

Human Dignity, Relational Ontology, and the Crisis of Life in Nigeria: Toward a Complementary Philosophical Framework

Authors

Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu ⁽¹⁾; Ikechukwu Bartholomew Ekemezie ⁽²⁾;
Anikpe Anthony Mbah ⁽³⁾

Main author's email: in.onwuatuegwu@unizik.edu.ng

(1.2.3) Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This article examined Nigeria's numerous human rights violations and the challenge of reconciling legal commitments to human rights with the harsh realities of human existence, particularly when confronted with moral dilemmas. The article makes a two-fold contribution. First, it identifies the causes of the normative discord between legal guarantees and ethical values. Second, it provides an alternative interdisciplinary framework of human dignity and examines its logical and legal implications. The study employed philosophical analysis and synthesis of selected Western and African philosophies, with particular emphasis on African communitarianism. It also drew on excerpts from recently published human rights reports to demonstrate the lack of conformity between established human rights standards and existing practices. The article argues for the logical and legal recognition and protection of human dignity by demonstrating that dignity is prior, both logically and ontologically, to humanity. It recommends greater efforts to integrate universal human rights with locally acceptable moral and legal frameworks grounded in human dignity and to foster a stronger sense of responsibility.

Key terms: African philosophy, human dignity, human rights, Igbo philosophy, Nigeria.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The term 'human dignity' is used here with a special degree of differentiation. The first dimension is 'human dignity' in the ontological sense, which signifies that all human beings, as moral beings, are endowed with a basic value and recognition which is not the result of social processes and which, consequently, no social group may take away. The second dimension is 'human dignity' in the relational sense. This implies that social recognition and encouragement of the ontological dignity of all human beings is accomplished in various relationships of social concern, solidarity, reciprocity and non-humiliation. The third dimension is 'human dignity' in the juridical sense. This element primarily signifies the restriction of social and state powers in the framework of the legal order and of the jurisdictional process in order to assure and protect the basic worth of all human beings. These dimensions of 'human dignity' are closely connected and inter-related. It should be noted that in the above relationships it is possible to have cases where a person may be warranted 'human dignity' in the ontological sense, but be denied 'human dignity' in the relational and juridical senses. In the contemporary School of Thought on Human Rights, 'human dignity' in the moral sense is interconnected with the recognition and protection of the worth and rights of the person (Donnelly 2007; Griffin 2008).

Nigeria is a good case study on the relationship between these factors. Section 33 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees the right to life. Similarly, Section 34 provides for respect for the dignity of the person. Although this is the position in law, unlawful killings and other unlawful crimes against humanity and war crimes continue to happen. There are numerous reports of violations of human rights and crimes under international law. These include arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, unlawful killings, attacks by non-state armed actors, and human rights violations and crimes attributed to the state security forces. The available evidence used in this paper is limited. Amnesty International's (2023) report on the human rights situation in Nigeria, Human Rights Watch's (2025) report on the situation in Nigeria in 2024, and Amnesty International's (2025) report on South-East Nigeria are used to illustrate different forms of human rights violations. Other forms exist and affect other regions of the country.

This study considers the case of traditions or practices that are interpreted as a violation of human rights. Empirical research questions are generally formulated to determine the causes of such violations. However, the present study wishes to examine the following philosophical questions: in what sense and from what perspective can the coexistence of the formal recognition of human dignity and its substantive realisation be justified? What kind of relationship can be postulated between the idea of the absolute worth of the person and relational and contextual ideas of personhood?

The philosophical diagnosis of the norm-practice gap will be addressed in this study. Political and social upheavals are undoubtedly important in this regard, but the present study addresses different questions. What makes concepts of dignity publicly justifiable, and what is their potential for social work and practice?

In this study, the answers to these questions will be found in African Relational Thought and Igbo Philosophy.

The study has two objectives. The first is to critically examine major conceptions of dignity, rights, personhood and relationality in the context of the Nigerian situation. The second is to formulate and justify a tri-fold (or complementary) framework of dignity. The framework comprises Ontological dignity, Relational dignity, and Normative/Legal dignity, in such a way that the three kinds of dignity cross-support and reinforce one another. It should be noted that the study does not aim at establishing a connection between philosophical views and human-rights violations. Rather, it attempts to redefine the limits within which constitutional rights and bearers of those rights operate and function in society.

Philosophical resources and evidence in support of basic human rights are scarce in the literature on African philosophy. Communitarian theories address social/moral relationships and obligations as well as the importance of the social/moral community. Ontological individualism is most profoundly exemplified in Igbo philosophy and other related African philosophy traditions. One of the more recent developments in African philosophy also emphasises relational ontology and crosses the aforesaid philosophical divides. Universal rights and the limits within which those rights operate in various philosophical traditions are central concerns of this paper. I seek to address the aforementioned problems by providing a critical norm-practice analysis of human rights in Nigeria.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Western Foundations of Human Dignity and Rights

The theories of dignity that are applicable to the Western setting generally speak of dignity in an abstract manner. Locke, on the other hand, conflates dignity and natural rights in his formulation of the natural law. For Locke, the natural law embodies certain political constraints. Before the formation of the state, natural law protects individuals' rights to life, liberty and estate (Locke, 1690/1988). Locke's thought clearly articulates the idea that natural rights precede the state, but natural rights and dignity are distinct concepts.

Kant, on the other hand, tends to ground dignity in rational nature. Kant's ethical philosophy contains the idea that persons (as rational beings) are ends in themselves and must be treated accordingly. It must be emphasised that for Kant, persons are ends in themselves and, therefore, must never be treated as means to an end. While both Locke and Kant formulate their ethics in a natural law framework, Kant's concepts of dignity and worth are more or less transcendental, abstract and conceptually absolutely distinct from Locke's thinking.

"Intrinsic dignity" is used in the sense of "moral worth" in this paper. As such, it is broader than Kant's concept of dignity. Kant's Theory provides us with a compelling philosophical reason to believe that all persons have such worth. The focus on Kant is not an endorsement of the idea that worth is to be ascribed to persons for their rational autonomy. Instead, the paper maintains that, at the very least, the value in question is to be ascribed to persons *qua* persons.

Some contemporary rights theories further elaborate the nature of such value and worth. Griffin (2008) indicates that the foundation of human rights lies in the capacity and opportunity of persons to determine and act upon a conception of a good life. On the other hand, Donnelly (2007, 2013) argues that human rights are universal in their moral and legal character, and that there need not be conformity in the various cultural interpretations and expressions of such rights. It is possible to reconcile the two theories to bring out a wider range of values and worth beyond the overlapping concept of rational autonomy, to be found

in the ideas of natural equality and universal rights. These values should be accorded their due recognition without conflating them with 'Western individualism.'

Universalism, Cultural Critique, and the Problem of Relativism

Critics of universalism show that cultural values inform the principles of many of the world's human rights practices, and hence that the dominant approaches to theorising human rights are not culturally neutral. For instance, Mutua (2002) has shown how processes to advance human rights around the world often mask and reinstate historically contingent and Western-centric moral frameworks. Alsobrook (2023) asks about the possibility of reconciling the recognition of various forms of African cultural dignity with universal human rights. Because rights often derive their moral force from the norms and cultural practices that structure social relationships, a constitutional provision that enjoins the state to uphold human rights may not always be morally binding on the state.

From a normative point of view, relativism and universalism are not exhaustive. Relatively speaking, there need not be absolute incompatibility between universality and particularity. Oyowe (2014) also supports the view that it is unwarranted to read a distinctively 'African' interpretation of human rights from cultural accounts of personhood and rights in Africa. From the perspective of a legal human rights framework, the objective of this research is to consider how the universality of the human person may be articulated by diverse legal cultures.

African Communitarian Philosophy Relation, Rights, and Personhood

Communitarian philosophy in Africa focuses on community and less on the individual. Mbiti famously asserted, "I am, because we are." He explained that we are all connected and dependent on one another, and that we have responsibility toward one another (Mbiti 1969, pp. 108-109). The value of this statement is to show that individual worth is connected to and defined by relationships. Relationships, however, do not always have to be positive to define individual worth. A parent, for example, may be irresponsible, and though that relationship may not be a positive one, it may still shape and define individual worth.

Normative communitarianism is further developed by Menkiti (1984), who argues true personhood is the product of community and relationships. Gyekye (1997), on the other hand, argues that the community and relationships shape the individual, but that does not mean the individual should always be subordinate to the community. Each of these philosophers focuses on the value and worth of the individual. This emphasis is vital to the theory and practice of dignity.

It appears that if dignity is grounded in personhood, then some individuals (i.e. children, people outside the community, people with extreme mental disabilities) could be denied dignity. If this is the case, personhood and dignity need to be separated. Achieving dignity through community membership could be through social recognition. However, community membership does not bestow one with basic human rights.

Literature in this area often considers this dilemma. In one case, the public version of ubuntu is used to ground human rights. In a separate case, the author examines the personhood/moral claim dilemma. In more recent work, the author identifies African communitarian dignity and presents several irreducible dimensions and expressions of human dignity.

These works show that the public discourse of relationality can enhance the discourse of human rights. However, public discourse of relationality should not be used to deny the irreducible moral worth of the individual.

Complementary Ontology and Its Different Interpretations

Complementary ontology goes beyond a mere appeal to social reciprocity. In particular, Asouzu's account of *ibuanyidanda* gives expression to beings in terms of 'missing links', whose being is recognised in relation to other 'missing links' through complementarity as opposed to exclusion (Asouzu, 2007). In this regard, the author outlines the methods by which a synthetic understanding of individuality and relativity can be grasped.

Related, but not identical methods can be found in other more recent African philosophy. Being in the sense of togetherness is found in Igwebuike (Kanu, 2018). Other authors have grounded their decolonial relational metaphysics in various concepts to overcome rigid dualism and relativism. Notwithstanding, the methods, vocabularies and objectives of these theories differ. Some of these theories are essentially accounts of relationality. This study uses these theories to introduce a distinct normative relational theory of ontological status, relational realisation, and relational safeguarding.

Theoretical Framework

Complementary Human Dignity

The structure builds upon ideas presented in various theories and adds the original ideas of the author. It accepts Kant's and modern human rights theories' ideas that persons' moral worth is not relative to their social utility. It accepts that moral worth is relative to social utility in African communitarian philosophy. It accepts an anti-dualistic idea in complementary ontology that rejects the need to choose between individualism and collectivism. It accepts an idea of individuality in relation in some Igbo metaphysics. The author presents an integrated account of these various ideas and forms a dignity model from them.

Intrinsic or Ontological Dignity

Intrinsic dignity refers to the moral value and worth of an individual which is not relative to any other factors. From a normative perspective, this value is reflected through various theories and doctrines, and in this regard, Kantian theory of dignity through rationality is quite illustrative. Accepting the spirit of Kant's theory, one does not approve of a legal or social order which fails to ensure respect toward persons. However, Kant's theory does not set this absolute bar for moral evaluation. Therefore, dignity is considered to be the minimum or the lowest threshold in this theory. This approach affirms that no legal, political or moral evaluation can justify or legitimise the failure to extend respect to a person.

Relational Dignity

Relational dignity is the acknowledgement of a person's value in their social relationships. Recognising value in dignity does not mean worth is created by social relationships. Social relationships may express, fail to express, or negate a person's value. Traditionally, communitarian theories have acknowledged the importance of social relationships in the development of a person's value, but have not justified the use of torture or other extreme forms of social negation. Negating social relationships may be justified by a failure to acknowledge a person's worth, but this must be balanced by the person's right to dignity. Therefore, dignity must be recognised in social relationships and through mutual respect and responsibility (Gyekye, 1997; Metz, 2011; Molefe, 2018).

Normative/Legal Dignity

Normative or legal worth represents the translation of innate dignity into legal terms. Through constitutional and other legal provisions, states give public expression to the worth of the human person, define the activities of the state and ensure it is accountable for its actions against persons. When a person's dignity is not recognised in the social sphere, that person should be able to claim dignity in the public/legal sphere against both the state and nonstate actors. This means that relational ethics are not solely a matter for moral philosophy. Relational public legal agencies are implemented to address this concern.

Complementarity as Philosophical Synthesis

The three aspects cover differing but related questions. Ontological dignity addresses the question: who is endowed with basic worth? Relational dignity addresses the question: how is worth expressed by and toward others? Normative/legal dignity addresses the question: what are the rights and what are the duties which arise out of this worth? The framework is complete and consistent. None of the aspects of dignity is a surrogate for the other aspects. Law without moral worth can lead to amorality in the interpretation of the law; relational worth without recognition can lead to worthlessness for some; worth without protection can lead to injustice.

Figure 1: Tripartite Complementary Model of Human Dignity

Ontological dignity	Relational dignity	Normative/legal dignity
Unconditional moral status Why every person matters	Recognition and ethical enactment How worth is socially realized	Rights, duties, and institutions How worth is publicly protected

The model is recursive: social recognition supports rights-respecting institutions, while rights-protecting institutions create conditions for relations that acknowledge equal worth.

Conceptual Implication and Original Contribution

This model builds on existing complementary ontologies and shifts from a general theory of interdependent metaphysics to a theory of dignity. Some methods of resolving binary contradictions can be found in Asouzu (2007), Kanu (2018), and Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2021). Analysis of dignity in an African context can be found in Molefe (2022) and other theories. The model formulates the relationship between dignity, social and legal recognition in an integrative way. The aim of the model is to show that individual dignity draws its moral value from social recognition and legal protection and that dignity can not be individually created. Relational recognition and institutional Framing Agencies are necessary to give moral dignity social value.

3.0 FINDINGS AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

The findings and philosophical analysis are presented in the following sections, focusing on the historical development of human rights in Nigeria, the gap between formal legal standards and practice, and the philosophical dimensions of human dignity. The analysis further examines Igbo philosophical concepts and their relevance to the proposed complementary framework of human dignity.

Historical Development of Human Rights in Nigeria

This paper identifies how various historical processes shaped legal pluralism in former British West African colonies and how the interaction of colonial legality and subsequent post-colonial constitutional and military rule created a strain between formal law and context-related regulative normative orders. This history usually illustrates normative disconnection. This refers to the case in which legal norms, especially in formal law, operate and function in the legal order; however, such norms may not be fully expressed in the 'thick' dimensions of everyday moral justification. This is one of the shortcomings of legal order.

Colonial Legal Transplantation and Plural Legal Orders

While British colonial rule might have abolished some customary legal systems, elsewhere it combined different legal systems within the same hierarchy. Elsewhere, Yakubu (2005) indicates that with legal transplants, British colonial rule established a legal framework, and customary legal systems became subordinate to that framework. In Northern Nigeria, various British legal and penal reforms combined with the colonial Government's application of Indirect Rule to alter the nature of the Islamic legal system (Yadudu, 1992). These clearly illustrate that it is fallacious to posit the existence of a 'unified' African customary legal system.

This lack of unity had little to do with the legitimacy of the imported legal systems. More importantly, the legal systems, frameworks and doctrines imposed by the colonial powers altered the basis upon which rules, customs and laws were recognised and validated. Whereas before the colonial era, and in the absence of a central legal authority, customary rules and laws and rules of various Islamic legal systems of Africa constrained and limited peoples' actions; after the imposition of colonial legal systems, peoples' actions were checked and limited by the laws and frameworks of the colonial state. This created an anomalous situation where the legal order of the state, especially with respect to formal legal rules, constrained and limited peoples' actions, but, from a moral perspective, legal order was in complete discord. The purpose of this paper is to analyse this moral legal order and historical conflict as one of the contexts within which the present-day controversies relating to the 'cultural' acceptance of human rights in Africa should be understood.

Constitutional Development and the Formalisation of Rights

Constitutional developments after the civil war deepened rights provisions in Nigerian constitutions. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1960, and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1963, incorporated some rights. The 1979 Constitution and the 1999 Constitution elaborated Chapter IV on the Rights of the Individual. The 1999 Constitution provides for the right to life, the freedom of thought and the dignity of the person (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). The 2024-2028 National Action Plan of the National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria also highlighted the importance of the longer constitutional and policy history of Nigeria.

It is important to highlight the above constitutional history because the main shortcoming of Nigeria's legal and constitutional order is not the lack of the inclusion of rights language. Rather, it is the lack of sufficient political will to implement such rights. Why are the rights entrenched in the constitution and other laws not implemented or enjoyed by the people?

Military Rule and Constitutional Disruption

Military rule reconfigures the relation between constitutionalism and the state. Nwabueze (1992) shows how the military, through various legal mechanisms, established its domination, contravened the rights of the citizens and adapted the polity to its will. The National Human Rights Commission (2024) provides similar accounts, illustrating periods of regression in the enjoyment of human rights. The focus is on the recursiveness of the exception. Military rule, in theory, posits the exceptional nature of rule and, in practice, breaks the rule, leading to the atrophy of the constitutional culture and positing a need for exceptionalism beyond constitutionalism.

The other paper characterised this experience as a national morality case of 'moral desensitisation.' While sympathetic to the broader proposition, the evidence here does not favour an empirical analysis of desensitisation. This paper argues that the use of exceptionalism as the norm serves to moralise the case of rights contingency. In a political culture dominated by exceptionalism, it is reasonable to expect that moral desensitisation was the case.

The Normative–Practical Gap

This analysis adds detail to our understanding of the norm/practice gap. We can consider legal standards (or formal constitutional rights) as 'real' norms, and it is the function of institutions to imbue them with practice. In some instances, it is necessary to rely on the moral culture of a community (and not the legal culture) to interpret the standards and assumptions on which rights are based, and to encourage a respect for rights. 'Normative disconnection' occurs when the legal and moral cultures do not align, and does not imply a rejection of the value of human rights.

Human-Rights Violations as Contextual Evidence

The cases analysed in this section are more illustrative than probative. While they do show the existence of large norm-practice gaps at certain times and places, they do not, and were not intended to, prove that such gaps arise from a single philosophical basis. Thus, human rights reports function as contextual evidence to the problem this paper analyses, and this paper provides the philosophical basis for such an analysis.

State Violence, Policing, and Accountability

The protests in 2020 of #EndSARS brought international focus on different abuse case studies by the Nigerian police and other law enforcement agencies, including unlawful arrests and detentions, torture, extortion and unlawful killings. Amnesty International (2023) published its human rights violation reports for Nigeria and recorded security forces' involvement in extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances, and others in collusion with the Nigerian government in the torture of civilians. Human Rights Watch (2025) reported the inability of citizens to enjoy their rights to peaceful protest and the overall deteriorating security situation in Nigeria. The reports equally highlighted instances of security and intelligence agencies of various countries abetting the human rights violations in Nigeria.

Armed Conflict, Insecurity, and Civilian Protection

Violence perpetrated by the state is just one element of the dignity crisis. Amnesty International documented 1,844 deaths in South East Nigeria over a 2-year period and found that various state and non-state actors committed atrocities in that region. The report didn't address why so many people died

or who was ultimately responsible. Violence in Nigeria is just one example of the many ways that civilians are forced to endure a stateless condition.

The challenge of developing a security policy to address a dignity crisis is different from other crises because the state is faced with having to use lethal force to protect the citizens and respond to threats against the state, while also recognising the equal human dignity of those threatening the state. The means and the end must be aligned. Using a dignity framework to assess the security situation of a region means that the ends and the means must also be aligned and security must be pursued in a dignified manner.

Structural Violence and Socio-Economic Conditions

Specific social structures can violate human dignity by impeding human agency and making it difficult for individuals to engage and participate in social affairs. Structural violence, as conceptualised by Galtung (1969), focuses on social and economic inequalities that result from societal structures and lead to the avoidable suffering and death of people. Absolute poverty and social and economic inequalities obstruct the ability of people to participate in social activities and may also amount to a violation of their dignity. Further, unnecessary poverty may lead to a situation where rights of the people remain unenforceable. Thus, the focus must be on both the negative and the social conditions that define the environment in which the rights of the people may be exercised.

Cultural Disconnection as a Philosophical Interpretation

Claims of 'moral indifference' should be made with caution. Most reports describe violations of human rights. They do not show that people have become indifferent to the suffering of others. The issue, rather, is philosophical and interpretative. When the law is violated with legal impunity, one possible philosophical issue is that, in the eyes of the community, the language of rights loses its connection with the moral language that explains and justifies their condemnation of lawlessness and other humiliating and violent acts. If this is the case, resources of a more critical nature should be explored. This, however, presupposes that we can identify these moral resources through various research methodologies.

Critical Philosophical Analysis

Diagnosing the Devaluation of Human Life

Separating levels of diagnosis usually facilitates identification of reasons for human rights violations and the inadequacy of remedies. Normative causes are, inter alia, the reasons and justifications for the existence of certain obligations towards others and the authority of the norms that define them. Philosophical causes concern the concepts of value, person and obligation. They also touch on the concept of justified or legitimate social and political power. The causes are not collapsed into one.

Institutional and Political Constraints

Legal rights can be undermined by several political and institutional challenges, including inadequate accountability, obstacles in accessing justice, impunity, and the use of law to further political interests. Despite the above challenges, one can argue that the existence of such challenges will not mean that legal standards will not be valid. The presence of such challenges mainly poses a threat to the implementation of the legal standards and does not create an absence of moral justification for the legal standards.

Socio-Economic and Structural Constraints

Material deprivation also limits participation and agency in several ways. In the absence of adequate and reliable basic services and opportunities, the value that inequality be acknowledged (and equality be strived for) loses meaning. We are not attempting a complete empirical analysis of poverty in Nigeria here. That would require a more substantial treatment. Our concern here is with conditions that, in the interest of the dignity of the people, ought to be addressed by the state, rather than with the conditions that justify the state in using coercion (Galtung, 1969).

Normative Alienation

This paper uses the term normative alienation to denote a condition in which a norm has a legitimate legal claim to be generally binding but is, in fact, felt, understood, or acted upon, as if it were irrelevant to the normative order that structures the morality of everyday life. Using this term does not mean that the great majority of Nigerians think of human rights (if at all) as things that are foreign to them or that various Nigerian cultures do not have their own normative systems. Normative alienation notes a possible case of justification: citizens and authorities may well know the legal rules in question, but may have no relevant moral judgment as to the rule's content and thus be unable to identify the rule as setting a claim to moral limit or recognition.

A postcolonial legal critique can help identify cases of normative alienation. However, the critique may be of little help to demonstrate that African moral thought is, in principle, alien to human rights (Mutua, 2002; Oyowe, 2014). As a matter of fact, African moral thought has ample means to ground human rights claims. Hence, this is more of a reconstructivist project than a nativist one.

Philosophical Diagnosis

The philosophical basis for the devaluation of life lies in the acceptance of the expendability of human beings, the setting of communal/political goals which compete with the recognition of basic moral rights and the ultimate disjunction between law and the reasons for which it is enacted. In this regard, the problem may be expressed in the following three forms: status is counterposed to recognition, recognition to law and moral judgment. Each of these will be considered in relation to the respective negative forms which they are intended to avoid.

Igbo Metaphysics and the Ontology of Human Life

Igbo philosophical materials function here more as suggestive tools than as affirmative instruments. It is true that Achebe (1975), Edeh (1985), and Nwala (1985) show that among the Igbo there are very many ideas which have been philosophically or theoretically misunderstood. These ideas, however, permeate different levels of human endeavour, including the verbal, non-verbal, visual and other expressive and reproductive activities of human beings. The critical philosophical problem here is how to rescue these misconceived or misunderstood ideas and concepts, if any, from among the Igbo and other people and to determine their relevance to the theory of human dignity.

Chi, Individuality, and Ontological Irreducibility

In Igbo thought, Chi is a profound and intricate idea. It is a spiritual idea, and it encompasses aspects of an individual, including his/her destiny and his/her creativity. Writers, including Achebe (1975), Edeh (1985) and Nwala (1985), try to answer the relation of the idea of Chi to the different levels and structures of Igbo

metaphysical thought. These writers view Chi as individuality, but a technical definition of the term is lacking.

A more restricted version of the argument, therefore, is in order. The idea of Chi is comparatively more advanced than other philosophical thought of premodern Africa, and it contains within it a metaphor which justifies the basic philosophical tenet of the framework, that is, that the human being is to be valued beyond and contrary to the logic of utilitarianism and function. This is more adequately justified by reference to a differentiating metaphysics.

It is clear that the model does not depend on a belief in Chi. Rather, like all humans, members of the Igbo community are to be valued beyond and contrary to the logic of utilitarianism.

Destiny, Agency, and Moral Responsibility

Igbo philosophy on chi also adds layers to simpler forms of determinism. One such saying is *onye kwe, chi ya ekwe*, meaning that when a person says yes, his or her chi also agrees. It captures the idea of affirmation and consensus on several planes of existence. When Achebe (1975) writes that a person makes decisions under the constraints of chi, which is beyond his/her individual control, he is making the case for relational agency. In other words, persons act within the confines of their social and metaphysical reality, and are sometimes constrained in their agency.

For S's stage of dignity theory, it means that the metaphysical framework allows for the integration of freedom and accountability. It is a recognition that persons are sometimes constrained by the metaphysical and social reality within which they act, and that agency can sometimes be located where moral responsibility lies. Chi also helps address the contradiction that while persons are bound to make meaningful choices, they are not completely free to do as they please, and sometimes, fatalism is used to justify evil and/or evil acts as being beyond human control.

Igbo Relational Personhood and the Achievement/Status Distinction

Theories of social thought among the Igbo emphasise relations and obligations that extend beyond the confines of the self. This focuses on communitarian theory in general, particularly the African sub-variety. However, it does not fully correspond to the account of 'achieved personhood' described by Menkiti. As noted previously, these theories incorporate the notion of individual dignity in a moral community. Individual dignity is a given; it is not necessarily the outcome of social interaction or participation. Because of individual dignity, a socially dependent person has a right not to be ill-treated, for example.

Because of this individual dignity, community is relative, particularly in the case of determining a person's moral worth. In this respect, the theory is more in line with 'middle-range' communitarianism. It is, however, further in the direction of 'Rights-relative' Relationalism than towards 'Moral absolutism' Communitarianism (Gyekye, 1997; Metz, 2011; Molefe, 2018).

Vitality and Expressive Dignity

African discussions of vitality provide different ways of expressing human value, especially when combined with Igbo ideas. For Molefe (2022), a consideration of vitality enhances diverse approaches to dignity in Africa. I use the idea of vitality to capture some dynamic elements of human value. The element of social

relationships can strengthen or weaken human value. Social conditions can impact the full expression of a person's worth. No social condition can diminish the dignity that persons have by birth.

Philosophical Significance

When examined in this way, several concepts, such as *chi*, situated agency, relational personhood, and vitality become equally enlightening. While *chi* provides culturally specific singular notions of person, relational personhood is concerned with the social relations of personhood that carry obligations; situated agency is the integration of freedom and responsibility; and vitality is concerned with the contexts of personhood that allow for thriving. None of these constrains the scope of human rights. Taken together, they illustrate that each culture is capable of deriving its own interpretation of universal respect and worth of human persons.

Toward a Complementary Reconstruction of Human Dignity in Nigeria Beyond the Individualism–Communitarianism Dichotomy

The typical comparison of 'Western individualism' and 'African communitarianism' is very general. The same is true when comparing some ideas of African Philosophy to those of some Western Philosophers. Locke, Kant, Gryphon, and Donnelly are different from one another, just as Mbiti, Menkiti, Gyekye and Metz are also not in complete agreement. A proper philosophical analysis will not be between complete isolation and complete absorption into a community. It will be to recognise complete individuality and also community.

Integrating Law, Culture, and Metaphysics

The reunification of the three registers achieves what is legal as well as what is universal. Legal universality posits that there are certain rights from which a dominating local population cannot legally withdraw. Cultural understanding, on the other hand, concerns the reasons which provide moral justification to such rights. Finally, what gives non-relative value to a person? This raises the question of metaphysics. Taking the case of Nigeria, it is hoped that these three registers would provide a synthesis to achieve a reconciliation where universal law and rights replace what is repressive, and an ethical legalism would ground an engaged citizenship. Igbo Philosophy is rich in resources to explain value and non-relative worth of the individual in social relations.

Human Dignity as a Tripartite Reality

The tripartite model will now be described in detail. First, every person in the world has what is called 'ontological dignity'. This means that all people have worth and are not to be treated in an inhumane manner. Next, 'relational dignity' means that a person is able to have some sort of relationship with others, for example, being respected and treated in a non-humiliating manner. Lastly, a person has 'normative/legal dignity' when the government of that country protects the person's rights and stops other people from abusing the person. The moral worth of a person does not change when a person is not treated in a dignified manner.

How the Model Extends Existing Theories

The present model focuses on dignity and rights, and more generally on political issues. This model finds complementarity in the field of ontology with Asouzu's (2007) missing-link ontology. Complementarity in philosophy is represented by Kanu (2018) and Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2021). The present model also focuses on political matters and provides insights that strengthen communication between a strong

communitarian position and a mixed position. Although it views dignity as socially expressed through social relations and institutional structures, it still accepts a degree of autonomy from social relations and institutional structures. Overall, the present model proposes a more integrated theory by considering all three elements: metaphysics, ethics and law.

Objection

Does Cultural Grounding Undermine Universality?

It is argued that grounding dignity in concepts such as chi may lead to a situation whereby the acceptance of human rights varies culturally. Possibly, for some rights to be recognised, there is a need to accept certain metaphysics. People from other cultures may not be able to acknowledge rights. Internal critics may be required to accept traditional beliefs. Thus, it can be argued that the concept of chi does not provide an understanding of human rights.

The argument is that even if we don't find adequate cultural justifications for universal rights, we may be able to find alternative moral justifications for them. These justifications may vary culturally. Donnelly (2007) and Oyowe (2014) support this view. Within the current framework, it can be argued that chi represents the moral worth of an individual and should not be considered a membership right to dignity. In the presence of universal rights, it may be argued that a traditional or customary practice may be in conflict with rights of dignity.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study explored how the philosophical gap between the affirmation and the lack of full practical realisation of human dignity in Nigeria can be diagnosed. It was argued that this diagnosis lies in the absence of a systematic relationship between the three levels of the unqualified worth of persons: the social and the institutional.

Thus, the theory presented two principal negative/reductive criticisms. First, it argued against the individualist theory that locates the worth of dignity in the private realm and, thus, need not be publicly recognised to have worth. Second, it argued against the theory that negates or denies the worth of dignity in the absence of public recognition. Rather, it argued, to distinguish dignity from being unrecognised, and to affirm basic personhood and worth without requiring recognition, is to affirm dignity.

It is hoped that the theory of multiple dignity offered herein will help integrationists redirect their efforts from defending the universality of human rights against integrative criticisms to offering practical, rights-oriented strategies for the protection of the person in Nigeria, that will engage the passionate yearnings of Nigerians for, and help achieve moral transformation and better life conditions.

Recommendations: The following recommendations are derived from the tripartite model and identify specific shortcomings rather than constituting a broad range of human rights reforms. The shortcomings include, inter alia, institutional indifference to persons' normative and legal dignity, social non-acknowledgement of relational recognition and, last but not least, moral and social exclusion of others' equal being.

Policy Implications and Practical Recommendations

Normative/Legal Dignity: Accountability and Effective Remedies

Constitutional and legal protections for human rights, in and of themselves, are inadequate. This is particularly true for more subjective human rights, like dignity, or honour. This is why, for example, the existence of an independent judiciary with the power to effectively remedy violations of human rights, in addition to mechanisms for the transparent and effective investigation of such violations, is an integral aspect of any adequate scheme for the protection of human dignity.

Relational Dignity: Ethical and Civic Education

Education should integrate constitutional rights with different moral languages, such as the non-humiliation principle, moral reciprocity, and the subject's onto-ethical worth. Educating students on these principles may require engaging different moral traditions, e.g. Igbo moral philosophies, with other universal moral theories and principles. The objective of this exercise should not be to inculcate students with the values of various cultures. Rather, it should be to enable students to appreciate legal (constitutional) rights as well as ethical rights, and to be able to frame ethical claims in terms of moral relations.

Ontological Dignity: Protecting Equal Status Against Social Ranking

Because dignity is inviolable, ethical and public policies must reject practices which condition the defence of human rights, human dignity, and fundamental freedoms on social, moral, ethical, religious, political, economic or other conditions. Policies which require that the dignity of individuals be protected because they are socially useful must be condemned. The same must be said for policies which restrict the protection of the dignity of an individual because of that individual's ethnicity, religion, social condition, disability, age, gender, moral behaviour, sexual orientation, or other condition.

Rights-Compatible Community Participation

Relational Dignity supports community participation, restorative practices, local mediation and other civil engagement initiatives when they improve recognition and access to justice. The integration of various cultural practices should be a legal bench complement. Nothing in a community should be given preference over the dignity and legal rights of vulnerable persons. Thus, the two should be complementary; that is, public institutions should be open to relativism while upholding the minimum standards of the modern legal order. Likewise, culturally relative practices should recognise the universal standards of equal dignity and be subjected to the same criticism.

Leadership and Civil Society as Mediating Institutions

The relational dimension of the model focuses on the mediation between law and ordinary morality. It identifies a variety of actors, including politicians, religious and traditional authorities, professionals, teachers, journalists, and civil society, as key intermediaries between the two. Theorising about human rights in this way encourages a strategic integration of three elements in human rights advocacy: the production of evidence and legal analysis, and the formulation of moral and public advocacy that renders constitutionally guaranteed human dignity and rights as constraints and preferences in the given context.

Bridging Theory and Practice

The model doesn't assert that violence and institutional collapse will disappear with the completion of philosophical restoration. Rather, the model claims that the case for the protection of persons would be

stronger if reasons to uphold it are found at all three levels of dignity simultaneously. If we find reasons to protect persons at all three levels of dignity, a person would have dignity in all three of those senses, and a dignity regime would be in effect.

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