

## IGBO TRADITIONAL ETHICS: A CRITIQUE OF KANT'S IDEA OF AFRICAN RATIONAL MORALITY

**Paulinus Chikwado Ejeh, PhD**

Philosophy Unit,

General Studies Division,

Caritas University, Amorji-Nike, Enugu, Nigeria

[ejehpaulo@gmail.com](mailto:ejehpaulo@gmail.com); 07038546333

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### **Abstract**

*The basic principle of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy is that reason is the foundation or basis of our status as moral agents. Capitalizing on this, Kant implicitly excluded Africans and other races apart from the white race from the status of moral agents because in his rather neglected or forgotten works – anthropology and physical geography, Kant had alluded that Africans lack rationality because of their race and skin colour. This paper interrogates the authenticity of Kant's cultural framework upon which he constructed a rational morality which excludes Africa from the scheme of things. Hence, the paper is a refutation of the Kantian position, drawing insights from the Igbo traditional moral thinking. In what follows, I argue that the Kantian project aimed at the exclusion of Africa from the universal rationality is quite contradictory and grossly misconstrued.*

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Morality, Igbo, Rationality, Agents.

### **Introduction**

One of the greatest challenges Africans have consistently faced is the location of affirmation of their true identity. This has become a burden that affects every aspect of the African life because presently, the richness of African identity is not dependent on what Africans make of it but is dependent on what the American or European says it is or it should be. And since Africans have no unique identity of their own, they become whoever the European or American says they are. This is why Immanuel Kant could not resist the temptation of denying and prepositioning Africans as a people with no mental ability. Before Kant, the African predicament began with a racial distinction of colours; however, it is now evident in Kant's theses that this predicament has transcended from raciality into the mind; rejecting and denying Africans the very natural quality that makes a being human.

Kant's writings alongside his predecessors' gave credence to slavery and colonialism. The effects of slavery and colonization in Africa are so monumental that generations of unborn Africans would still be affected by

them, if not checkmated. Unfortunately and truthfully, colonialism in all its forms cannot be over in Africa until all colonial and racial thoughts, ideologies, views and decrees are dealt with and removed from the vocabulary of the people who use them as tools for control and dominance. From time to time, we allude to and lament over the evils and destructions caused by the European colonization of the African continent. We even write books and academic papers on how Europe underdeveloped Africa. But somehow, we overlook or forget that the root of colonialism is the denial of African rationality and morality. Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher and one of the mouth-piece of the European think-tanks, had illogically argued that Africans have no rationality. For him, rationality is the basis of our human morality. In other words, to be rational is to be moral. Therefore, since for Kant, Africans lack rationality, then they are not moral human beings. It is this erroneous understanding of African's rationality that gave backings to the colonial masters to enslave Africans and treat them sub-humanly.

It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to address the issue of rationality as it concerns Africans, viz-a-viz morality in the Igbo traditional world-view, as well as draw attention to the truth that rationality is a universal feature of all human beings irrespective of race, colour, tradition, custom, beliefs or religion. And as such, it is illogical and contradictory to deny a section of humanity the very essential characteristic which is universal and common to all beings. This is because traditional society everywhere exhibits a unity in the expression of its political, economic and cultural life with religion and morality as the unifying force (Herskovits, 1952). Hence, as Uzodimma Nwala (2010:15) rightly noted, "no rational individual and no organized community is without a stock of knowledge or wisdom, showing what he or the community thinks and believes about life and the nature of things." From this point of view, we maintain therefore, that rationality or the ability to think is a natural quality of man which is in every human being regardless of his race, colour, religion, tradition or customs.

### **Kant's Idea of Rational Morality**

Immanuel Kant was a product of the Enlightenment - the age of reason. He believes in the rationality of man and seeks to develop the notion of a rational morality as opposed to a theological morality. He works with the conception of man as essentially a rational animal. As applied to man, we understand rational to mean two things: (1) the power to discover what is the case, and to guide conduct by such knowledge, and (2) the power to discover what ought to be the case and to guide conduct by such knowledge.

Kant was a moral rationalist who believes that purely rational procedures could show us what we ought to do and he also thought that reason can show us how we must act to escape from determinism and to achieve freedom and autonomy. Consequently, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explores the implications of a priori knowledge. According to him, if you admit that there is any rational knowledge, then you must admit that it is a priori in character; and if you admit that there is any rational morality, you must admit that it is a priori in character. Thus if you admit that there is any rational knowledge, you must recognize that it is binding on all rational beings. For Kant, rational knowledge and rational morality are facts to be recognized and not hypothesis to be proved. Hence, rational morality for Kant is a priori. In other words, morality is discovered by reason or put simply, morality is grounded in reason. Kant's aim is to separate anthropology which is empirical in nature from ethics which is metaphysical in nature in order to ground obligation a priori in reason. Hence, for Kant, the notion of rightness of action is grounded a priori in reason. The implication is that we discover what is right or wrong simply by pure reason. Hence morality is the function of practical reason.

The problem with Kant's choice of rationality as the source of morality is not that he excludes other means or sources by which man can discover the rightness or wrongness of an action, such as religion or God, intuition, social customs as in the case with the Igbo traditional world-view and the rest of Africa, but that having established that rationality is the basis or foundation of morality and that it applies to all human beings, Kant goes ahead to deny Africans and other non-European races the same rationality which he says applies to all humans. In the classifications of the different human races, Kant writes of the black people thus:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art and science or any other praise-worthy quality even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between the

two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour (Kant, 1960).

This particular reference to Africans' lack of rationality has led many writers to accuse Kant of racism. Kant's assertion that Africans lack rationality would have been dismissed as a mistake or aberration if he had not tried to scientifically justify the superiority of European race over and above every other race, particularly the African race. However, rather than accuse Kant of being a racist or bemoan and lament over Kant's racial views against Africa, we should rather counter Kant's argument with superior arguments with regards to African rational morality. In other words, using the Igbo conception of morality or moral living, we shall argue and show that Africans are rational moral beings, and that Kant is not only a product of his time (a period in which Europe knew little or nothing about Africa and African people), but also misinformed and ignorant of the true nature of Africa and African people.

### **Moral Thinking in Igbo Traditional World-View**

Like in other African societies, the level of moral thinking was very high in the traditional Igbo societies. In the Igbo language, for example, varieties of words abound, which are used to denote or express approval and disapproval; good and bad; right and wrong; pleasant and unpleasant acts. Words such as "aru" (evil) and "nma" (good/right) all embody moral connotations. In Igbo, "ime aru" means to commit or to do what is evil; while "ime nma" means to conduct oneself or to behave in a morally or worthy manner. An individual is termed or called "onye aruru ala" - one who commits or pollutes the land when his or her behaviour runs contrary to or is not in accordance with the community's approved code of conduct. On the other hand, a person is considered "onye omen ma" or "onye ezigbo omume" - one who does good or a good person, when his/her ethical conduct agrees with or conforms with the ethically approved codes of the society. The Igbos also use the expression "ajo mmadu" to describe a bad person when the individual's conducts run contrary to the established code of conducts in the community. The word "ajo" can mean both bad and evil. Hence "ajo" (bad) is the opposite of "nma" (good) and they can be applied to humans when the morality of the person's act is questioned, and to things when describing a bad situation. For instance, when the Igbos say "ajo mmadu", it is not the same as when they say "ajo ife"; for "ajo mmadu" describes the moral bankruptcy of an individual, while "ajo ife" describes the lack of goodness in a thing or situation. These two may seem to be the same, but they are not because, the morality attached to a thing (ife) is only in reference to or in reaction to humans approval or disapproval of that particular

thing (ife); while when directed to a person, it calls for a total evaluation of the person's moral conduct.

In Igbo land, "ala" or land/earth is held very sacred because it is believed to possess some form of divine sanctity or holiness. For this reason, an individual can either please or displease the preternatural forces that indwell it. When one offends the preternatural forces or when one abominates the land, he is said to have polluted the land and is expected to appease the land with some prescribed rites and rituals according to the custom of the land as a sign of repentance and deterrence for future occurrence. This is done in order to restore the relationship between the people and the land as the abode of the ancestors, the sustainer of soil fertility, the progress of human life as well as the health of animals, plants and other beings that inhabit h physical land/earth.

From the ongoing, it is clear that in the Igbo traditional worldview, there is a clear-cut understanding of the importance and role of moral living or morality in the community. Hence, the word "nma" conveys the idea of goodness or the idea of acting in a morally appropriate manner. In this sense, the Igbo is expected to act and conduct himself/herself in a morally and befitting manner. Thus, within the Igbo traditional society, a moral person is he/she who avoids evils and lives in harmony with his fellow human beings; a person who lives a good life (ezi ndu) or virtuous life, the life of rectitude and approbation.

In the Igbo traditional world-view, the standard of moral judgment is rooted in the social and religious customs of the people. As C.C. Okorochoa rightly noted, the traditional Igbo moral code is based on the concept of what the Igbos call "omenala" - tradition or social custom. This omenala or tradition/custom prescribes actions that are good and to be pursued and others that are bad and to be avoided. This is why Okorochoa (1987) avers that "the moral code of [Ibo] land commonly spoken of as "omenala" defines the various aspects of behaviour and social activities that are approved while those aspects that are disapproved are prohibited." This omenala is the means by which the social ethos is measured and values of the society controlled from one generation to another and the process of socialization through which the education of the young ones are facilitated. Hence the norm of right or wrong is, for the traditional Igbo society, the social custom or "omenala". And it is the means by which the traditional Igbo society enforces conformity to its rules of life.

Like in most African societies, the nature of traditional Igbo morality was purely and basically communalistic. Hence what affects one affects all; and

what affects all affects one. This is why virtue and goodness are seen as means of realizing the social harmony of the society; for they promote peace, order and a feeling of brotherhood and belongingness. Thus, morality in traditional Igbo society is basically concerned with society and with the relations between men and their fellow men.

### **Igbo Rational Morality**

The Igbos, and in general, the Africans believe in the transition of the human existence from the mundane to the divine essence. Their belief in an after-life of some sort, and the hope of attaining to the enviable status of departed ancestors is an incentive to living morally worthy lives in the community. Such beliefs ultimately served as an aid for Igbos as well as for traditional Africans to live morally worthy lives. Morality for the Igbos as well as for the rest of Africa is based mainly on the reward of a good life after death. That is, the Igbos believe that moral living admits one into the class of ancestors after this life, while lack of it disqualifies one from attaining the status of ancestorship. In fact, the fear that the soul of an immoral man hovers and wanders in the void after death instead of resting with the ancestors is a strong push or motivation for moral living among the Igbos. In Kant's view, this is not proper or does not merit moral worthiness. For Kant, our action must arise from the motive of duty. In other words, we must act because it is our duty and not because we hope to gain certain benefits. Hence all moral action must result from the sense of duty and nothing more. But then, is it really possible to act morally without hoping to gain something in return no matter how insignificant or grand? Even the Christian morality is based on a reward or punishment of a sort, like that of the Igbos. And in reality, as humans, there is hardly any moral act that we perform that has no string attached to it. Mostly, we perform most of our actions because we hope to be rewarded by God (if we are believers) or by people either through praise or acceptance as a good person. Even if none of the above applies to our motive for acting morally, at least, we sometimes perform morally good action for personal satisfaction or self-fulfillment. In which case, we still perform certain actions for a reason. Even Kant's method of acting only for the sake of duty is also for a reason, namely duty – it is my duty to do this, so I do it because it is what duty demands from me.

Morality or moral living in the Igbo traditional world-view is a reality that is apparent and can be seen in the way the Igbos live their lives.; in their proverbs and phrases, statements, words, and in their folklores. The Igbos believe that “*agbata onye bu nwanneya*”, meaning that ones neighbour is his relation. The implication of this statement is that one should always be nice or relate cordially

and morally towards his neighbours. The Igbo statements such as “Eziokwu bu ndu” – truth is life, which enjoins the individual to always tell the truth in order to live long, is an indication of how much the Igbos value moral living. Hence they link or liken truth telling (sincerity, honesty, morality) to life itself. It is in line with the biblical injunction: “honour thy father and mother so that thy days will be long”. The Igbos also believe that truth telling brings or sustains life. Therefore, he who desires life must embrace or tell the truth always.

### **Igbo Traditional Morality Proves Africa’s Rationality**

As already noted, this paper is a reaction to Immanuel Kant’s anthropological and ethical postulations that Africans are not rational and therefore not moral agents. Kant, following the footsteps of his predecessors jumped into an illogical and irrational conclusion that Africans are not thinking beings. Like his predecessors, Kant did not take into considerations the diverse, complex and evolving nature of humans which allows for individuals and races to be different and unique in their own way. Hence to conclude as Kant concluded that Africans are not rational is simply to demonstrate one’s ignorance of the very significant quality or characteristic of human beings. This is because if rationality is a general quality or characteristic of all conscious beings, then it is wrong for Kant or anyone else to take a particular race out of the class of human beings and deny them rationality.

In traditional logic, a simple syllogism such as the following should have informed Kant’s thought of the very fact that what is true of a whole is equally true of its parts:

All human beings are mortal.

Germans are human beings.

Therefore, Germans are mortals.

We can extend the above syllogism to Africa thus:

All human beings are mortal.

Africans are human beings.

Therefore, Africans are mortal.

We can also form a similar syllogism thus:

All human beings are rational.

Africans are human beings.

Therefore, Africans are rational.

Kant did not deny that Africans are not human beings; he rather says that Africans are not rational beings. He concedes that Africans can be educated only as servants. In other words, Africans are only fit to be educated for the purpose of serving the white Europeans. However, in denying Africans rationality, Kant implicitly denies that Africans are human beings. But then, Kant's main argument centers more on establishing that Africans are not rational than on whether they are not humans. This is because Kant understands that Africans are human beings but a type of human beings that are not rational like his European brethren. It is for this reason that we find it quite surprising that Kant missed or ignored the rules of simple logic as demonstrated above. Some writers including the present author, is of the opinion that the issue of rationality as raised by Kant and his predecessors against the Africans arose not from their ignorance or inability to comprehend human nature and logic, but rather from their calculated and prejudiced attempts to create a system of thought that would enable them to blacklist a particular race in order to have a reference to defend their nefarious desires to colonize, dominate and dehumanize the Africa people.

All the same, it is no longer news that Africans have in various ways and time proved that they are equally rational and moral beings like anyone else. This can be shown in their ways of life – the way they relate to one another and to those outside their immediate environment as aptly showcased in the Igbo traditional ethics. The Igbo traditional ethics as has been shown is the true embodiment of their rich cultural values and customs. The dos and don'ts as well as guides for living and relating with others are all spelt out in the Igbo traditional ethics. The Igbos value life above everything else. Taking innocent life or spilling of blood is a taboo and an abomination. Truth telling and uprightness are equally valued and rewarded. Adultery is forbidden, while incest and many other evils which Kant's European societies uphold and approve as good today such as homosexuality and lesbianism have been condemned by Igbo traditional ethics right from time. In Igbo traditional society, one is considered an upright man if he lives in accordance with the norms and tradition set down by the ancestors.

From the above, therefore, it is clear that the Igbos are moral beings, for it is only moral beings who can value truth, reject evil and accept good, as is typified in their traditional world-view. If the Igbos are not rational, then they cannot be moral, but since we have shown that they are moral beings, then they are equally rational beings. And since they are rational and moral beings, then Kant's proposition or theses that Africans (to which Igbos belong) are not



rational beings is not only false, but also erroneously misconstrued. Africans are therefore, rational beings and moral agents. If they were not rational and moral agents, they would have killed themselves long ago. They would not equally have philosophy and ethics as we have today.

### **Conclusion**

From the ongoing, it appears Kant is not aware of the implications of his theses on Africa. Kant denies rationality to Africans, implying inferior racial considerations, with numerous damaging effects on the African environment and social structures. The position of this paper is that such denigrating understanding of humanity as it relates to Africa is not only contradictory but must be refuted everywhere as we tried to do in this paper. Thus, we have been able to show, drawing insights from the Igbo traditional morality, that the Igbos and indeed all Africa are rational and moral beings. The Igbos of Africa not only have the idea of morality, but also strive to live morally. This, therefore, refutes and challenges fundamentally Kant's racially induced historic treatment of Africa. As a philosophical treatise, Kant's anthropological writings disrespect Africa's contribution to world civilization. His interpretation of Africa's place in world history as "a people who have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling" is a gross misrepresentation and misconception of a great continent to whom several scientific discoveries have shown that humanity most probably began in Africa.

Therefore, we have been able to show that Africans have in various ways exhibited the power to discover what is the case, and to guide conduct by such knowledge, as well as the power to discover what ought to be the case and to guide conduct by such knowledge – to develop a moral philosophy and morality. Needless to list the various activities engaged by Africans ranging from scientific inventions to discoveries which all point towards the very fact that Africans are rational and therefore not in any way different from the Europeans in terms of rationality and morality.

However, rather than accuse Kant of racism because of his myopic, ignoble, misinformed and illogical conclusion about the nature of Africans, we should rather excuse him for his ignorance and re-educate his Western brothers who followed his footsteps in disdain and denigrating Africa and African people. After all, an Igbo adage has it that: "Ife onye amaro kariri ya" meaning that what one does not know is greater than him. Kant lacked the knowledge of African rationality and morality because he never left his home town Königsberg in East Prussia, or what is now Kaliningrad, Russia throughout his

life; and he died at the age of eighty (80) years. However, some writers like Pauline Klenigard is of the opinion that Kant changed his views about Africa and became very cosmopolitan towards the end of his life. But whether he changed his views or not, the fact still remains that his views were evidentially unfounded as we have been able to demonstrate in this paper.

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