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This essay is taken from a part of the Dedication of the work
“The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and Beyond African Philosophy”

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An Igbo proverb states that *oha na azu nwa* i.e. childrearing is an affair of the community. What this means is that we are, largely, products of our environment and knowledge acquisition is a matter of concatenation of ideas made accessible to the mind through our surroundings. In other words, we are who we are through the complementarity of all the factors and actors that enter into our upbringing. To understand a person entails understanding all those factors and actors that combine to make a person who he is. Similarly, we understand a thought system better by reference to its ambience as the totality of the factors and actors that combine to give character to the system in question. Complementarism as a systematic methodological reflection about reality is thinkable only in terms of all those factors and actors that combine to make it possible. For this reason, I dedicate this work, in a general way, to all those actors and factors that played major roles in the course of the evolution of my thinking. A brief insight into my own personal ambience would definitely help drive home some of the ideas that shall be pursued in this work. I am doing this in full consciousness that philosophy must be a reflection of reality as lived experience.

The traditional African society is a very complex, and highly sophisticated society whose affairs were piloted by very intelligent and highly gifted individuals. I wish to bring this background nearer from the perspective of the Igbo traditional African society and more concretely still from my own immediate background. These experiences constitute a colossal pillar of support to this reflection. It is important to delve into this matter because there is often the temptation to imagine the traditional African as a simple-minded individual whose attitude to life is devoid of philosophical rigor. That is to say, that of someone who uncritically luxuriates on rich supply of immutable ideas based on myths and fables. Such erroneous ideas are occasioned by what I call *picture type fallacy*. Here Basden observes, “We sometime hear of good folk who talk of the ‘simple life’ of the unsophisticated African...Never was there a greater error than to think that a native can live a ‘simple’ life as the expression is commonly understood” (Basden, Niger Ibos xvi). The affairs of this society were piloted by enlightened, intelligent, influential, ambitious and highly organised and gifted individuals and groups who were very much capable of independent and creative thinking. This is the ambience of my inspiration.

Whenever I travel home to my village of residence, Ndiakunwanta Uno Arondizuogu, in Ideato North Local Government of Imo State, my attention is always drawn to the ancestral house (*obi*) of Mazi Okoli Idozuka, which is located about 300 meters from my compound. An inscription on the front wall of this compound is very striking. It reads, “This is the compound of Mazi Okoli Idozuka the great legend.” A great legend he was, if one were to stop at this description. He was a great warrior whose war name was *Agadagbachiriuzo* (The huge tree trunk that blocks the way). Our people understand his position as that of the Chief of Staff of the founder of my village Mazi Akunwanta himself. I grew up with stories about this legend and tales about how he and his troops widened the boundaries of my village some 180 years ago. This Okoli Idozuka is the same man as Okoro Idozuka the father of Nwankwo Okoro. Many who

immigrated to Aro territories change their names to their Aro equivalent. Thus, many who answered Okoli were called Okoro in the Aro territories. Elizabeth Isichei in her renowned “History of the Igbo People” paradoxically designates some of these influential figures, from the perspective of our modern thinking, as “robber barons.” This is an instance of error of transposition as shall be discussed in this work. Thus, she writes:

“The history of the wealthy state of Arondizuogu provides similar examples of robber barons: Nwankwo Okoro was the first son of Okoro Idozuka...At the age of 21 he joined his father on slave trade...He killed anybody who came across his way...He once said ‘I must visit any town that crosses my way and nothing will prevent me from attacking them with my great troops’ ...By collecting slaves and war-captives he was able to build a very large family. When the British came, they made him a Warrant Chief” (105).

Isichei’s allusion to “robber barons” must be viewed with utmost caution. The time these people lived was different and their lives were governed by very different laws and indeed by the law of “an eye for an eye.” One can safely say that theirs was a situation of lived ambivalence.

The Aro colonies in the olden days, including Arondizuogu, stood in principle for peace, justice, progress, development, social harmony and protection of the weak and the oppressed. This is why many communities welcomed the Aros in their midst and accorded them all the rights and privileges of residence.

Arondizuogu, my town, was founded by Mazi Izuogu Ogbunukpo and Mazi IHEME. Izuogu Ogbunukpo was a big slave merchant who came from Arochukwu, in Arochukwu Local Government in the present Abia state. IHEME himself was his Chief Servant and he came from Isi-Akpu Nise, in Awka South in the present Anambra State. IHEME settled at Arondizuogu and his master Izuogu joined him, and both are regarded as the founders of Arondizuogu. With time, Izuogu and his people united with IHEME and his people to form the great union that is Arondizuogu based on the principles of mutual complementation.

They found themselves within the traditional African historical epoch and at the inception of transition from traditional African society to modernity. It was a time of redefinition and readjustment. It was a time when what it took to define personal interest touched *tangentially* on the common good, in the same way religion touches on reason. They never meet and they are never separated.

At this historical epoch, the common good, might and right were intertwined in an intricate complex fashion that needs a well-grounded explicative index. This index we find in the idea of the law of self-preservation. In other words, for these people one visible law was in force, that is to say, the law of self-preservation and it was often interpreted to favour the dictates of the ego. People undertook everything they deemed appropriate to preserve themselves; their lives, their property, their glory, their honour, and anything they considered important. Hence, the common good is that which helps the individual uphold the ego.

It was in this spirit that Mazi Izuogu Ogbunukpo and his troops razed the town of Ora. The people of Ora were alleged to have insulted him (Igwegbe 83). The town Ora about eight kilometres from Okigwe on your way to Onitsha on the Okigwe – Onitsha highway, exists today only in name. The inhabitants were virtually sent into extinction by Izuogu and his men, in the middle of the 18th century. The place is called today Ikpa Ora; that is the wilderness of Ora. Human nature hardly changes in view of our natural propensity to serve our interests first most especially in asymmetrical situations of life and in ambivalent situations of this type. For this reason, we have the obligation to understand and explain such occurrences properly, within their context, in view of taking necessary measures towards forestalling such occurrence in the future.

Most traditional African societies found themselves in this form of ambivalent situations and here power was often misused to the advantage of the strong and crafty in asymmetrical situations. In such situations, human beings often tend to define the common good to include those interests that are shared by a closed circle of individuals. All these weaknesses notwithstanding, many still view the traditional African society as a society that by far supersedes our contemporary African societies in matters of adherence to and respect for basic human values. For many also, the traditional African society has a higher developed sense of the common good than our contemporary African societies. For these individuals, traditional African societies show stronger sense of high moral uprightness, of social harmony, mutual respect, high

sense of values and of respect for human dignity, etc.

My granduncle Udorji Mmelonye (1858-1983) is a typical example of those who share this view. He had good experience of both the traditional and contemporary African societies. He was a prison warden in 1910. In comparison to our times, one of his greatest regrets during the evening days of his life was that people of substance had all died. He enthuses often and in bitter regrets “mmadu anwuchana ihe nọzi ugbua bụ sọ enwe enwe” i.e. real human beings are now dead. He considered the calibre of people living in our age as lacking in substance. We can consider these thoughts as typical of the type of romanticism and nostalgia that we attach to issues that touch our hearts.

In spite of all, one has the deep feeling that his time was different, but remarkable. He was caught in the depth of transition from traditional African society to modernity. The traditional African society was a time full of ambivalences. It was a time of slave trade, subjugation, conquest, and domination. It was equally a time of protection of rights of citizens, a time for togetherness, genuine love for family and community, a time where people upheld the sanctity of the common good and transgressed gravely against the same outside the boundaries of their communities. It was often an encounter between order and disorder, light and darkness, power and submission, religion and irreligion. In all cases, people tried to define the situation according to their understanding and acted in ways that were in consonance with their personal interests. This notwithstanding, it was a time when people were bound by their words and adhered strictly to the dictates of truth and justice and upheld the sacredness of covenants.

Okoro Idozuka, the great legend, and his troops extended the boundaries of my village because our neighbours the Isuokpụ (Umualaoma) people with whom he sealed a blood covenant killed one of his slave servants, a member of his household. Since the terms of the agreement were broken by the other party, he resorted to full-scale war. The parameters of definition of terms as it related to civility and barbarity, between order and disorder, life and death, conservation and destruction, mercy and leniency etc. were often not well defined in the consciousness of people since all these values were deeply intermingled with people's personal interests.

We can then understand some of the extreme measures taken to conserve the communities, in traditional African societies, even if it entailed embarking on human sacrifice. It was a time of lived ambivalence. This ambivalence found further expression in the clash between colonialism and traditional African life. Here, each institution tried to define human happiness and human values according to its paradigms of understanding and in keeping with the interests driving it. Personal interests played so much role that what it took to subjugate whole nations was what was equally needed to pacify them. We can then understand why the colonial administrators, in their wisdom, found it expedient to engage, as Warrant Chiefs the very people Isichei called “robber barons” as veritable instruments of law and order.

This is how Nwankwo Okoro became a Warrant Chief. His father, Okoro Idozuka, remains a great legend that he was.

Akunwanta my village, which Okoro Idozuka helped to found, was an immigrant land of tolerance since it absorbed people, from all over Igboland, but mostly from the present Anambra State, who sought refuge in Aro territories. Okoro Idozuka himself was such an immigrant from Anambra State so also Akunwanta. My great grandfather Mmelonye was one of the beneficiaries of this tolerance. He was born about the year 1819 at Nise to Mazi Ezenweneke of the greater Adoji family of Nise in Ngodo, Awka South Anambra State. Akunwanta, as a village, has ever flourished due to the type of mutual complementary spirit that exists among all the immigrants. This exceptional spirit of complementarity and mutuality has always been the foundation of the survival of my people in the olden times. It was a life devoid of excessive selfishness in which personal survival was intricately related to the common good. A simple example suffices. This relates to an incident that nearly ruined Mazi Okoro Idozuka himself. About the year 1819, in order to discredit Okoro Idozuka, some people accused him of abduction of some human beings. To salvage his honour, he consented to take the highest oath obtainable in the land in those days. This was the so-called *seven big oaths (alusi asaa or ita alusi asaa)*. Here a person was required to swear to the gods on his own head but he had also to join the fate of six other people closest to him to underline his innocence. Should the accused be guilty, the gods would not kill only him but also all those joined in the oath.

Mazi Okoli Idozuka's relatives were defined to include those from his immediate household and

all male children born in Akunwanta soil. When Mazi Okoro Idozuka was ready to take this big oath, he looked for six more males to join him to make up the required number seven. Unfortunately, he could not find the sixth male person from among members of his immediate household. By this time, Mmelonye, my great grandfather, had married Mmaku, a girl from Neni, in Anambra state. He rescued Okoro Idozuka from this difficulty by offering that his son, Agosi, just born in his land of immigration be among those to take the oath. Agosi thus became the sixth person to be added for the big oath. Since his accusers were not able to substantiate their allegations, the charges against Okoro Idozuka were dropped.

What is striking about this incident is not only the solidarity that existed among members of the community but also the complex way in which certain principles were understood and pursued. It is worthy of note how the principles governing citizenship were defined and clearly understood within this seemingly primitive society. Mmelonye was not eligible as a candidate for the big oath because he came from Nise as an immigrant and he was not born in Akunwanta soil. All immigrants were regarded as citizens but only those born in the land of immigration had certain unique rights and privileges as indigenes.

One can characterise the authentic Igbo spirit as the spirit of complementarity (*ibu anyi danda*). This has helped the Igbo surmount all difficulties in the olden times. It is a spirit borne by mutual support and captured by such common Igbo adages *Igwe bu ike, njiko ka*, etc. Arondizuogu, as the biggest Aro colony, is a land of immigrants and this spirit contributed much to her greatness. Due to the vast opportunities and security it offered, it attracted adventurers and young men looking for better conditions of living or for greener pastures as we say today. Many availed themselves of this opportunity of forming a strong union of mutual interacting and complementary units as is epitomised by the nineteen villages of which Arondizuogu is constituted. Almost all the immigrants came with their gods such that in Arondizuogu you have gods, shrines etc. in all forms, and colours. All live in peace and harmony and in true spirit of complementarity understood as mutual service. This idea of exploring fully the multi-dimensional and varied nature of their situation enabled the Aros of this colony to achieve very enviable heights. The Aro colonies were the free world of old in Igboland and they were some of the rare places in Igboland where people could build their existence without molestation and undue social constraints. It is for this reasons, for example, that “the ‘Osu’ institution does not exist in Arondizuogu, neither does the ‘Ume’”. Here is a clear case of flawless unity, despite historical diversities; mutual blend or synthesis of the cultural values of our complex Igbo race” (Okoro 30).

With the destruction of the long-juju of Arochukwu by the British, during the Arochukwu expedition (1901-1902), the general feeling was that “the Aros have received a knock-out blow, from which their chances of recovery appear to be rather remote” (Among the Ibos of the Niger 209).

Contrary to these doubts, the Aros excelled soon after the abolition of slave trade and got themselves well established early in all areas of endeavour, in politics, in commerce, in education etc. They were able to do this due to their unflinching adherence to the spirit of complementarity as is exemplified in their close relationship to each other. Thus, my father went to the commercial city of Aba early in 1931 and joined his cousin Mazi Moses Nwankwo in his trade as apprentice tailor. Their success depended on their strict adherence to the authentic Igbo spirit of complementarity. This is epitomised in the Aro process of training young people to a trade and here, the young person “would first serve a short period of apprenticeship during which he would learn and observe the secret doctrine of ‘Our rod is our truth, and our truth is our wealth’” (Igwegbe 51). Adhering strictly to this rule, like many enterprising Igbos of his time, my father soon discovered the world beyond the confines of Aba and Nigeria and established business connections with Europe and Asia.

He traded with Reykjavik Iceland and was a major representative, in Nigeria, of the Union of Stockfish Producers, Reykjavik Iceland in the late 50s and early 60s of the 20th century. He made business travels to Iceland (Reykjavik), Scotland, Norway in 1961 to deepen his business connection. These business contacts brought members of our family close with the Western world and Asia early. Mr. Thoroddur Jonsson, Hafnarstraeti 15, Reykjavik Iceland, and many other Europeans merchants were regular guests at our Aba residence, so also were many Indians in the late 50s and early 60s of the 20th century. These contacts naturally revealed to me early how common folks can resemble themselves in their struggle to address most basic needs towards self-preservation. Besides, it helps us understand better that human

beings can resemble themselves in their insufficiency and are infinitely dependent on others to be themselves. Here, the Igbo adage that human beings are gods to their fellow human beings comes true (mmadu bu chi ibeya). The case of an Indian merchant is a typical example but not exceptional. This man suffered heavy business losses due to his own personal miscalculations. He spent the whole day brooding desperately over his losses in my father's shop. To comfort him, my father offered him a deal to enable him recoup some of his losses. This he readily accepted. I can still see in my mind's eyes how this idea brought this man instant relief.

My father's business, most especially with Reykjavik, was built on the simple maxims of transparency and fellow feeling, compassion, complementarity and mutual confidence. In practical terms, this entailed that goods were shipped to him from Iceland, he organised traders on the spot at Aba. These collected the wares on credit for distribution. After they sold the wares, the money was remitted to Reykjavik. Everyone understood the rule of the game and endeavoured to abide by it. Many prospered from what they regard as my father's large-heartedness. However, a puzzle presents itself here: Who is here to be called large-hearted? Is it the man in Iceland or the traders who made their returns promptly and in all honesty or my father who was dependent on both? The issue is that all understood that their interests were at stake. They understood that to preserve their interests they must take the interests of others into account. They were following the basic rule of self-preservation since their existence was at stake, the welfare of their families, their honour, and their prosperity. You help me preserve my interest and I help you secure your interests, this is the basic rule of human co-existence in society. Wherever this basic rule is flouted, human societies start to die a natural death. It was an efficient business built on very simple but necessary rule of healthy human relationship devoid of complications. Hardly did my father experience cases of fraud, because everyone identified the whole transaction as the common good that must be upheld. Each partner understood that any attempt to subvert the arrangement was suicidal. Human societies and nations can be compared to business operations; the moment the basic rules underlying these operations are undermined that is the moment, also they are subjugated to undue tension. With regard to my father's business, all whose interests were at stake discovered the fact of mutual indebtedness and interdependence in complementarity as a fundamental axiom of human co-habitation. They built their existence on the assumption that *consequent self-interest is anti-self interest*.

Most of the great achievements during the transition period from traditional African society to modernity were facilitated by this spirit of trust and complementarity. Igbos were among those who persisted on adhering to the demands of this traditional African principle. For this reason, they recorded enormous and unprecedented rapid progress, within the context of Nigerian history most especially of Nigerian economic history. This is the genuine Igbo spirit of *Ibu anyi danda*. Thus in the research conducted by Dr. Onyemelukwe in the early sixties of the twentieth century he sheds light on this fact. Here, "he describes the mutual trust and cooperation existing between the Igbos of the Diaspora and those at home. They would often avoid a tiring dangerous journey by consigning unaccompanied goods to each other – which were safely delivered by Igbo lorry drivers, or sent large sums of money by the same drivers. Often their consignments were only partially prepaid. The traders of Onitsha would sometimes make interest-free unsecured loans to each other – a remarkable index of honesty and generosity" (Isichei 214).

What we can infer from this is that wherever the spirit of complementarity is in place social organisations and communities are more likely to perform their duties well and achieve more easily set objectives. Likewise, human being are more in a position to live a contented and richer existence since they live in the complementarity of the variety and multidimensionality that is characteristic of human existential situations.

The Igbos, like many Africans, have always built their lives on the spirit of complementarity and this spirit has helped them surmount untold difficulties in their history. A typical example is the Biafran war, which the Igbos fought with a united spirit and in complementation of their efforts. The Nigerian political history since the 70s of the 20th century is characterised by a very weak Igbo impact because of their noticeable departure from this spirit to a vile form of individualism. The same thing holds true of many African nations. In comparison to the 50s and early 60 of the 20th century, the African spirit of our time in the 21st century can be characterised safely as excessively individualistic and egocentric. Here,

most contemporary Africans persist in defining their personal interests outside the legitimacy provided by the common good. One is not surprised at the outcome of this radical departure from the complementary spirit of traditional African society. Hardly can a people prosper and be great where they are not able to identify their private interests as integral part of the common good in true spirit of harmonious complementarity.

This lesson escapes most modern African nations in their attempts to build human society today. Wherever a person or society lives from the maxim of consequent self-interest devoid of any regard for the common good, it soon finds itself in an artificial state of war and terror. Many modern African states find themselves in this type of artificial state of war in the areas of business, politics, administration, and mutual co-existence.

The almost comatose situation we experience today in Nigeria is a gradual development that started in full force soon after the attainment of independence in 1960. Before then, the principle of complementarity played a major role in the way people interacted with each other. This is reflected in almost all facets of life but most especially in people's attitude to work and to the common good. A simple example suffices to illustrate this point.

Besides the experience of honesty in human relationship that is epitomised in business transactions, I grew up to know government workers as "public servants." They were called public servants and this they were in the true sense of the word. These public servants worked selflessly and identified their interests with the common good. They made basic infrastructure function in most emerging townships under the colonial administration. A typical example was *The Public Works Department (PWD)*, the equivalent of our Ministry of Works today. The cadre of workers in this service was drawn from many who were imbued with remnants of authentic traditional African spirit of solidarity and complementarity. Since they operated in this spirit, things worked the way they should work in most townships. The administration of people and institutions was a thing of joy, people had joy doing things, and the little things of life invited people to joy.

This form of life in the late 50s and early 60s of the 20th century was almost the norm. The villages were not left out since they radiated the type of life that was characterised by we-feeling and co-authentication. People at this time evidently had very little. Strikingly, there is every reason to conclude that they were very rich. They lived from the richness of their being and not from the emptiness of their egoism. One who made these experiences would feel it certainly still in the depth of his being as a transcendent complementary experience. It is out of this deep-seated feeling that one, in retrospect, understands the spirit driving those who mourned the dead and the way they did it. Here, in Igboland, people wept over the dead the African or Igbo way. It was a captivating type of lamentation or moaning. You can hardly try this today without taking some energy boosting concoctions. The same thing is applicable to the traditional African way of welcoming relatives back home. Here, a person was almost wrestled to the ground in the name of hogging and with evident tears of joy. We cannot dismiss these gestures as emotional outbursts without much significance. A human society runs dry and is stressed the moment the very cord of compassion and we-feeling is broken. Such a situation easily breeds all forms of deviant behaviours and insensitivity to human needs.

The substance of these experiences is not unique to traditional African societies, they characterise human societies wherever human beings understand that their survival depends on their ability to reach out to others like themselves. This discovery of the personhood of the other is one of the greatest changes that can take place in the mind. Where this change has not taken place, the human mind easily reverts to a hidden potential danger. We can then understand the futility of searching for the weapons of mass destruction in the deserts and laboratories of terrorists and rogue states, imagining that they are hidden in the wilderness. Such weapons are hidden in the minds of individuals and groups who have not undergone the type of transformation that the discovery of the experience of transcendent complementary unity of consciousness brings. Thus, our ability to change or reform the world largely depends on our ability to acquire an accommodating comprehensive mindset that is in tune with the demands of the principle of complementarity. The higher this sense is developed in a person or in a society, the more such individuals, or such groups are in a position to achieve set objectives.

I make this observation judging also from my experiences during my student days overseas in

Austria. The same is applicable during my travels in Europe most especially in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland and during my travels to USA, USSR, Italy, France, England, Bulgaria, Israel, Belgium, etc.

The type of warmth and support I received as a young student in Austria and in my dealings with many people internationally make me believe that the differences existing between human beings can be surmounted by very little effort and if we allow the limitations of being to be the cause of our joy. This is the joy of being as it belongs to our ability to derive joy from the fragmentation of historical existence and not absolutise relativity. The idea of complementarity serves as a bridge between human beings and between societies in their insufficiency. Wherever this idea is discovered and treasured, human beings are capable of enriching themselves mutually from the abundance of their goodness and they can even see their weaknesses as opportunities to influence their world positively. Mutual dependence, solidarity, truthfulness, care, warmth are fundamental human values that belong necessarily to our natural sense of self-preservation. Where these values are discovered and shared in a transcendent complementary experience, they can become veritable instruments of authentic self-actualisation. All human beings are capable of discovering their intrinsic worth since they are no inventions of any culture. However, all cultures have all it takes to lose them due to prejudice, suspicion, undue competition, unbridled selfishness, and intolerance, lack of foresight, and lack of high-developed sense for the common good. Wherever regard for these values is lacking, human existence can easily turn to mere hostile struggle where each people devise every strategy to edge others out in the erroneous belief that they can preserve their interests by negating the interests of other. *All forms of selfishness derive from the ignorance that they are anti-self-interest* since we cannot realise our interests in the exclusion of the interests of others. There is ample evidence that this idea, which is no invention of any culture, forms the foundation of traditional African interpersonal relationship in a very significant but not exclusive manner. This book explores the idea of complementarity from its rich traditional African background and seeks to overcome some of the weaknesses associated with its use in this ambience.