THE PERCEPTION OF SUICIDE IN IGBO RELIGION: A STUDY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SUICIDOLOGY

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Abstract
Suicide (igbu onwe) is a voluntary and intentional act of self destruction (mmadu iji aka ya gbue onwe ya). It is self-murder. In Igbo world view, it disrupts and disturbs the ontological order. In suicide, the self is the victim while in murder (Igbu ochu) the other is the victim. Both crimes are offensive to God, the Creator (Ezechiteoke), the earth goddess (ani, ana, al’) and the ancestors (ndi ichie, ndi nna nna) in Igbo Religion. This paper examines the perception of suicide in Igbo Religion and studies African Traditional Suicidology using Igbo cultural context as a specimen. Suicidology is the scientific study of self destructive behavioural patterns from ideation, through suicide plan to suicide attempt. Suicide ends in death as intended by self and for the self. Suicidology scientifically studies suicidal behaviours and suicide preventive measures. The findings of this paper show that suicide is an abomination (nso ani /nso ana, nso al’) in Igbo religion and it goes with purification or cleansing rituals (ikpu aru) at every instance in order to appease God, the gods, deities, the earth goddess and the ancestors. It found out too that suicide for altruistic reasons are termed heroic and celebrated as such in Igbo land. At some instances, the Igbo judicial process and traditional authority can approve, force or advise suicidal options for criminals who injuriously violate the social harmony of individuals and communities. However, these are exceptions in this case. There are in African Traditional Suicidology cultural perspectives to understanding suicidal behaviours and ways to prevent suicides. This paper recommends among others, the need to uphold life as supreme (ndu bu isi) and as precious (ndu ka). It urges Ndi Igbo to curb possible suicides in her population through excellent measures that exist in their traditional suicidology. It advocates further researches into suicidology from specific cultural contexts in order to avoid the fallacy of over-generalization and thus discover those risk factors prevalent in different cultural areas and their solutions within indigenous frames of reference. The methodology employed in this work is “culture area approach” which means that this study focused on Igbo cultural context as a homogenous fact within the generalized African cultures and studied its perception of suicide and suicidology from its religious perspective.

Keywords: Perception, Suicide, Igbo Religion, African Tradition and Suicidology

Introduction
The relevance of Suicidology as a subject in multi-disciplinary scholarship is obvious in today’s world and its turn of events. A great number of persons who, as it were, decided to choose suicide as a means to end their lives blame the society for their woes. So, suicide has gained global attention due to its frequent occurrences across cultures and continents. The statistics of suicide in America alone, for example, is very alarming as it happens on daily basis. The
phenomenon of self murder is also rampant in Europe with high rates of prevalence. In Asia and Africa, suicide is becoming a sure means of escape from earthly existence. According to Nock, M.K. et al (2008:3-4) “ suicide is an enormous public health problem in the United States and around the world. Each year over 30,000 people in the United States and approximately 1 million people worldwide die by suicide, making it one of the leading causes of death”. In African Traditional Societies, Suicide takes place with inadequate reportage of the number of persons involved. This paucity of data is informed by cultural prohibitions and inhibitions around the phenomenon of suicide in Africa. Suicide is a taboo in all African communities because of the way it is perceived from antiquities as a crime. This understanding has persisted with some high degrees of influence till today.

This paper discusses the perception of suicide in Igbo Religion. It has the objective and special interest to study this phenomenon too from the perspective of African Traditional Suicidology. Suicidology “is the scientific study of suicidal behaviour and suicide prevention” (Wikipedia, Suicidology P.1). Suicidal behaviours are classified into three specific kinds as suicide ideation that is, the contemplation and gestures that reveal the intention of suicide, suicide plan which means the possible specific method of choice arrived at ordinarily, to be the escape route from life; and suicide attempt which “refers to engagement in potentially self- injurious behaviour in which there is at least some intent to die” (Nock, M.K. et al (2008:5). Africans in their world view see every of their activities from a religious dimension. Whatever the African does as testified to by ethnographers, cultural anthropologists, experts in religion, sociologists, travelers and missionaries who studied them say that Africans are deeply religious. So, this implies that even suicide has to be understood from its religious significance in Africa. Suicide is not just a secular social affair among the African people. It is an event that involves the spiritual world, the spiritual beings, humanity and the entire cosmos. This is explainable by the facts of life coming to humanity as a divine gift. It also comes from the backgrounds of the eschatology and morality in Igbo Religion. Eschatology in the sense that the Igbo human person strives to join his ancestors and reincarnate when he surrenders to death which is wished to come at a ripe old age. Morality in the sense that among Igbo people (N’di Igbo) of South East Nigeria, suicide is not morally permissible. It is nso ani/nso al’. Therefore, it is a taboo subject among Igbo people and in all African indigenous communities. We shall try to study in some details those preventive measures found in the African cultures against suicide. However, the study will focus very largely on those preventive patterns that exist in Igbo land. These preventive measures constitute some critical aspects of African Traditional Suicidology.

It is important that Africans in their religious consciousness and affiliations go back to the primordial understanding of suicide from its social, moral, economic, philosophical and psychological dimensions as handed down from the ancient times. It is also essential that Africans maintain the social equilibrium that comes from the gains of extended family system. It is necessary, therefore, that Africans see the evil of suicide from the angles of the eternal worth of the human person. The anthropology of Igbo world view has much respect for the human person. The human person male or female is Mmadu whose metaphysics reveals that his or her deepest being, dignity and identity are connected with the divine. Therefore, Mmadu has body (aru), soul (nkpalodi) and spirit (Mmuo). These aspects of the human person that is, the co-principles that make up the human being are not all mortal as some aspects are immortal. So, life here on earth is temporary and mortal while real existence in that sense begins at death. These perceptions are tied to Igbo Religion which has provisions for funeral rites and ceremonies with which the dead are ushered into the spiritual realm. This common religious practice which is every one’s right, modus loquendi, is denied a suicide. This work shall have achieved its purpose when the modern minds comprehend from it the cultural values which Igbo Religion holds in its perception of suicide, the anthropology of the human person, the theistic origins of the human person and the eternal value of the human person. All these ideas are carefully guided by the morality and religiosity as found in Igbo world view. In Igbo land, therefore, suicide has violations of intra-personal harmony within the self, the social order, the cosmological unity and the humanity’s communion with the Divine as consequences. In the next section, we shall discuss suicide as perceived in Igbo Religion.

Suicide As Perceived In Igbo Religion

Suicide is igbu onwe which means self- killing. Suicide is different from murder which is igbu ochu. Killing which makes one’s own self the victim is suicide while killing that makes the other person the victim is murder. Therefore, the Igbo understanding of suicide is one killing himself or herself that is Mmadu igbu onwe ya which is shortened as igbu onwe. Both igbu onwe and igbu ochu are all perceived in Igbo Religion as abomination (aru) taboo (nso ani / nso a), crime (ajo ihe) and sin (njo). According to Agha, A.U. (2003:95), “Suicide is sin before God. Suicide is affective disorder.” Suicide goes with a lot of religious rituals at its instance. The sin of suicide, especially within the family circles, attracts the rites of cleansing (ikpu aru). It is believed that when these religious rituals of purification or cleansing are not done, then the earth goddess, the ancestors, God himself, the Chukwu Abiama and all in the spiritual realm would
be angry and they will visit the family or the entire community with a lot of afflictions, troubles and mishaps. Therefore, Igbo Religion handles this reconciliation and the attendant appeasements of the gods, supreme Being, Chukwu Abiama Ura (God), the ancestors and other spiritual beings. Igbo Religion perceives suicide as ndi ndu bu isi (life is precious), ndu bu isi (life is first, life is supreme) and so on. In this connection, therefore, igbu onwe and igbu ochu (murder) violate the morality and sanctity in Igbo religious metaphysics as both crimes are linked with shedding of blood (obara). In Igbo society, Obara is synonymous with life (ndu). This is expressed vividly in oath taking (inu iyi) or covenant making (igba ndu) where blood is licked as a symbolic surrender or donation of one’s life to the cause in question whose consequence is life or death. It is understood that any land that drinks blood cries for vengeance. What the land takes is water in order to make the soil fertile and not blood. In Igbo metaphysics of duality, the sky (igwe) is masculine and the earth (ala ani, al’) is feminine Nwoye, C.M.A (2011:307). The sky releases water which fertilizes the earth and the earth produces its fruits. This earth is a goddess which does not like to take the blood of her children. As a consequence, suicide is prohibited by Igbo religions as it is an offence against the ani, ana, al’ the earth goddess and Ezechiteoke God, the Creator and Giver of life.

African Traditional Suicidology: The Igbo Specimen

This study has the whole of Africa and its multi-variant cultural milieux in view. However, its focus is particularized on Igbo suicidology as a typical African specimen. In the words of Hjelmeland, H. (2010:34), “cultural research in suicidology is crucial in order to develop our understanding of the meanings of suicidal behaviour in different cultural contexts. It is important to focus on cultural issues in suicidological research and … have a cultural focus/perspective on the research”. One advantage on having specific cultural contexts such as the Igbo cultural area in South East Nigeria is to avoid the fallacy of over-generalization like assuming that the suicidal behaviours in the occidental West, for instance, are exactly the same in Igbo land. Research in suicidology from a cultural perspective can “mean both to study something within one cultural context and to compare something across different cultural contexts”. (Hjelmeland, H. (2010:35). Suicidology is a the science of self destructive behaviours” (Maris, Berman &Silverman, 2000: 62 citied by Calder, L., 2004:2). It is the scientific study of self destructive behavioural patterns from ideation, through suicide plan to suicide attempt. Suicidology scientifically studies suicidal behaviours and suicidal preventive measures. Suicide ends in death as intended by self and for the self. Suicide has dual meanings of event and victim. Edwin S. Schneidman (1918-2009), the father of contemporary suicidology noted that

The most evident fact about suicidology and suicidal events is that they are multidimensional, multifaceted, and multidisciplinary, containing as they do, concomitant biological, sociological, psychological (interpersonal and intra psychic), epidemiological and philosophical elements. From the view of the psychological factors in suicide, the key element in every case is the psychological pain: psychache. All affective states (such as rage, hostility, depression, shame guilt, affectlessness, hopelessness, etc.) are relevant to suicide only as they relate to unbearable psychological pain. No psychache, no suicide. In every case, the psychological pain is created and fueled by
frustrated psychological needs. There are modal psychological needs with which the person lives (and which define the personality) and there are vital psychological needs whose frustration cannot be tolerated (which define the suicide). Within an individual, these two kinds of needs are psychologically consistent with each other, although not necessarily the same as each other (Leenaars, A.A. (2010:9-10).

As Schneidman studied suicide from a psychological viewpoint and came out with the research finding in five words “Suicide is caused by psychache”, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), according to Crossman, A. (2017) maintained that “Suicide can be caused by social factors, not just individual psychological ones. The more socially integrated a person is connected to society and generally feeling that they belong and that their life makes sense within the social context, the less likely they are to commit suicide.” He presents Durkheim’s four types of suicide as Anomic suicide cared by “a sense of disconnection from society and a feeling of not belonging that result from weakened social cohesion”, Altruistic suicide prompted by “excessive regulation of individuals by social forces, such that a person will be moved to kill themselves for the benefit of a cause or for society at large;” Egoistic suicide occurs when people feel totally detached from society. Ordinarily, people are integrated into society by work roles, ties to family and other social bonds. When these bonds are weakened through retirement of loss or friends, the likelihood of egoistic suicide increases.” And finally, fatalistic suicide which happens “under conditions of extreme social regulation that result in oppressive conditions and denial of self and of agency…. Such as the case of suicide among prisoners”. The above scholars Schneidman and Durkheim contributed immensely to western suicidology from psycho-social contexts. In Igbo traditional suicidology, suicidal behaviours can as well be as a result of spiritual powers and attacks.

**Suicidal Behaviours In Igbo Suicidology**

There is oath taking (unu iyi) and covenant making (igba ndu) in Igbo Religion which helps to ensure trust, settle conflicts and restore peace. However, this religious exercise is believed to have caused a good number of deaths across the length and breadth of Igbo land. The spiritual arbiters; God, ancestors, deities invoked during the process hastens the defaulter’s death by visiting him with disease, affictions and death. Often times, the person who entered into the oath taking or covenant making by swearing falsely or who breached the agreement afterwards is induced by the gods to commit suicide. Such deities include Amadioha, Adoro Ero, Apo Opi, Arusi Ogwugwu, ube Uhun’owere and others. It is understood that these deities can make someone commit suicide (onye ahu ewere aka ya gbue onwe ya). There are afflictions from the gods such as madness, depression, despair, schizophrenia, confession of guilt and mental torture that precede the self-murder. Some deities include Amadioha, Adoro Ero, Apo Opi, Arusi Ogwugwu, ube Uhun’owere and others. It is understood that these deities can make someone commit suicide (onye ahu ewere aka ya gbue onwe ya). There are afflictions from the gods such as madness, depression, despair, schizophrenia, confession of guilt and mental torture that precede the self-murder. Somebody who loses his relative or precious wealth may decide to invoke the spiritual interventions and arbitrations of these deities. This invocation is called ikpo ma. Whenever the alusi (deities, gods) responded to the invitation or invocation, suicide cases were recorded. This is a strong belief system in Igbo Religion. Suicide does not just occur in that sense; to offend the gods in the interpretation of this belief view is a suicidal behaviour.

In Igbo culture, there are judicial or political patterns that prompt suicide. For instance, a notorious armed robber, murderer or witch who torments the entire family or village injuriously, causing grave harm could be asked to travel. In this case travel does not represent exile. What it means is that the criminal is advised or forced by the elders (ndi okenye, ndi ogere nyi) or the native vigilante group (ndi oche/nche) to commit suicide. It is done this way: the absolute criminal is brought out in medio nocte (in the middle of the night) and asked to dig his grave by himself. He enters the grave and is covered with the red mother earth. That brings to an abrupt end both his person and his crimes. The Igbo society celebrates peace, social harmony and good neighbourliness. She tends to remove any person and every structure that brings about hardships, social conflicts and societal disorganizations. So evil people such as armed robbers who violate rights to private property, the murderers who destroy human lives and witches who destroy pregnancies, suffocate family progress and afflict grave harm on the community are removed that way by their own hands. They dig their own graves or another method is by giving them poison, pesticide, acid or any harmful liquid that could kill them before day break. At some other instances, the criminal is given the rope to hang himself. As aptly put by Umechukwu (1994) in Ani, N.R& Ugwuoke, A. C. (2014:3-4), “Historically, the traditional Igbo had a practice of handing a rope to a murderer to hang himself which was also anchored on their religious ritual of appeasing the creator of life. In Igbo society some religious and political practices were beneficial; but others were harmful to the extent that they precipitate suicide. In all these aforementioned cases, those in traditional rulership and security operatives know the sources of the suicides. In Igbo traditional communities, criminal behavioural patterns such as the examples given above are suicidal behaviours. This is a good evidence of the power which the community has over the individual. The power of life and death which is found also in civil governance where the competent authority can approve the deaths of hardened criminals and the
plots of coup d'etat. It is a suicidal behaviour for a widow to drink the water used to wash the corpse of her late husband to prove her innocence over his death. This cultural practice has suicidal result.

We have altruistic suicide in Igbo society whose suicidal behaviour manifests in risks of community service. People who committed this type of suicide became heroes and their actions are praised. In the olden days, lions, tigers, wild beasts were killing people in the villages, hamlets and settlements of human habitations. Some people surrendered their lives for the welfare of their communities and confronted those animals and unjust aggressors head long. Some of them succeeded in killing the wild beasts and the community gave them the titles of Ogbaru (Lion killer), Ochendo (banner of protection) or agu na-eche ibe (the lion / the strong one that protects his people) and so on.

Some communities instituted their monarchy around these people whose descendants have retained the traditional stool till today. Their suicidal behaviour was obvious in the sense that the chances of life and death were equal. Some of them lost their lives by the claws and teeth of those wild carnivores. The intentionality to die was not attached to their brave steps but the possibility of death was vivid and highly implied. Those who ideate suicide tend to stay alone, stay moody and withdrawn. Some stop attending social ceremonies (enume /mmeme) or family meetings (izu Umunna) only to commit suicide. They could send their family to visit the village or relatives and within their period of aloneness in the house, they execute suicide. Or he could send the wife or children on an errand, and to their embarrassment on return, they see the sad event and its notes. It is a suicidal behaviour when one continues to utter warning statements like “very soon it will be over” I will soon end it all,” “should we not see again, take it as part of life,” et cetera. Unfortunately some of these utterances were understood when it was already too late.

Another suicidal behaviour in traditional Igbo suicidology is alcoholism. Igbo land vegetation is blessed with palm wine (nkwu enu, nkwu ocha) and raffia palm wine (ngwo) whose nutritional and medicinal values are high. The socio-religious values of palm wine is enormous too. They are used in hospitality to entertain visitors, in social ceremonies such as marriages, title-taking and the likes; in rituals such as worship, oath taking or covenant making and so on. These are produced in large scales in Igbo land in commercial quantities. It has rich economic values too. This palm wine taken in moderation is healthy and nourishes the body and gladdens the spirit. However, there is a local gin (kai kai) which many have formed bad habits about; they cannot do any longer without it yet it is harmful to the bodily system. This corrosive chemical called kai kai destroys the liver and other renal organs. Many have already died by their addiction to it and a great number is on the way to the grave too. Some have died equally by other suicidal behaviours such as cigarette smoking, drug abuse, reckless driving and without seat belt that increases the risk factor, climbing the palm tree without good or fresh ropes, gambling only to lose much finances to dupe and commit suicide. Some new generation churches teach their members not to go to the hospitals nor take drugs when they fall sick. Many of these Pentecostals and Protestants have died through this suicidal behaviour.

However, apart from these exceptions of the unjust aggressor earlier discussed and the altruism that could lead indirect self- murder, suicide is not a good thing in Igbo society and her religion. Suicide is not wished in Igbo society and it is not permitted by Igbo religion. In the next section, we shall discuss very elaborately the preventive measures against suicide in Africa with special reference to Igbo traditional suicidology as its proper specimen.

The Preventive Measures In Igbo Suicidology

In Igbo society, there are a lot of preventive measures against suicide. These include:

Social welfare: There is this Social Net whereby the needs of the individual members of particular families are cared for within the contexts of extended family system. It is a cultural value that places much premium on togetherness and communitarian progressive security patterns because united the family stands. On this note too, the recognition of the Self in Africa especially in Igbo culture is insofar as one is connected with the family because there is this Igbo proverb that says: “he who goes alone is killed by mosquito.” So in Igbo society and Africa generally, there is social Net which is Caritas whereby the needs of the poor are cared for. This helps in a very big way to curb suicide because one celebrates his belongingness to a social group with which he identifies in moments of joy and in moments of sorrow. This measure prevents anomic and egoistic suicides. The Africans put much premium on the human person and so it is always bitter when one loses a member of his family to death because the African understanding of the human person is such that there should be, if you like, social immortality. Social immortality in this context means the continuation of human population and membership in the family from generation to generation. So, the loss of a human being to death is very painful in Africa. African people desire large families. They like to have males and females in the family. We, the Africans, want people whether young or old in our families because mgbenye is relational poverty and ogbenye is
material poverty. Both Mgenye and Ogenyenye are abhorred in Igbo culture. The former is lack of relatives, friends, kith and kin while the latter is lack of good means of sustenance and the abundance of sundry material deprivations.

When one loses a very close relative either by consanguinity or affinity to the cold hands of death, the members of the family rally round him or her. Some have committed suicide because of the death of close relations like saying, “what am I doing again?” , “who is there for me?” and as a consequence, the persons especially the males, climbs the palm tree cuts the rope, falls and dies. This example is just one method out of others which suicides choose to end life. Here, it is appropriate to mention that lovers and even marital partners or relatives who commit suicide, one at the instance of the other’s death express the firm resolve to continue their social connection in the land of the dead. Some husbands would like to die and meet their wives and vice versa. These ugly experiences made our forebears to put in place the preventive measures against suicide in the forms of social Net, consolation given and condolences paid to the bereaved.

Care for the Bereaved: When somebody dies, no body within the family circle or kindred goes to work, market, farm or attend to any matters unconnected with the mishap (odachi onwu) until after the mourning period. Outsiders like people from neighbouring villages or associates within the vicinity, friends and sympathizers go to the bereaved on condolence visits. The bereaved also do not go out to attend to secular affairs; they stay at home. Whatever they need are provided by the elastic provisions of the extended family system, friends and sympathizers. The movements of the bereaved are restricted and monitored because anything, especially the undesirable could happen to them. The fear is that they could lose their lives by suicide. Ordinarily, the Africans try to prevent death which could come from this angle by staying close to the bereaved.

Africans, especially the Igbo people are very industrious but when it comes to death, they take some leave of absence from work fronts to mourn the dead and console those affected by the demise. Those affected by the death cry and mourn in bitterness and grief (ariri, akwa akwa ariri, eru uju onwu) because somebody is lost. They are consoled, console and shown some constant concerns through out the moments of intensive grief. These warmth and closeness prevent suicide. Another supportive action is this: since the bereaved do not go to market, farm or work, the friends and family members bring food; various dishes are cooked and brought to sustain those in designated mourning venue or compound (ezz/ezo onwu). For the friends, it is charity but for relatives especially from the paternal side, it is compulsory. It is obligatory to bring a certain quantity of cooked food (okwa nri) according to schedules of time and specifications of menu. Based on the number and population of each family, everybody comes home at instance of a relative’s death and with the aforecited arrangements, they are cared for during the mourning period. Some may bring money, wine, water, fire wood, et cetera to assist under these conditions.

The mourning period could last for one month, that is seven native weeks (izu isaa/asaa) for the nuclear family, two native weeks or four (izu ebo/ abua m’obu eno/ ino / ano) for the extended family members. The exigencies of modern times have brought some adjustments to the mourning periods in some Igbo communities and in some other African societies. Long period of time has been shortened according to the forces of the cultural dynamics within specific areas in Africa. The aforementioned period is not for widows or widowers whose mourning duration is between four months and one year. In Obukpa Community in Nsukka cultural zone, it is four months and at most six months in other areas in Africa. The aforementioned period is not for widows or widowers whose mourning duration is between four months and one year. In Obukpa Community in Nsukka cultural zone, it is four months and at most six months for widows and widowers. A week is simply four days in Igbo time structure. We have the Eke, the Oye / Orie, the Afo and the Nkwo; these constitute the market names and days and their seven cycles make up one month. So, one month period is twenty eight days in Igbo cultural time structure. These pretty long period of mourning and the concerns associated with it are part of the cultural steps taken in order to prevent suicide in Igbo society.

The consolations, condolences and care are antidotes against suicide in Traditional Africa. Death is perceived as obvious and this death is also known as transition and not an annihilation in Igbo understanding of the concept. The deceased who is said to have died has a soul (nkpulobi) therefore he does not die and goes out of existence. Death is also a grief, a painful situation that hurts deeply yet it is a celebration when death is at a ripe old age. What this means is that after the burial and funeral ceremonies, one joins the ancestors in the land of the spirits (al’ ndd ma, ala ndi muo) where he or she lives on. There is in this perception, interconnectedness between the dead and the living. However, it is painful because the deceased is lost over here on this side of the divide, id est (that is) on this side of reality. We have uwa mmadu (land of humanity) and uwa mmno, Uwa ndd ma (the land of the spirits) in Igbo cosmology. Suicide is a painful exit in Igbo society because it actualizes premature death. Early deaths are abhorred in Igbo land. People wish to live long till the evening of life (uwa Mgbede) that is at ripe old age. This is onwu n’ ogerenyi, onwu n’ okenye, onwu ishi nka), all these concepts describe death at old age.
Deaths have meanings and connections in Igbo world view. Hence, we have onwu ajo (bad death) some who lived a bad life and died without repentance or someone who died badly like the case of suicide. There are onwu ututu, death at infancy, onwu ehiehie/eshhushi) death at youthful age, onwu ogbanje, onwu ike, onwu ubu, onwu uke (premature deaths), onwu uchu (a curse induced death or dying in abject poverty or hunger), onwu mbujia(sudden death), onwu chi (death by natural causes and in an advanced age). Onwu ma/alusi gbura (death as punishment by the gods), onwu there (shameful death like in the course robbery, incest, adultery, suicide, et cetera), onwu oriri, onwu uyo / onwu anuli (happy death after a fulfilled life socially or spiritually, or at a ripe old age, glorious exit). In Igbo perception, it is an abomination for somebody to willfully get drowned or die by hanging or by any other methods of executing suicide. Suicide is not permissible in Igbo morality. Therefore in order to curb suicide, the self- killer is treated with indignity. He and his corpse are treated badly.

**Bad treatment at Death:** One other preventive measure against self murder in Igbo suicidology is how the suicide is treated. He is not mourned; people do not cry or express any sign of grief. If the suicide died by hanging on the tree, the grave is dug beneath his dangling corpse and the rope is cut so that he falls into the grave. Nobody touches the corpse because it is culturally forbidden to do so. If the suicide died in the house, he is dragged on the ground till the grave. There is no washing of the corpse, there is no dressing him up for his last journey and there are no funeral rites for him.

When the living see the way the suicide is treated at death as a mere thing, a dog or a housefly who would not join his ancestors, then he may dismiss his suicidal behaviours of ideation and possible plans and thus consider options for living. By this cultural index, suicide cases are also prevented in Igbo cultural milieu. Within the Igbo cultural areas and in some other African communities even the house in which the person died is destroyed, the farm land and the yam barn if he killed himself in the farm or the barn are destroyed too and the tree on which he hanged himself is cut down to curb future occurrences. According to Person, A. (2012:1-3):

The Igbo believe that if a person commits suicide like Okonkwo did at the end of Things Fall Apart, he was never at peace with himself, the village, relatives and the gods, and he will never be, as he chose an evil act by deciding to accept a “bad death”. The land on which the deed is committed is considered polluted, so rituals are required in order to cleanse it. The method varies depending on how the individual killed himself. Okonkwo killed himself by hanging himself from a tree, in this case, though only certain people are allowed to touch and thereby remove the corpse, the tree itself is cut down so that no other person may hang himself there and because the tree is now considered evil. If the hanging occurred inside a house, the house is burned to prevent a second suicide, and the body will be buried in the evil forest. If the act is committed within the yam barn, all of the yams must be burned along with the barn. If this occurs on farm land, a grave is dug beneath the body, so that when the rope is cut, the corpse falls directly into it. If a suicide is committed when a man drowns himself in a well, that well is filled in and becomes unusable from that point on. Whereas during a normal funeral, there people cook, drink, dance and have a wake, none of this is allowed for a man who hanged himself. No one, not even friends or family, is allowed to cry in public over the loss.

It is not just that somebody has been lost to death, there are not economic losses associated with suicide as we saw from the above citation. We cannot finish our discourse on African Traditional Suicidology without good reference to Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart which talked about Okonkwo who was great in defence of his Igbo traditions but ended in the tragedy of suicide. Okonkwo was not helped by that same culture he defended with all his brain and brawn since he committed suicide, an abomination. Eke, E.O (2012:8) analyzed the situation, thus:

Achebe’s excellent portrayal of the clash of civilization that occurred with the colonization of Africa, and the difficulties it presented in a Traditional Igbo Society in Thing Fall Apart, is mark of his genius. The sad irony of things fall apart if that Okonkwo gave up everything to become a real man, and in the end, committed suicide, and was treated less than a dog in accordance with the same tradition that meant everything to him. This is a cautionary tale to all those who would sacrifice the most important things in life for, tradition, and do evil in the name of tradition and religious beliefs.

In Igbo land, without the prejudices of Christian civilization, Ndi Igbo naturally take it for granted that none under her cultural influences would choose to die by suicide. However, inspite of these preventive measures, people still die by self killing by poisoning, a kind of drinking harmful and corrosive liquid and concoctions portent enough to destroy
one’s own life, drowning, hanging, firearms (guns), cutting the rope and falling from the palm tree or any other tree chosen for the purpose. In Europe and America suicides choose as an instance of one method, to fall from skyscrapers. In African Traditional Societies, in the absence of such tall buildings in their ancient past, they chose tree trunks elevated and high enough to execute their own deaths.

The idea of suicide in Igbo Religion is that it is nso al’s nso ani (an abomination, a taboo). It is a crime (mpu, aru), a sin (ihe ojo, njo). A suicide is not given any religious commendations to join the ancestors; there are no funeral rites nor ceremonies for them. They are, as mentioned above, like housefly. Housefly signifies in this context nothingness, worthless entity, insignificant body, a quantity that should not earn any iota of respect, as it were. As Opata, D. U. (1998:183) wrote, “Suicide is one of the worst forms of bad death in Igbo land... because it disturbs the ontological order by reducing the beingness of the person”. The mad man, who is res nullus in the eyes of the law is cared for while alive and buried with dignity in Igbo culture but not a suicide who gives his family the wounds and scars of stigma, trauma and shame. The recoveries from such psychological torture and shockers are not always easy for the suicide’s relatives, colleagues and friends of suicides. The Igbo culture is anthropocentric. Man is at the centre of Igbo world view. The suicide loses the dignity of the human person.

The Stigma: In African societies, suicide goes with a stinking stigma. It brings shame on the family as it happens and in subsequent times. The family loses some social prestige to this ugly incident by one of her own. One of the consequences is marriage difficulties experienced by the family. In the process of marriage, Ndi Igbo conduct extensive pre- marital enquiries. So in the process of this reasonable length of investigation, if it is discovered that the family has history, antecedent or pedigree of suicide, the marriage proposal is nipped at the bud immediately. Suitors and spinsters refuse to marry from and to such families respectively for the fears that suicide could be replicated and repeated in theirs. Suicide is a cultural impediment to traditional marriage just as we have some canonical, diriment impediments against Christian marriage. Therefore, in order not to expose one’s family or descendants to ridicule, stigma and shame, many have dropped their suicide options. This is one good example of ethical consequentialist framework that helps prevent suicide where one avoids suicide due to its negative consequences on self and others.

The Impossibilities Of Peaceful Rest And Re- Incarnation: We already know the African is Homo Religiosus Africanus (the Religious African man) whose religion is every thing for him. This African whose religiosity is striking deep and whose both secular and sacred lives and activities are permeated by religion loses funeral rites due to suicide. Without funeral rites and ceremonies no African can rest in peace nor join his ancestors which is the eternal wish of the African. The suicide cannot re- incarnate which means that he cannot come back to his family through his offspring. He becomes a suffering, wandering, malevolent spirit who has lost communion with Chukwu (the Supreme Being), the ancestors and his bio- social family.

According to metuh, E. I. (1991:118), “Igbo beliefs view life as a continuing cyclic process. After a brief stay in the spirit- land on is allowed by God to re-incarnate to continue the joyous cycle of life. The wicked are deprived the joy of reincarnation. As incarnation (Iwolu aru nke Jesu kristi, John 1:14 Et verbum Caro factum est; et habitavit in nobis) is real in Johannine Christology of Catholic Theology so does re-incarnation (ilo uwa/ ilua uwa) make some sense for practitioners of African Traditional Religion. This Re-incarnation is expressed in Igbo names such as nne nne (maternal grand mother), Nnadi ya (the late father is still present) Nna ayata (The late father has re-incarnated), Nne Nna (paternal grand mother) and so on. These are believed to have re-incarnated in those who bear such names.

Well, biological facts of hereditary and variation can explain indubitably the genetic characteristics that run in the family from parents to children. There is restlessness for every suicide. Therefore, the wishes and prayers laba na ndokwa (go in peace), zuru ike na udo/ ndokwa (Requiescat in pace, Rest in peace (R.I.P) and the ukwutaz gg dl n’ anyi oyi (May your departure bring us favours) are not for any who committed suicide. This is because, he cannot bring favour since he is not in the abode of the ancestors nor in communion with Chukwu Abiama (God, the Author and Sustainer of life).

Recommendations

Based on the need to campaign against suicide across cultures and continents, the following recommendations are made:

i. Suicide should be seen as an evil phenomenon by all nations and cultures in order to curb its high rates of occurrence and prevalence.
ii. Suicide should be avoided as it breaks the link between the suicide and his family and between him and his Creator thereby losing his dignity as a human being and eternal bliss with God.

iii. It is a holy duty to give warmth to the lonely and help to the poor in order that they may get social connections, economic assistance and opt for life.

iv. It is essential that scholars focus on cultural perspectives in suicidological research in order to tackle suicide from its basic social and cultural roots.

v. The economic wastes associated with suicide is enormous. The idea of destroying the house, farm and yam barn or cutting down the economic tree should be reviewed in order to stop such extremity and excesses.

vi. The pain of bereavement is enough trauma so there is no need giving further torture through stigma.

vii. Let the suicide be buried with funeral rites and let the corpse get no further desecrations because Chukwu (the supreme Being) should be the sole judge of all lives and actions.

viii. In the light of Christian civilization, as Igbo land is predominantly Christians with Catholics as the greatest number, it is high time we stopped appealing to deities and gods as spiritual arbiters. And neither should we take Re-incarnation as anything factual since it is no more than mere fantasy and superstitious belief.

ix. God said “Thou shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17). This means do not kill neither the self (suicide) nor the other (murder); let everyone, the armed robber, the witches, the wicked, the sinners, obey God and live. (Ezekiel 18:18-24; Matthew 9:9-13, Luke 15:11-32).

Conclusion

_Ndi Igbo_, know that death is inevitable (_onwu bu iwu, onwu bu addg avu_) and it is the way of all mortals captured in Igbo proverb that says _igwe nile ga- eje n’uzu_ (literal translation: all iron must go to the black smith’s workshop- All persons must die). However, Igbo people desire _onwu chi_, that is death by natural causes and at a ripe old age. Premature deaths induced by suicide or any activity and habit that do not lead to longevity is abhorred in Igbo society. Igbo Religion perceives suicide as _nso al’/nso ani_ which is offensive to humanity, gods and God. The suicide preventive measures in Igbo traditional suicidology is to ensure that life is seen as sacred, supreme and precious. Therefore, it should be preserved consciously as a Divine gift (_ndu bu onyinye Chukwu_).

References


