

## Solidarity Practices Among The Igbos And The Framework Of Ubuntu Solidarity.

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### Abstract

Solidarity constitutes a foundational principle in both the indigenous Igbo worldview of southeastern Nigeria and the broader African philosophy of Ubuntu. While Ubuntu has achieved global recognition as the quintessential expression of African communitarian ethics encapsulated in the maxim "I am because we are", the Igbo conceptualization of solidarity, expressed through concepts such as *igwebuiké* (unity is strength), *onye aghala nwanne ya* (be your brother's keeper), and the *Igbo apprenticeship system*, represent a distinctive articulation of communal obligation embedded within specific historical, economic, and spiritual frameworks. This study undertakes a comparative philosophical analysis of solidarity practices among the Igbo people in relation to Ubuntu solidarity. Drawing on recent scholarship in African philosophy, ethnographic accounts, and analyses of the Igbo apprenticeship system as a contemporary manifestation of solidarity economics, this paper argues that Igbo solidarity practices both affirm and complicate Ubuntu's claims to universal African communitarianism. Beyond minor nuances, both traditions emphasize relational personhood, mutual care, and collective flourishing. The study concludes that examining Igbo solidarity alongside Ubuntu offers a more nuanced understanding of solidarity's operation in African contexts and provides resources for addressing contemporary challenges of social cohesion and economic development.

**Keywords:** Igbo, Ubuntu, solidarity, *igwebuiké*, apprenticeship, and communitarianism.

### 1. Introduction

The concept of solidarity occupies a central place in African philosophical discourse, particularly through the widely recognized framework of Ubuntu. Emerging primarily from Southern African linguistic and cultural contexts, Ubuntu has been articulated as a comprehensive ethical orientation emphasizing the relational constitution of personhood and the primacy of communal well-being over individual autonomy.<sup>1,2</sup> The phrase "I am because we are" has become shorthand for an entire philosophical tradition that posits human flourishing as inextricably linked to collective flourishing.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Ubuntu represents but one articulation of solidarity among Africa's diverse philosophical traditions. The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, numbering approximately forty million and comprising one of Africa's largest ethnic groups have developed distinctive solidarity practices and concepts that warrant careful examination alongside Ubuntu. These include *igwebuiké* (unity is strength), *onye aghala nwanne ya* (be your brother's keeper or do not abandon your sibling), the age-grade system of communal labor, the Igbo apprenticeship system (*igba boi*), and the *Mbari* artistic tradition embodying communal responsibility for cosmic and social harmony.<sup>4</sup>

This study addresses three interconnected research questions: First, what are the foundational solidarity concepts and practices in traditional and contemporary Igbo society? Second, how do these practices relate philosophically to Ubuntu solidarity where do they converge, where do they diverge, and what tensions emerge? Third, what implications does this comparative analysis hold for understanding solidarity's operation in African contexts and its relevance to contemporary development challenges?

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond philosophical taxonomy. Understanding the distinctive contours of Igbo solidarity illuminates how African communities have historically organized collective action, distributed resources, and maintained social cohesion without centralized state apparatuses. Furthermore, examining points of tension between Igbo

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Emeka Ejike and Chammah J. Kaunda, "Ubuntu and Samae Philosophical Assist Towards Agapeic Humanism," *The Philosophical Forum* 55, no. 4 (2024): 340, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12375>.

<sup>2</sup> Janestic Mwende Twikirize, Sharlotte Tusasiirwe, and Rugare Mugumbate, eds., (2023). *Ubuntu Philosophy and Decolonising Social Work Fields of Practice in Africa* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group), 15-18.

<sup>3</sup> Chukwuemeka Anyikwa, (2025). "Global Health and the Dialectics of Solidarity through Ubuntu and European Perspectives," *BMJ Global Health* 10, no. 12 (2025): 3, <https://gh.bmj.com/content/10/12/e019259>.

<sup>4</sup> Biko Agozino et al. (2020). "Mbari and Ubuntu in Indigenous Africana Criminologies," in *Routledge Handbook of Africana Criminologies* (London: Routledge), 45-47.

particularism and Ubuntu universalism offers critical resources for addressing contemporary challenges from ethnic polarization to economic inequality that require reimagining solidarity across difference.

## 2. Principle of Ubuntu Solidarity

### 2.1 Philosophical Foundations of Ubuntu Solidarity

Ubuntu is a word from the languages and cultures of Bantu-speaking people of Southern Africa, the philosophy that guides Ubuntu embodies an understanding of being human as one who becomes a person with others. The term itself is based on the Nguni saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* that “a person is a person through other persons” which has been developed into an elaborate ethical system by philosophers including John Mbiti, Kwame Gyekye and Thaddeus Metz.<sup>5</sup>

Mbiti’s influential formulation encompasses the ontological aspect of Ubuntu: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>6</sup> This statement inverts the individualistic, Cartesian starting point of the *cogito* by suggesting that community is logically and existentially prior to individual self-consciousness. Personhood is not something that is simply given, nor that we are born with; it is achieved through our participation in communal life and the obligation of one to another. As Metz puts the doctrinal claim at the heart of Ubuntu, moral obligations are not mere social conventions but necessities which flow from who we are as persons.<sup>7</sup>

Ubuntu ethics give priority to community building through virtues such as compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and hospitality.<sup>8</sup> The philosophy also goes beyond interpersonal relations; it includes environmental stewardship and ancestral veneration whom we embrace as our people extends beyond the living to include the unborn in a community that encompasses the recently departed. This broad understanding of community (as Americans are called to understand it) puts some meaning into obligations that go beyond self-interest and a closed circle of kin.

### 2.2 Ubuntu Practice and African Experience

The Ubuntu solidarity takes place in different fields of social life. In healthcare settings, Ubuntu principles guide community caregiving for the sick and elderly, traditional healing networks, and shared child-rearing practices. The South African Ritshidze community-led HIV care monitoring initiative is a contemporary embodiment of Ubuntu social solidarity engaged with 21st-century health equity challenges, showcasing how vernacular philosophical concepts can be harnessed to address structural inequities.<sup>9</sup>

In economic contexts, Ubuntu manifests itself in practices like *Letsema*, a notion in Southern Africa embodying values-driven partnerships and shared responsibility for development, and *Harambee* in Kenya (the self-help traditions of communities investing in schools, health centers or public goods). These practices embody Ubuntu’s insistence that one cannot actively pursue the good life as an individual without consideration of other lives.

But scholarly critique has made more complex than romanticised readings of Ubuntu as undifferentiated communalism. Motsamai Molefe shows how relationships between agents and features of autonomy and responsibility can be compatible with relational obligations in contexts where individual success or personal honor is upheld socially.<sup>10</sup> Ubuntu hence comes forth not as the oppositional of individuality but instead its rightful foundation, a vehicle in which true self-actualization happens alongside, rather than in opposition to, social embedding.

### 2.3 Ubuntu's Universalist Aspirations

Ubuntu philosophy has inherent universalist aspirations. If personhood is the relational essence of our being, and if our moral obligations derive from the ontological fact of our humanity’s interconnectedness, then all solidarity must in principle transcend ethnic, national or religious boundaries. The philosophy’s emphasis on common humanity (as both in Sotho-Tswana variants) gestures toward a universal moral community where all persons deserve recognition and care. But this universalist dimension exists in tension with the cultural specificity of Ubuntu. Detractors have asked whether Ubuntu’s moral lexicon translates across cultural frontiers without distortion, and whether its communitarian emphasis sufficiently safeguards individual rights as well as minority interests. These tensions become especially salient when Ubuntu is considered alongside alternative African solidarity traditions, including those of the Igbo that more explicitly articulate particularistic dimensions of communal obligation.

<sup>5</sup> Janestic Mwendu Twikirize, Rugare Mugumbate and Sharlotte Tusasiirwe, (2024).

*Ubuntu Philosophy and Decolonising Social Work Fields of Practice*, (New York: Routledge), 15-18.

<sup>6</sup> Chukwuemeka Anyikwa, (2025). "Global Health and the Dialectics of Solidarity through Ubuntu and European Perspectives," 4.

<sup>7</sup> Janestic Mwendu Twikirize, Rugare Mugumbate and Sharlotte Tusasiirwe, (2024).

*Ubuntu Philosophy and Decolonising Social Work Fields of Practice*, 20-22.

<sup>8</sup> Janestic Mwendu Twikirize, Rugare Mugumbate and Sharlotte Tusasiirwe, (2024).

*Ubuntu Philosophy and Decolonising Social Work Fields of Practice*, 20-22.

<sup>9</sup> Chukwuemeka Anyikwa, (2025). "Global Health and the Dialectics of Solidarity through Ubuntu and European Perspectives," 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Motsamai Molefe, cited in "Global Health and the Dialectics of Solidarity," 3.

### 3. Igbo Perspectives to Ubuntu Solidarity

#### 3.1 Fundamental Concepts: *Igwebuiké* and *Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya*

The most notable philosophical expression of Igbo solidarity is the idea of *igwebuiké*. Translating to “there is strength in numbers” or “a great multitude makes for great strength,” *igwebuiké* argues that a collective identity and action can be found at the heart of individual and communal livelihood.<sup>11</sup> The ideal is not merely descriptive but prescriptive: it bears a normative force that requires community members to prioritize the collective and promote one another’s efforts.

The closely related *onye aghala nwanne ya* “be your brother’s keeper” or “do not forsake your sibling.” When Professor Chukwunyeré Nwosu lectured in 2024 on the principles of solidarity in Igbo communities, he spoke about this idea: “It translates to no individual or person should leave behind the brother or the relative,” and is a concept “to make sure that communal life and the well-being of everyone are taken into consideration and protected at all times.”<sup>12</sup> Nwosu *khlinkerl* ndemended this Igbo principle at the same time as Ubuntu, noting that (both) “reflected the warm-rich African heritage premised on values such as compassion, consideration, empathy, kindness, equality and human dignity and oneness.

There is a striking resonance between the Igbo and Ubuntu concepts. *Igwebuiké*, *Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya*, Ubuntu and Strength in Unity are supposed to largely mean the same, according to the Tekedia platform as well.<sup>13</sup> Both traditions base solidarity on ontological claims about human interconnectedness and derive ethical obligations from the realization that individual well-being is inextricably tied to communal well-being.

#### 3.2 Igbo Apprenticeship System towards Ubuntu Solidarity Practice

One of the most unique Igbo solidarity practices (which is known throughout the world) is the *igba boi* system of apprenticeship. This indigenous economic institution that has existed for more than a hundred years consists of an established businessperson (*oga*) taking-in an apprentice (*boi*) for a predetermined period, often five to seven years during which the apprentice learns the trade while providing free labor. After some time, the *oga* honestly grants the apprentice startup money (*ego idu ulo*) to set up a solo shop of their own often times in the same line of work.<sup>14</sup>

This system prefers solidarity economics in many layers. First, it operates on the principles of reciprocity and intergenerational obligation; the *oga* who benefited from an apprenticeship now is expected to “settle” apprentices, who in turn will settle future generations. Second, it intentionally generates rivals, which dilutes market share and makes it possible for a wider segment of the population to take part in economic life. As the Tekedia analysis notes, “a man enters a business sector and wins market share. Then, one day, he makes the decision of his own accord to sacrifice market share and instantly creates competition...Nobody is super-rich but everybody’s doing just fine!”<sup>15</sup>

The apprentice system embodies *onye aghala nwanne ya* in a particularized economic manner. It’s not a victory in terms of total market control; it’s “quantifiable support to stakeholders” how many other people you’ve empowered to achieve economic independence with your help.<sup>16</sup> This is a radical alternative to the highly individualistic accumulation of capital, and illustrates how principles of solidarity can shape whole economies.

That resilience and adaptability of the system is evidenced by its persistence through colonialism, civil war, and Nigeria’s incorporation into global capitalism. Experts estimate that the Igbo apprenticeship system has given rise to thousands of successful entrepreneurs and comprises one of the world’s largest indigenous business incubation networks.<sup>22</sup> It is credited with the phenomenal post-civil war economic recovery of Igbo communities that reconstructed commercial network and accumulated capital despite having lost nearly all assets during the 1967-1970 conflict.

#### 3.3 Age-Grade and Collective Labor towards Ubuntu Solidarity Practice

In traditional Igbo society, solidarity was organized through age-grade associations (*ogbo*) that brought together individuals who had undergone coming-of-age rites at the same time. They served as mutual aid societies, labor pools and social insurance systems.<sup>23</sup> Of these, one of the more illustrative practices was the construction of houses collectively: at a certain age men would have their houses built by their age grade, with said beneficiary having contributed to building others’ houses in that grade.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Ohanaeze Ndigbo Retreat Calls For Release Of Nnamdi Kanu, Charts Developmental Path,” National Network, June 11, 2025; <https://nationalnetworkonline.com/2025/06/11/ohanaeze-ndigbo-retreat-demands-nnamdi-kanus-release-charts-path-for-unity-development/>.

<sup>12</sup> Kamalu, quoted in “Mbari and Ubuntu in Indigenous Africana Criminologies,” 46.

<sup>13</sup> Ndubuisi Ekekwe, (2020). “I Am Because We Are Ubuntu,” *Tekedia*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.tekedia.com/i-am-because-we-are-ubuntu/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ndubuisi Ekekwe, (2020). “I Am Because We Are Ubuntu,”

<sup>15</sup> Ndubuisi Ekekwe, (2020). “I Am Because We Are Ubuntu,”

<sup>16</sup> Chukwuemeka Anyikwa, (2025). “Global Health and the Dialectics of Solidarity through Ubuntu and European Perspectives,” 2-3.

This tradition of building homes is solidarity in its finest form. Other than a transactional exchange of labor, it expressed the ontological conviction that “the well-being of each member was seen as vital to the entire community.”<sup>17</sup> This practice nurtured a sense of social cohesion via shared responsibility and what scholars refer to as “joyful contribution”, labor that was performed not under duress but rather in celebration of the bonds between members of a community. The Igbo (Nigeria) proverb “Ònye kwe, chi ya ekwe” (If one flourishes, their personal spirit flourishes) embodies this understanding of interconnected flourishing.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.4 Kinship-Based Solidarity (Umunna System)

The most fundamental model of Igbo solidarity is the kinship system, particularly the *umunna* (patrilineal kindred). The *umunna* serves as the primary unit of social organization, providing identity, security, and support for its members. Within this structure, solidarity is expressed through shared responsibilities such as conflict resolution, marriage arrangements, burial rites, and welfare support.

Philosophically, the *umunna* reflects a communitarian conception of personhood in which the individual is constituted through relationships. One becomes a “person” (*mmadu*) not merely by biological birth but through active participation in the life of the community. This stands in contrast to Western individualistic models and aligns with broader African philosophical perspectives that emphasize relational identity and moral interdependence.

In Igbo cosmology, the *umunna* operates on principles of collective decision-making and mutual aid. Members are expected to contribute to communal projects and assist one another in times of need. According to Victor Uchendu, the Igbo kinship system “ensures that no individual is left entirely to fend for himself in the face of life’s challenges”<sup>19</sup>. This model of solidarity fosters a strong sense of belonging and social accountability.

### 4. Recommendations towards better Future for Igbo Ubuntu Solidarity

Informed by this analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Nigerian and Igbo Institutions:

**Document and Preserve Solidarity Practices:** Oral traditions, proverbs, and practices that embody Igbo solidarity should be systematically documented and preserved. Academic institutions and cultural organizations can play a key role in researching and publishing indigenous knowledge systems. This not only safeguards cultural heritage but also provides intellectual resources for future generations.

**Nurture Hybrid Institutional Forms:** Policy should enable hybrid forms of solidarity that combine existing informal mechanisms of solidarity with formal institutional structures for example, the tutor-based principles embodied in apprenticeship dynamics within technical and vocational education programs.

**Extend Solidarity Beyond Ethnic Boundaries:** Igbo institutions should develop targeted programming that extends solidarity practices across ethnic boundaries to create coalitions with other Nigerian communities around broad economic and development interests.

#### For Development Partners:

**Learn from Models of Indigenous Solidarity:** International development organizations can start starting at Igbo solidarity practices as potential fashions for inclusive financial and social improvement initiatives, recognizing that indigenous establishments might have tighter keep in more sorts than externally applied frameworks.

**Support Rather than Supplant:** Development processes should reinforce already functioning solidarity institutions, rather than replace them with formal structures -- since reliance on relational practices is contingent upon community ownership.

**Foster Community-to-Community Learning:** Create platforms to share practices of solidarity between African communities so that Igbo apprenticeship systems, Ubuntu-based initiatives and other indigenous traditions of solidarity can learn mutually.

<sup>17</sup> Chukwuemeka Anyikwa, (2025). "Global Health and the Dialectics of Solidarity through Ubuntu and European Perspectives," 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> Ndubuisi Ekekwe, (2020). “I Am Because We Are Ubuntu,”

<sup>19</sup> Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 43.

### **Conclusion**

The above study has also related the Igbo people solidarity practice with the Ubuntu solidarity practice revealing many meaningful convergences and enough divergences. Both traditions are rooted in ontological claims about how personhood is relationally constituted and derive ethical obligations from the insight that individual flourishing is inextricably linked with communal flourishing. Both operationalize solidarity through tangible institutional mechanisms, apprenticeship systems, age-grade associations, collective labor practices that give form to economic activity and social relations.

This study demands a graduated understanding of solidarity, one that recognizes strongest obligation to those with whom one shares thickest ties but still retains baseline obligation to all persons. Such an understanding attests to the complex moral psychology of human beings who glimpse being at once embedded in particular communities and called to acknowledge universal humanity.

Igbo solidarity tradition provides great reagents for tackling modern problems of development, social cohesion and economic inclusion. The apprenticeship-rain-alternative system provides a model of solidarity economics that shares opportunity instead of concentrating wealth. The age-grade tradition is an example of how communities take initiative and organize mutual aid to meet needs that benefit the collective. But scaling those best practices beyond in-person communities and deepening solidarity across ethnic lines will remain pressing challenges.

As African societies wrestle with globalization's challenges and promises, indigenous solidarity traditions can transmit vital resources for envisioning alternatives to both atomistic individualism and coercive collectivism. The Igbo understanding that apprenticeship, age-grade, "umu ada", "onye aghala nwanne ya", we do not abandon our siblings articulates a vision of human flourishing grounded in mutual care and collective responsibility. That vision, developed in conversation with Ubuntu and other African philosophical traditions can help in the construction of more just and inclusive societies all over the continent and beyond.