged will hand over tradition to the young?

Some ethical issues, therefore, arise: Does time factor dispense people from filial obligations towards their elderly parents? Is it fair to book aged parents into institutions like old people's home against their will? Does this amount to partial abandonment of elderly parents, and does it detract from the respect for their human dignity? Are bills payment a good substitute for love, affection and filial devotion to aged parents? To hire a care attendant to look after them in their own homes could be a lesser evil.

In terms of family values, is modernity a blessing or a curse to African culture? Is there anything like socio-economic determinism? Why do some people stick to the routine of daily eight working hours in the office when working from home is a viable option in office-free cases? Must workers be overworked when machines are making work lighter and faster? Besides, there are many unemployed people. Can modern man not fashion a better work ethic in order to accommodate family needs seeing that family is the basis of the larger society and the disorientation of people or the ruin of a community commences in the family? Most working-class parents are unable to balance the demands of their jobs with adequate care for their families. Consequently, many Nigerian children are morally disoriented. Must Nigerian workers join an amoral bandwagon, which does not reflect African philoprogenitive and geront-values? These are care ethical issues to look into within the purview of the African universe of discourse.

"Long live my mother and her ugliness,"<sup>23</sup> an acknowledgement of the irreplaceability of a mother by the Gikuyu people of Kenya in East Africa appreciates mothers; Likewise, *Nneka – Mother is supreme*, an Igbo popular expression. The Igbo express a similar idea in the axioms: "*Nne maa mma, nne bu nne; Nne joo njo, nne bu nne – Whether mother is beautiful or ugly, mother is mother.*" "*Onweghi onye na-asi ofe nne ya tere adighi uto – Nobody ever says their mother's soup is not tasty.*"

These sayings are as political as they are moral. They carry the binding force of respect, filial devotion and thoughtful care for one's mother. In fact, before a mother is buried in Igboland, her relatives discipline her children if they failed to take good care of their mother. Such children are humiliated, punished and fined. As it is very shameful for a man to have his mother's corpse abducted, maternal relatives sometimes threaten to go home with their sister's corpse. Thus, care is built into Igbo ethical system as both value and practice.

## 2. *Solidarity in Times of Need as Care Ethics*

Ethics has much to do with interpersonal relationships and human interactions on a daily basis. "To be human is to live in a community, so the question is not whether to do so,

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<sup>23</sup> G.J. Wanjohi, *The Wisdom and Philosophy of African Proverbs: The Gikuyu Worldview*, 243.



but what kind of community is best and how we should manage it."<sup>24</sup> Ethics of solidarity is the Igbo native system of managing the community. Igbo solidarity has ramifications: (a) communal support in bereavement, (b) *Idu nwa-odibo* (the settling of an apprentice), (c) older children taking the responsibility to cater to the needs of their siblings even at the expense of their personal comfort and self-development, etc.

In Nzerem town in Igboland, for instance, funerals are empathy driven. Close relatives of the bereaved participate actively in cash and kind. The kindred levy themselves and provide some quantity of food and drinks for the entertainment of guests in order to lessen the burden on the bereaved. The digging of grave is the duty of the men of that particular village that lost a member. The work of lowering men, children and unmarried women is theirs, while a married woman is lowered by her people. This solidarity is customary.

Among the Igbo, everybody expects a master (*Oga*) to settle a good apprentice who served him for an agreed number of years. This practice is an Igbo ethico-economic system, which emancipates many poor but promising people, especially traders. In fact, it is unethical for an entrepreneur not to help set up a business for an honest apprentice he groomed. Such a man is condemned as a bad and wicked person. The same applies to those who do not care about their siblings.

Similarly, many children greatly benefit from the magnanimity, self-effacement, and self-abnegation of the firstborn and/or the besting child of their parents, who stand in *locum parentis*. Altruistic people, who put the needs of their siblings before their own when the need arises, are considered good and kind-hearted. This caring phenomenon is probably due to the customary communalistic spirit. In an individualistic society, where the self comes first, this would not be so.

Are these altruistic acts therefore attributable to sociocultural conditioning? Or do they emanate from independent principled judgment? If the acts are due to socio-cultural conditioning, can they count as morality since a moral act is free, conscientious, deliberate and unconstrained? Do the actors have a choice and could they have acted otherwise? The fact that some people are labelled bad and wicked because of non-compliance with those social expectations, implies that freewill, conscience and choice are involved. It means that those who put their siblings first to the detriment of their own comfort and self-development do it freely and willingly, and this is by Igbo standards a morally good act. Nothing prevents such persons from taking care of themselves first before thinking of their siblings. But they have other values in mind; they are concerned about the future of their lineage, and hence the promotion of the greater good of their family.

In this consists the burden as well as the glory of the extended family system. Some schools of thought view the African extended family system as a setback. Whereas for some, it is a marvellous charitable custom, a means of upward mobility which benefits many; and it helps to maintain sanity in the society by reducing unemployment and crimes. Were this system universalized, there would have been no street urchins

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<sup>24</sup>A.A. Anderson, "Universal Law," in *Pod Redakcja et ali, Filozofia Dialog Uniwersalizm: Ksiega dedykowana Profesorowi Januszowi Kuczyńskiemu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa, 2001, 181.

(*Almajiri*) or abandoned children in Northern Nigeria, for instance. The positive impacts of extended family system make it a morally good practice. Living well is not about basking in affluence when others lack basic needs; living well is about caring and uplifting the needy and less privileged. Life, like leadership, is about service to others. Human beings are gifts to one another. Self-centeredness is a moral failure.

Essential elements which inform Igbo habitual activities and are vital to distinguishing what is African, can easily be identified by analysing traditional events.<sup>25</sup> "The epitome of African ethics, the value which is very much treasured above all else is communal co-operation and family spirit. The interplay between the moral element and the principle of reciprocal relations is pivotal in discerning what is African. Hence the maxim: it is because of communality that people come together for moonlight plays. Otherwise, the moon shines on everyone's compound. Communalism is the fulcrum of African life pattern."<sup>26</sup> In fact, it is the fulcrum of the whole of creation because ecology is so arranged that every being serves the needs of others as depicted in food chain, in commensalism, saprophytism and parasitism. Even in ordinary life, if an entertainer is gifted in singing, her sonorous voice is for the listening pleasure of her audience, not herself. A teacher teaches others, not herself. Everything is geared towards the common good of all. Imon G. rightly said: "Nothing in nature lives for itself: Rivers don't drink their own water. Trees don't eat their own fruit. Sun does not give heat to itself. Flowers don't spread fragrance for themselves. Living for others is the rule of nature. And therein lies the secret of living." Zeno of Citium said the goal of life is living in agreement with nature. For Zeno, happiness is a good flow of life. Cosmos is governed by natural laws ordained by a Supreme Lawgiver. Man has a rational soul with which to exercise free will and no one is forced to pursue a good life. It is up to the individual to choose whether to ignore what he has little or no control over and be indifferent to pain and pleasure, poverty and riches. If a person does that, he will achieve a life that is in harmony with nature.<sup>27</sup> A life that is in harmony with nature, is a life that is a blessing to others. Thus, Igbo communality imbued with benevolence and fraternal concern for others is in tune with cosmic design; it is an ideal to be coveted. Igbo people should, therefore, not allow modernity to rob them of traditional moralities such as care ethics.

### 3. *Igbo Traditional Work Ethics of Care*

Fellow feeling is so engrained in the African moral fibre that it affects expectations. African philosophy of work, a critical reflection on work ethos and those underlying principles which make work intelligible to the African, reveal that an African expects something extra in addition to his wages paid in full. He expects care and a concern for his well-being; he expects appreciation of his person and contribution. These are critical to his happiness, output and fulfilment in his workplace. In recent times, people e.g. artistes and even the Nigerian police, openly ask people to appreciate them, and by that, they mean tips or monetary gratifications. For them it is an encouragement; for other people, it could be corruption. Who is right and who is wrong?

<sup>25</sup> M.P. Eboh, *Philosophical Essays: Critique of Social Praxis* (Port Harcourt: Paragraphics, 1996), 16.

<sup>26</sup> M.P. Eboh, *Philosophical Essays: Critique of Social Praxis*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> A. Hall, *The Philosophy Book*, p.67.

Kenya plans to remove pockets from police uniforms in order to curb corruption. Perhaps there should be researches in this regard and a critical evaluation of African work ethic and remuneration system might help. What official work means to a Westerner may not be what it means to a Kenyan or a Nigerian. Could it be that African civil servants are estranged, grappling with a work ethic and mentality that is not theirs?

Igbo people are egalitarian in nature; an average Igbo person is very industrious and highly democratic. Nevertheless, the people traditionally engage in teamwork because it makes for greater output, hence the aphorism *Agboko agbako nyuo mamriri ya agba ufufu* – *joint urination produces foam*. For instance, they form work groups and take turns to work for one another so that farm work, which could take a person a week to finish, can be done for him in one day. The person whose work is being done caters for the group that day. Interestingly, one can take his work team to work for a person he respects in the community, and the latter would customarily feed the team that day. There is hardly an Igbo ethos that lacks care dimension; care is built into the system.

### Conclusion

Igbo ethics of care is apparently under siege on account of modernity. African moral universe of discourse should therefore revisit synergy, praxis and all traditional ethos, which previously stood the people in good stead. Ethics of care defines and conveys the fulcrum of communality, the African mode of being and living, in the most proper sense. There is a need to recover all the good human values: respect for elders, family team spirit, compassion, forgiveness, and solidarity, especially in times of daunting challenges. Misunderstanding is unavoidable in relationships. Peaceful co-existence, renewal of love, and rapprochement are expected to exist and continue in a family even after conflict resolutions, hence the compelling need for context-bound socio-epistemological truth with its placebo effects, which heals the wounds of relationships faster than strict justice and/or clear cut epistemological truths. Igbo elders handle matrimonial affrays with care ethics and counselling because only the right moral values and prudent approach can bring the survival of marriages and the family, and hence a peaceful society. The nearer the values are to customs and nature, the better because custom guides life based on lived experience, and nature is teleological and so intelligently purposeful that the more constructively natural people are, the better. We strongly advocate the promotion and strengthening of the ethics of care in Africa, especially the care of the elderly in their natural homes and backgrounds. As people with lived experience of Igbo care ethics in village life, we have documented these *modi operandi* for future generations to reconnoiter the fundamentals of Igbo moral strength. Ethics of care should extend to the natural environment and to contemporary workplaces to enable workers care adequately for their families.

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