

# Pantaleon Iroegbu's Concept of God in Igbo Metaphysics

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## Abstract

*This study explores Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of God within the context of Igbo metaphysics and its relevance for understanding reality, human existence and religious coexistence. It places Iroegbu's thought within the wider context of African philosophy in which metaphysical inquiry is firmly grounded in communal life, interconnectedness and the quest for ultimate meaning. The study is motivated by the need to clarify how Iroegbu interprets God as the Supreme being and foundation of all that exists in Igbo thought. The method employed in this work is a synthesis of expository and hermeneutical methods drawn from Iroegbu's philosophical writings and related scholarly works. His metaphysical vision emphasizes mutual enrichment and interconnectedness of beings on each other and ultimately on God, showing that existence is structured around relationship rather than isolation. In this framework, God is not only transcendental but also immanent in the order and harmony of creation. The study argues that Iroegbu's concept of God offers a profound philosophical basis for understanding Igbo worldview that values unity, balance and mutual respect. It further contends that this perspective has practical relevance for promoting dialogue, tolerance and peaceful coexistence in a plural society such as Nigeria. The work concludes that Iroegbu's relational understanding of God enriches African philosophical discourse and provides valuable insight for addressing religious conflict, strengthening social harmony and fostering a more inclusive vision of human community.*

## Original Research Article

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## Introduction

This work examines Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of God within Igbo metaphysics, using *Uwa* ontology, a core principle of his metaphysical thought that places God at the centre of reality. As a Nigerian philosopher of Igbo heritage, Iroegbu made significant contributions to African philosophy by developing a distinctive metaphysical system rooted in Igbo's existential and cultural thought. Iroegbu's *Uwa* ontology establishes a culturally grounded and globally relevant framework for understanding "being". Iroegbu's metaphysical foundation, *Uwa* ontology, derives from the Igbo word, *Uwa* which means "world" or "earth" referring to the physical realm humans inhabit. In his thought, *Uwa* integrates the physical and spiritual dimensions into a unified understanding of reality. The *Uwa* ontology addresses fundamental questions about God, existence and the interconnectedness of all beings. It presents "Being" as relational and understands existence as realized through belonging to a communal whole. From this perspective, existence is inseparable from community, reflecting a reality in which all beings are interconnected and

participate in the world's harmony. For Iroegbu, God is at the apex of the *Uwa* ontology.

## The nature and attributes of God

In Pantaleon Iroegbu's metaphysical framework, God (*Chukwu*) is the Supreme Being and foundation of existence. The attributes of God according to Iroegbu, express both transcendence and immanence, highlighting God as the source and sustainer of all reality. Iroegbu classified God's attributes into three namely: transcendental, entitative and operative attributes. Transcendental attributes of God describe His absolute and infinite limitations. They express God as the fullness of being, encompassing all perfection. These attributes include: Distinctness (Separateness), Exemplarity (Similarity) and Intelligibility. As the ultimate *Kpim* of *Uwa*, God transcends and sustains all reality as its infinite ground. The entitative attributes of God, in Iroegbu's thought, describe His essential being. They present God as the self-existent, necessary being who is independent of all else. These attributes include His simplicity, immutability and perfection.

As *Kpim* and the foundation of *Uwa*, God is the ultimate source of all reality. Operative attributes of God for Iroegbu refers to His actions in relation to creation. They express God as the active source who sustains, governs and orders *Uwa*. Through these attributes, God is understood as continually involved in the preservation and direction of all reality as its *Kpim*. Together, the attributes express His holistic conception of the Divine.

### The *Uwa* ontological Framework

Iroegbu's *Uwa* ontology presents a layered understanding of reality, rooted in Igbo metaphysics, communal experience, language and spirituality. As Iroegbu, explains "*Uwa*" denotes the totality of reality, encompassing the visible and invisible, material and spiritual and interconnectedness of all that existence. In his words, Iroegbu says, "My perception of reality in its different aspects is synthesized in my perception of *Uwa*. *Uwa* defines being. It summarizes being and beings for me. It englobes all beings in the bosom of *Uwa*-being...Whatever is, in so far as it is, is *Uwa*. *Uwa* is reality and reality is *Uwa*."<sup>1</sup> Iroegbu's view of reality is grounded in key insights that shape to his *Uwa* ontology, rooted in his African, especially Igbo worldview. For Iroegbu, *Uwa* transcends the physical world and encompasses the whole realm of existence where beings emerge, relate and find meaning. He defined the Igbo term *Uwa* as:

The entirety of existence, from God the highest Being to inanimate beings of our cosmos, can be summarized in the englobing concept of the Igbo term *Uwa*. *Uwa* is all-inclusive. It mirrors being, existence, entity, all reality. It englobes all that is animate and inanimate, visible and invisible. It is comprehensive, universal and global. It is transcendent and immanent scope as well as explicative and prospective elasticity.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the Western view, which limits the world to the physical and material world, excluding the spiritual, Iroegbu observes that, "*Uwa* however has a much deeper meaning, scope, connotation and global elasticity than the English term, *world*...has a larger extension than *world*, which directly and ordinary means this material created world."<sup>3</sup> Iroegbu's *Uwa* ontology is significant in that it encompasses God, divine beings, humans and nature, highlighting the ultimate source of meaning in Igbo communal existence. At the heart of this framework is a distinct ontological claim, "to be is to belong". This reflects the African view that existence is relational - to exist is to coexist- showing how the Igbo thought understands reality and its world. This principle "to be is to belong"<sup>4</sup> together with Iroegbu's *Uwa* concept, underpins his ontology.

In *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, Pantaleon Iroegbu dedicates chapter twenty-four to the *Uwa* ontology, presenting a holistic Igbo metaphysical framework that explains the totality of existence. Central to this ontology is the concept of

*Uwa*, a multidimensional concept that integrates life, destiny, persons, community, nature and the cosmic order into a relational vision of reality. To explain its complexity, Iroegbu identifies fifteen connotations, each showing a distinct but interconnected dimension of being. They are world, universe, nature, environment, community, life, existence, reality, destiny, history, culture, society, space, time and experience which collectively portray reality as an integrated and relational whole. In other words, these connotations show that human life is relational and embedded in ecological, social and cosmic frameworks. Together, they form a holistic metaphysical system for understanding human existence, communal responsibility and the interconnected structure of reality in Igbo thought.

### THE SIX ZONES OF *UWA*

Within Pantaleon Iroegbu's *Uwa* ontology, *Uwa* an Igbo word for world is a multidimensional and interconnected reality, in which every aspect of existence is harmoniously integrated within a unified framework. *Uwa* is more than a physical or material notion but a full metaphysical structure that interrelates the divine, human and cosmic dimensions of being. To explain the structure and functioning of this integrated reality, Iroegbu identifies six zones of *Uwa*, each reflecting a distinct but related aspect of being. These zones are Cosmos, Divine world, Godian world, Good-spirit world, Bad-spirit world and Ancestral world provide a structured and comprehensive framework for understanding reality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of God, human beings, communities and the cosmos. He shows that the interconnectedness of God, humanity, society and cosmos, linking metaphysical insights with ethical living and social harmony in Igbo thought.

### The Relational and Communal dimensions of *Uwa*: Individual, Family, Community and the Human Person

#### (i) The Individual in *Uwa* Ontology

The role of an individual in an Igbo community is best understood within a relational and communal framework, where personhood is not conceived in isolation but is constituted through belonging, active participation and moral responsibility within the community. Pantaleon Iroegbu's *Uwa* ontology presents human existence as essentially relational and grounded in community. The human person is not an isolated entity but is constituted through the interrelated dimensions of individuality, family and community, all of which contribute to a holistic conception of personhood. The Igbo worldview emphasizes that an individual and community exist in an inseparable relationship, highlighting the communal dimension of reality. Daly aptly expresses the necessity of the community for the sustenance of the individual, "As an individual, each person has a unique identity defined by a subjective consciousness, forms and carries out projects that

<sup>1</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 338.

<sup>2</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 339.

<sup>3</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 338-339.

<sup>4</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 374.

unfold in a personal history, holds an inalienable right to pursue this life plan, and follows universal principles of morality in relationships with others. But at the practical level of everyday life, a communitarian conception can be felt.”<sup>5</sup>

Within the framework of Iroegbu’s *Uwa* Ontology, the communal bond between an individual and community begins at birth. This bond originating at birth, manifests as the child’s first encounter with the *Uwa*, highlighting the relational foundation of existence. The child thereby, leaves the security of the mother’s womb and enters this harsh world (as he describes it), where it begins to cry. This child is welcomed into a micro-community that reflects the larger society he will inhabit. Iroegbu puts it thus, “The mini-community that gathered and welcomed the new-born baby is a representative of the larger one in which the child will live its entire life : the Igbo world.”<sup>6</sup>

In Iroegbu’s view, the Igbo child is born into a social world characterized by communalism and collective bonds, which nurtures a sense of belonging. Within this communal framework, the child’s existence, conduct and destiny are formed and defined irrespective of his consent. The Igbo people constitute Igbo identity, which is characterized by the elements that set them apart as a distinct ethnic group. These elements are, among others: “Common origin, Common world-view, Common language, Shared culture, Race, colour and habits, Common historical experience and Common destiny”.<sup>7</sup> Collectively, these traits characterize the Igbo person and form what is recognized as the Igbo identity.

#### **(ii) The Family as the primary relational site**

In Pantaleon Iroegbu’s *Uwa* ontology, the family emerges as the foundational domain of human connection, the primary arena where the human self is cultivated. As Iroegbu puts it, “The baby’s mother is the very first instance of the I (baby)-reality encounter...The mother is there: first reality. She is assisted by the midwife whom the baby also sees, but as intermediary...the father is also on the scene of delivery. The baby thus sees reality first as human reality.”<sup>8</sup> Within this relational environment, the individuals encounter care, guidance, ethical formation and cultural as well as spiritual instructions that shape their character. By nurturing the rational, moral and spiritual dimensions of its members, the family cultivates the human person, whose being is inseparable from communal belonging and aligned with the harmony of the world.

#### **(iii) The Community Dimension**

In the Igbo worldview, the community anchors existence, shaping the meaning and identity of the individual. According to Abanuka,

The community is the second source or origin of knowledge. The individual is a member of his community. Consequently, the individual lives and acts as a member of a given community. From the moment of his existence in the community, the individual is influenced by the life and experience of the community. These influences are very important factors in the development of human knowledge in the individual.<sup>9</sup>

Iroegbu points out just how powerful this bond truly is “Without the community there is no remaining in existence.”<sup>10</sup> This does not imply the loss of individuality, for one remains autonomous and distinct being within the larger context. The community and individual are not in opposition but are bound in a mutually functional relationship, in which the community supports the individual’s independence and belonging which allows the individual to achieve integrity. According to Pantaleon,

In the community to which I have been born, we have shared needs and expectations, one way, even if varied in details in various places, of religious beliefs and expression. We also have shared customs, ethical taboos and moral interdictions. Finally, we have one type of socio-economic, geo-political stratification, and a solidarity of communal actions and interactions. Indubitably, I realize that what dominates the entire life and worldview is not the individual just there, but the community, society or group to which he/she belongs. This provokes reflection.<sup>11</sup>

Far from being opposing entities, the individual and community exist in a relationship of mutual interdependence: through participation and inclusion, the individual attains wholeness, while the community thrives through the cultivation of its members. Together, these relationships illustrate that being in the Igbo worldview is by nature relational, communal and interdependent. In other words, In Igbo thought, reality is a web of relationships linking individuals, communities, spirits and nature, thereby emphasizing the interconnectedness and shared responsibilities that shape their worldview.

#### **(iv) The Human Person**

Iroegbu presents the human person as an integrated whole, made up of interdependent and interconnected dimensions rather than isolated components. These dimensions are body (*ahu*), reason (*Uche*), Spirit (*mmuo*) and Inner-self or heart

<sup>5</sup> M. Daly. (ed.) *Communitarianism: A New Public Ethics*. (California: Wadsworth Publ. Comp., 1994), XVI.

<sup>6</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 344.

<sup>7</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 345.

<sup>8</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 343.

<sup>9</sup> B. Abanuka. *A new essay on African philosophy*. (Nsukka: Spiritan Publications, 1994), 66.

<sup>10</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 345.

<sup>11</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 347.

(*Obi*). His inquiry into the nature of the human person begins with a careful examination of the Igbo concept of the person, *mmadu*. Human personhood encompasses both the spiritual and physical, rather than existing as a purely spiritual entity. As stated by Iroegbu, “He has a body, or better he is *somebody*. He is not a spirit, a disembodied invisible being. By not being a spirit pure and simple (*muo*), he is human being, *mmadu*... He is thus body: limited, fragile, contingent and human, merely human. The conclusion from this is that, part of the essence of *mmadu-ness* is body, *ahu*.”<sup>12</sup> Within Iroegbu’s *Uwa* ontology, the *ahu* (body) transcends mere physicality, serving as a vital expression of the human person. It integrates both the corporeal and spiritual dimensions of being, revealing the person’s place within the interconnected totality of reality. In the Igbo view, the corporeal dimension of “*mmaduness*”<sup>13</sup> as Iroegbu puts it, expressed by the human body, forms an essential aspect of a person’s being. Nevertheless, the mere possession of a body does not confer humanity, for animals, too are embodied. True human personhood, therefore, transcends mere physical existence, integrating the body as an essential component while also embracing other aspects of being and relationships. Another significant element of the human person is *Uche* which in the Igbo language refers to reason, mind or intellect. It endows the individual with the ability to reflect, comprehend and exercise judgment, thereby enabling meaningful and responsible engagement with reality. Iroegbu asserts, “It is important that one is able to reason, to dialogue reasonably, to do things in a way different from other beings with bodies, i.e., brutes...One is a more excellent human person who can reason more excellently.”<sup>14</sup>

The third element of human person is the spirit which in Igbo language is *mmuo*. *Mmuo* significantly shapes the character and disposition of each individual. It equips the individual with the ability to reflect, comprehend and exercise judgment thereby enabling meaningful and responsible engagement with reality. Upon death, it enters the realm of the ancestors and eventually reappears in the family through reincarnation. The last element of the human person is *Mkpuru-obi* which means soul. In the constitution of the human person, *obi* operates as the moral and emotional core. As stated by Iroegbu, “*Mkpuruobi* literally means “seed of heart” for *obi* is heart. Since the heart is in every creature the source of physical life and force of energy, *Mkpuruobi* is used to indicate that the most fundamental aspect without which nothing functions.”<sup>15</sup> Together, these dimensions present an integrative and relational view of the human person as an embodied, rational, moral and spiritual being, wherein each aspect exists in dynamic interdependence, reflecting the unity and interconnectedness that characterize *Uwa* as a shared horizon of being.

Pantaleon Iroegbu’s *Uwa* ontology is grounded in the view that existence is essentially to belong. In this view, existence is intrinsically relational rather than independent. In other words, nothing whether human, natural or spiritual human or otherwise, exists in isolation. Every entity derives its meaning and reality through participation in the wider whole known as *Uwa*, the comprehensive horizon of existence. That is to say, that this totality is not limited to the physical world alone but embraces the material, spiritual, visible and invisible dimensions of reality.

Within this framework, individuality is not erased but redefined. Distinct beings retain their uniqueness, yet their identity is intelligible only within the network of relationships that binds all things together. Thus, differences and interconnectedness are not opposites but complementary aspects of being. Human persons, in particular, occupy a distinctive place as conscious and responsible agent. Their dignity and self-understanding arise not from isolated selfhood but from active participation in communal life, cultural traditions and the broader cosmic order.

Consequently, personhood in Iroegbu’s thought is both relational and participatory. To exist as a human being is to be embedded in a web of mutual obligations and shared meanings, where one’s identity is continuously shaped and affirmed through interaction with others and with the larger structure of reality. In this sense, belongingness is not merely a social condition but an ontological principle – one that grounds human existence, sustains community and affirms the interconnected unity of all that is.

### **IROEGBU’S CONCEPT OF “BEING AS BELONGINGNESS”**

The concept of “Being as Belongingness” constitutes the cornerstone of Pantaleon Iroegbu’s metaphysical thought. Through “Being as Belongingness”, Iroegbu presents a uniquely African perspective on existence, grounded in Igbo culture. In line with this perspective, to exist is not to stand alone, but to belong -in-relation to family, community and the cosmos. He says,

The African’s fundamental understanding of the human person is not individualistic or atomistic. Rather it is relational and being-with-ness. He is primarily a being-with the neighbour. Right from birth to his entrance into the nether-world: he is a being-with the community. For when any person, at birth, descends from heaven, he descends into a human community (Akan proverb). Further he is a being- with God, the primordial author of his being and of all other beings. He is equally a being-with nature, the cosmos and all material things around him. He is also a being-with the spiritual and ancestral beings that form part of his cosmic vision.

<sup>12</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 352.

<sup>13</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 352.

<sup>14</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 352.

<sup>15</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 353.

Finally, in these various beings- with, man becomes a being-with –himself. In discovering others, he discovers himself.<sup>16</sup>

He says that, “Being is whatever exists, whatever has reality, entity or existence. This could be posited in the universe or outside of it...it is being in so far as it shares or can share in existence, directly or indirectly, fully or partially, independently or dependently”.<sup>17</sup> He argued that being can be described but not defined, “Being is indefinable because to define is to ascribe a specific difference, a quality that distinguishes the defined from realities. But outside being there is no other reality. Being is the first, the most simple, universal and immediate of all notions.”<sup>18</sup> At the core of his metaphysics lies the principle that existence is defined by belongingness. In support of the above statement, Oyeshile writes, “The relationship between the community and the individual can be likened to the relationship between a play and its parts or a team and its players. This necessarily presupposes that there is an intricate link between what we know as the community and its individual members such that they have a similar ‘destiny’ in a metaphorical sense. The well-being of the community is often used as the determinant of the well-being of the individual even though the converse does not always hold.”<sup>19</sup> The same view is shared by Arinze who states that human existence in Igbo culture is relational and communal. To exist “is to live in the group, to see things with the group. Life is not an individual venture, each one for himself.”<sup>20</sup>

Iroegbu defines belongingness as “the synthesis of the reality and experience of belonging. It is an open-ended term. For, to talk of belonging is to raise the question of the recipient-subject of belonging: Belonging to what?”<sup>21</sup> Iroegbu goes further to give an answer to the above question by stating that in this context, it means “to be part of, member of, in the group of...”<sup>22</sup> Hence, to belong is to be part (individual) of a whole, to be part of a community. The recipient is involved and belongs to a community first then to the world. He emphasizes further that belongingness is,

...being a part of, therefore belonging to reality *Uwa*. In this sense, Belongingness is an abstract term, an ontological one that specifies that a thing is, because it belong. In a general sense:

To be is to belong.

To belong is to be.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, existence finds its meaning in active participation, mutual sharing and belonging within communal relationships, where the individual is understood as inherently connected to others within a shared social and moral framework.

As Mbiti notably observes, individual’s identity is closely intertwined with the community, emphasizing the central role of communal life in shaping human existence. He says “The individual can only say: “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore, therefore I am.”<sup>24</sup> Mulago also points out that,

The community is the necessary and sufficient condition for life of the individual person. The individual person is immersed into the natural world and nevertheless emerges from it as an individual and a person within his conscience and freedom given him by the mediation of the community in which he senses a certain presence of the divine.<sup>25</sup>

The community marks the child’s birth with celebration, recognizes the ancestor he represents, gives him a name, and interprets his arrival within the communal circumstances. As he matures, he becomes conscious of his interdependence with his kin and the responsibility to serve the community. As Uchendu rightly pointed out:

Community spirit is very strong among the Igbos. Almost from the first, the individual is aware of his dependence on his kin group and his community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group to which he owes so much. He seldom, if ever, becomes really detached from the group wherever he may live.<sup>26</sup>

Within Igbo culture, a person’s existence is inseparable from their communal ties. This interconnectionedness is reflected in communal activities such as festivals, rites of passage and collective decision-making where every individual’s role strengthens the shared identity of the community. Egwuutorah stressed this point when he observed that:

Igbo communalism is expressed in living together and sharing responsibilities. The traditional Igbo society has a great asset in its practice of a mode of life called communalism. This used to be the bedrock and the result of the wonderful relationship prevalent in the Igbo-African community as well as the purpose of the

<sup>16</sup> P. Iroegbu. *Appropriate ecclesiology: through narrative theology to an African church*. (Owerri: INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES PRESS LTD, 1996),92.

<sup>17</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 60.

<sup>18</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> O. A. Oyeshile. *The Individual-Community Relationship as an Issue in Social and Political Philosophy*. In *Core Issues in African Philosophy*. Edited by Olusegun Oladipo. (Ibadan: Hope Publications,2016), 103.

<sup>20</sup> F. A. Arinze. *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*. (Ibadan: University Press, 1970), 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 374.

<sup>22</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*,374.

<sup>23</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS The Kpim of Philosophy*, 374.

<sup>24</sup> J. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 140.

<sup>25</sup> V. Mulago. *African heritage and Contemporary Christianity*. (Nairobi: Oxford University, 1989),115.

<sup>26</sup> V.C. Uchendu. *The Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria*. (London: Rinehart & Winston, 1965), 34.

existence of the Igbo community in particular and of the Africans in general.<sup>27</sup>

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe sets forth how the Igbo community shapes individual identity and moral life, illustrating Iroegbu's idea of "Being as Belongingness" where a person's being is realized through belonging to a kin, a community, and the wider *Uwa*. It was emphasized during a feast organized by Okonkwo, where his Uncle, Uchendu presents the essence of the Igbo philosophy of belonging, when he said, "We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsmen to scratch him".<sup>28</sup>

Iroegbu's concept of "Being as Belongingness" is further illustrated, as we can see in Uchendu, being one of the oldest members of the *Umunna*, in thanking Okonkwo after the feast, showed him that individual existence is realized and deepened within the communal life of the Igbo people. He says, "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so."<sup>29</sup> This further establishes the fact that the meaning of existence is grounded in the community and not in the individual. From this foundation, Iroegbu developed his concept of belongingness, highlighting the deeply relational character of human life. He further says, "As we have argued elsewhere, we can summarize the essence of community thus: From the nuclear family, via the extended family to the village and entire kindred, life was seen and lived as one. None can make it alone. We need one another. The community gives the individual his existence, welcome and education."<sup>30</sup> In Igbo land, the primary community in which people live and find their sense of belonging is the *Umunna* (kindred). The *Umunna* represents a synthesis of the diverse connotations and regional understandings of *Uwa*. It is most vividly expressed in the interplay between communal life and individual existence- a dynamic that *Uwa* ontology seeks to define precisely, revealing the deeper structure of being in the world of existence. As Iroegbu puts it, "Belongingness is the arrangement of the fundamental structure of society (laws, duties, privileges, jobs, offices, advantages and incumbents of the community), such that it

incarnates and manifests the commonness of origin, of history and of general destiny of all the members of the community. Belongingness is *Umunna* concretized."<sup>31</sup> Iroegbu identifies the Igbo proverb "*Egbe bere, Ugo bere* which means let the kite perch and let the eagle perch" as a central cultural symbol that represents this vision.

### **The concept of Belongingness: *Egbe bere, Ugo bere (EBUB)***

In the Igbo society, proverbs are employed as instruments for transmitting moral instructions and preserving cultural identity. According to Ede, "Proverbs, that is, brief, popular epigrams, are very commonly used by male elders as expressions of traditional wisdom and familiarity with Igbo lore".<sup>32</sup> The significance of proverbs in Igbo language and cultural expression is further emphasized by Onwuchekwa who says "Igbo proverbs are like storehouses or archives through which one can dig into Igbo philosophy, cultures, economics, technology and general worldview".<sup>33</sup> Among the Igbo proverbs is "*Egbe bere, Ugo bere*".

*Egbe bere, Ugo bere, nke si nibe ya ebele, nku kwaa ya.*

(Let the kite perch, let the Eagle perch;  
if one says that the other should not perch,  
let that one's wings break).<sup>34</sup>

This proverb distinguishes itself as a deep expression of coexistence. It communicates the principle that all beings deserve their place in the structure of existence with harmony preserved, only when each is allowed to thrive without exclusion. In this proverb, the kite and the eagle exemplify distinction-variations in power, status and capacity- yet both are entitled to their rightful place within the communal order. The proverb implies that if one denies another the chance to perch, one must also forego the same opportunity. Simply put, every being must share space, life and value rather than one claiming them at the expense of others. Iroegbu puts it thus, "Thus *Egbe bere Ugo bere* as an ontological principle re-enacts the contents and existential significance of belongingness. It expresses the essence or hermeneutic *Kpim* of reality. What a being is, is its activity of perching. To perch is to be. To be is to perch. To be is to belong. To belong is to perch."<sup>35</sup>

The Igbo proverb, *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* in this work is interrogated from the metaphysical perspective of Pantaleon Iroegbu's concept of Being as Belongingness. It contends that

<sup>27</sup> I.C. Ekwuorah. Igbo communalism: An Appraisal of Asozuzu's ibunyanidanda. In *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 2023, Vol. 2. No.1., 403.

<sup>28</sup> C. Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*, 132.

<sup>29</sup> C. Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*, 133.

<sup>30</sup> P.I. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 347.

<sup>31</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 350.

<sup>32</sup> E.M.P. Edeh. *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> O. Onwuchekwa. Philosophy in indigenous Igbo Proverbs: Cross- Cultural Media for Education in the Era of Globalization. *Scientific Research, Open Journal of Philosophy*, 2013, , Vol.3, No. 1A, page 218.

<sup>34</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 351.

<sup>35</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 379.

the proverb is more than a moral appeal for tolerance or peaceful coexistence but an essential principle that demonstrates that being is fundamentally relational. According to Asouzu, “It helps to bring the world still nearer to all stake-holders in very significant and insightful ways”.<sup>36</sup> This is further supported by Onwuchekwa who states,

If we analyze the Igbo proverb that *Egbe bere, Ugo bere nke siri ibe ya ebela ka nku kwaa ya* ” meaning: “May the kite perch and may the Eagle perch, whichever does not want its neighbor to perch, may its wings be broken”, we will see some invaluable solution to the problems of globalization inherent in it. First, the proverb will teach us that the problem of “subject-object” dichotomy which is a serious burden on globalization is irrelevant.<sup>37</sup>

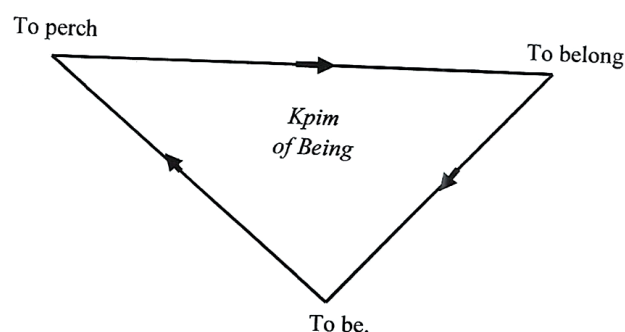
The Igbo worldview understands reality as an interconnected web of beings, bound together by life and the world (*Uwa*), not separate entities. This perspective highlights that the meaning and value of being are realized through relationships, mutual recognition and shared participation. Within this framework, *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* demonstrates the principle of coexistence, reflecting the communal and interdependent nature of Igbo metaphysics. Onwuchekwa puts it thus, “In fact, “egbe bere, ugo bere”, is a lesson on complementary reflection. It unites rather than divides us...It emphasizes the need for a deeper knowledge among men that will result to a closer understanding of one another. Hence, the need for moderation, communalism and complementary reflection.”<sup>38</sup> The philosophy of belonging permeates human life. It emphasizes interdependence, connection and communion, reminding us that identity is forged not in isolation but through relationships with others. It is a philosophy that resonates with African cultural identity.

According to Iroegbu, “Existence belongs to all”.<sup>39</sup> Iroegbu’s notion of belongingness establishes a metaphysical structure that aligns closely with this cultural insight. His assertion that “to be is to belong” conveys the idea that existence is realized through communal participation. Belongingness constitutes the very core of existence. In the same way that the eagle and the kite must both be allowed to perch, every human being must be embraced within the communal web of existence. The alignment between the proverb and Iroegbu’s idea is significant. *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* illustrates the cultural expression of belongingness and Iroegbu advanced it into a structured philosophical framework. Both maintain that true harmony arises only when coexistence is mutually upheld. Together, they affirm that human flourishing arises from

mutual recognition and the rejection of exclusion. Belongingness is not about inclusion alone but about the very possibility of existence.

Iroegbu employs a diagram to illuminate the concept of *Egbe bere, Ugo bere*, highlighting the interconnectedness of perching, belonging and being. Within this proverb, perching represents engagement in being, signifying the recognition of one’s rightful place within the shared order of existence. In his words, Iroegbu, says “Thus *Egbe bere Ugo bere* as an ontological principle re-enacts the contents and existential significance of belongingness. It expresses the essence or Kpim of reality. What a being is, is its activity of perching. To perch is to be. To be is to perch. To be is to belong. To belong is to perch.”<sup>40</sup>

The diagram below, created by Pantaleon Iroegbu, illustrates the proverb *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* as a visual embodiment of coexistence within Igbo thought. It reflects the metaphysical principle that authentic existence is relational, emphasizing balance, mutual respect and the interconnectedness of all beings within the broader framework of *Uwa* (the world).



#### Kpim: The Relationships of Perching- Belonging-Being: Tree of Life<sup>41</sup>

Through the proverb, *Egbe bere, Ugo bere*, Iroegbu interprets the relationship between *Egbe* and *Ugo* as a symbolic disclosure of coexistence, where distinct beings affirm one another’s shared order of existence. Iroegbu elaborately asserts:

When *Egbe* perches and *Ugo* perches, they come face to face with each other. They are present to each other. They relate to each other deeply and directly as well as have relationships with other inhabitants of *Uwa* to relate is to share something to give and take. They have common projects, needs and desires. Together they

<sup>36</sup> I. Asouzu. *Ibuaru: The heavy burden of Philosophy, beyond African Philosophy*. (London: Transaction Publishers, 2007),13.

<sup>37</sup> O. Onwuchekwa. Philosophy in Indigenous Igbo Proverbs: Cross – Cultural Media for Education in the Era of Globalization. In *Scientific Research, Open Journal of Philosophy*, page 220.

<sup>38</sup> O. Onwuchekwa. Philosophy in indigenous Igbo

proverbs: Cross-Cultural media for Education in the era of Globalization, 220.

<sup>39</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 376.

<sup>40</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 379.

<sup>41</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 379.

struggle to overcome their difficulties. Together also they share their joys.<sup>42</sup>

From the foregoing, the principle of *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* embodies the Igbo metaphysical and ethical understanding of coexistence, mutual acknowledgement and relational harmony. As earlier stated, it emphasizes that being is neither isolated nor self-sufficient but is actualized within a shared space, where each entity has the opportunity to thrive without diminishing the other. This principle stresses the communal nature of reality, where balance and a sense of belonging are maintained through mutual accommodation. By prioritizing coexistence rather than domination, *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* presents a worldview in which the continuity of life and existence depends on relational harmony. Thus, this principle not only illuminates the Igbo understanding of communal organization but also reinforces the metaphysical claim that authentic existence is grounded in mutual coexistence, interdependence and the acknowledgement others. Iroegbu explicitly affirms this when he states that,

In relationship to the *Kpim* of things, this essential communal relationship is brought to a higher and more fundamental focus. It takes up an ontological dimension with an existential expression. *Egbe bere, Ugo bere* means primarily that individuals are in question: *Egbe* and *Ugo*. But they are not yet fully persons, they are still within the mental constructs of being in flight, above, not yet within being but only potential beings. Until they perch.

To perch is to hold on to something, to descend on the world, to embrace reality, to be present to being... As long as one has not perched, one is not yet fully being, existentially concrete. Not until one perches. The act of perching is the process of acquiring being. To perch therefore is to become. Perching is becoming. To fully perch is to fully be. To deny the other the right to perch or prevent him from perching is to alienate him. This is to deny him being.<sup>43</sup>

Although the proposition “to be is to belong, and to belong is to be” may at first appear circular, it fundamentally articulates the foundational role of relationality in defining the nature of existence. This framework will, however become clearer as the four conceptual dimensions of belongingness in Iroegbu’s thought are explored.

### 1. Be- (I)-on (Be on)

This first connotation ‘to belong’ entails “being on” within *Uwa*, a term that translates to world in English language. This term bears a deeper meaning within Igbo ontological thought,

signifying the totality of existence from which all concrete realities emerge and find their bearing. In this sense, to be is to avoid the state of not-being. In other words, To be “off” is equivalent to ceasing to exist, to be “on” is equivalent to being in existence.

### 2. Be- (I)-on-going

This constitutes the second phase of the etymological understanding of the concept of “belongingness”. According to Iroegbu, “The *ongoingness* of being means that somebody who belongs today cannot be, all things being equal, be regarded as not belonging tomorrow, unless at the prize of annihilation.”<sup>44</sup> On this basis, there is no need for extended argument to establish that belongingness is not a concluded matter, but an enduring and ever-continuous process. By understanding being as the “be-(I)-on-going” with respect to belongingness, it could be said that once a being is tuned into its *Uwa m*, it thereafter persists. The being progresses in its *Uwaness*, reflecting that existence is always a dynamic process. To be sustained in being, is to continue further within being, rather than departing from or existing outside of it.

For Iroegbu, “To be maintained in being is to proceed on, further in being, and not out of, or outside of, being (*Uwa*). Being is something that goes on.”<sup>45</sup> Being ongoing is both an affirmation and a manifestation of continuity. Iroegbu puts it thus, “Ongoingness is an existential constituent of Being-in-Belongingness. The ontological consequence is that being is being in so far as it is ongoing.”<sup>46</sup>

### 3. Be – long

This constitutes the third conceptual dimension of belongingness. It conveys a form of relationship or relational presence. Within the framework of belongingness, a being is realized, since belonging entails ongoing presence, settlement and enduring existence in being. To belong is to sustain and unfold the ongoing reality of a being’s belongingness. Through the act of belonging, a being engages relationally with another in reality. According to Iroegbu, be-long means, “to stay, abide or live long... Belongingness means that the subject of *Uwa* stays long in being.”<sup>47</sup> At this point, Iroegbu addresses time and space, portraying being in relation to time and space. He suggests that the duration of time in “be-long” is shaped by situational conditions and further asserts that “long” itself signifies a quality of permanence- persisting indefinitely.

### 4. Be-longing

This represents the fourth aspect of belongingness. Belongingness involves a deliberate decision to stay on by being. It is the will to persist and sustain its concrete

<sup>42</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 379-380.

<sup>43</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 378-379.

<sup>44</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

<sup>45</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

<sup>46</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

<sup>47</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 375.

existence. Iroegbu states that “This brings in, and stresses the personal element: the longing for life, for being and *Uwa*. To belong is to be in the desire for life. It is the will to march along in life.”<sup>48</sup> It rests on the understanding that life is of supreme value. The desire for life finds expression in the diverse names by which the Igbo people recognize and honour it, like *Nduka* (life is greater), *Ndubuisi* (life is the principal).<sup>49</sup>

Each of these themes of belongingness highlights the significance of being and in doing so, reveals that existence, at its core, is grounded in belonging. As Iroegbu puts it “Belongingness therefore defines a central cord of *Umunna*. In it each member finds a sense, a fulfilment and an existential integrity.”<sup>50</sup> From these themes, it emerges that once one is in harmony with being, turning away from its essential nature is no longer possible.

Pantaleon Iroegbu’s conception of God in Igbo metaphysics offers a culturally rooted understanding of the divine. God is presented as the ultimate source, sustainer and regulator of existence, through whom all beings come to being and participate in reality within an interconnected network of belonging. In this view, existence is fundamentally relational such that the moral, social and existential dimensions of life are essentially intertwined with the divine order.

This framework further holds that moral, social and existential dimensions of life are inseparable from this relational structure of being. Iroegbu’s thought shows that Igbo understanding of God is not merely theological but is also deeply rooted in metaphysical, ethical and communal dimensions that together form a holistic worldview. Ultimately, this worldview affirms that interconnectedness and communal belonging are essential aspects of both human and universal existence.

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<sup>48</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*, 376.

<sup>49</sup> P. Iroegbu. *METAPHYSICS: The Kpim of Philosophy*,

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<sup>50</sup> P. Iroegbu. *Appropriate ecclesiology: through narrative theology to an African church*, 92.