

**APPRAISING *ONYE AGHALA NWANNE YA IGBO* IDEOLOGY AS A
FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING SUICIDE TREND AMONG
UNDERGRADUATES IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The increasing rate of suicide among undergraduates in Nigeria has in the recent times necessitated the urgency of a potent framework that will efficiently curb the surge. Thus, this study aimed at appraising *onye aghala nwanne ya Igbo* ideology as a framework for addressing suicide trend among undergraduates in Nigeria. To set the stage for discussion of this topic, efforts were made to review factors generally leading to suicide especially in educational institutions. In this regard, various socio-economic factors were identified to have attacked and weakened the idea of collectivism in communities and by extension educational institutions. This is believed to have birthed an era of heightened individualism that is negatively affecting human relationships and such mutual assistance derivable from social collectivism. This appears to orchestrate a trend of suicide in educational institutions especially among undergraduates which portends serious problem to families, educational institutions and the Nigerian state. Consequently, the paper utilised the instrumentality of *onye aghala nwanne ya Igbo* ideology to unravel suicide trends especially among undergraduates. It as well articulated possible ideals in *onye aghala nwanne ya* ideology such as, relationships built on unconditional love and acceptance of one another which can serve as a framework for restoring and strengthening brotherliness, mutual help and cordial relationships in efforts towards addressing the trend of suicide in educational institutions in Nigeria. The study therefore recommends the following; families, religious institutions and various school managements should make concerted efforts to mediate in their children/followers/students, the virtue of unconditional

acceptance to love and treat their neighbours as brothers regardless of ethnic, religious or other affiliations and to; consciously set examples to these young individuals through social activities, acts that portray selfless love for others and their welfare.

Keywords: Philosophy, *Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya*, Collectivism, Unconditional Love, Suicide.

Introduction

Man's social existence is not without problems such as suicide. Suicide which has become a trend in many educational institutions is usually believed to be consequent on the fact that no 'man is an island' as often used to portray the insufficient nature of man. The awareness of insufficiency of man with regards to independently providing solutions to all his problems and the inevitable need to rely on the collective and complimentary role of others for survival came through his own experiences (Onebunne, 2020). In other words, as a rational being, man discovered that in the absence of collective and/or mutual support, he may not survive and lead a comfortable and fulfilled life. This gave recourse to the idea of collective and/or complementary living as a useful avenue for surviving the challenges posed by other vagaries of life. Consequently, most societies have over time evolved and freely subscribed to such belief system in which all men are bound to live and uphold the welfare of others. By this, everyone is carried along with no one left behind as obtainable in the Igbo traditional society which operates on a system of collectivism often expressed through such ideologies as *onye aghala nwanne ya* (be your brother's keeper). This is believed to serve as the bedrock for friendly relationships and achievements. Accordingly, the *Onye aghala nwanne ya* ideology is considered as a reliable traditional life pattern and a basis for promoting collective social welfare. In this regard, efforts are often made to pass down this ideology from one generation to another, to ensure that individuals at every point in life become their brothers' keeper and thus work to ensure one another's welfare in any environment.

However, in recent times, the ideology of *onye aghala nwanne ya* as expressed in peaceful coexistence, sharing of responsibilities and catering for the welfare of others appear to be diminishing in the society. The present-day society appears to be characterized by desperate quests among many individuals for self-gratification and braggadocio, with little or no consideration to the welfare of other people in the family, religious settings and/or school environments. This situation is believed to have resulted in distorted relationships that is now wide spread among the different tiers of the society. Thus, denying many people at different levels the needed opportunity for survival that is otherwise made possible through the *onye aghala nwanne ya* ideology. It has as well created animosity and wide gap among individuals who ordinarily would relate, share or lend any form of support in ensuring the welfare of one another especially in the present period of wide spread harsh socio-economic conditions in Nigeria. The implication being that, life in our present-day society seems to be deviating from such traditional ideological principles of collective welfare. It may therefore be safe to hypothesize that such ideology like *onye aghala nwanne ya* appears to be weakened in the contemporary times. The situation above is believed to occasion feelings of dejection, helplessness and hopelessness among many people with regards to their socio-economic survival. Also, the situation seems to often overwhelm many people and trigger such culturally abhorred trends like suicide. This then implies a possible link between the weakening of such

ideological foundations like *onye aghala nwanne ya* and the trend of suicide in educational institutions in Nigeria.

Suicide is a social menace. It has in the recent times become a trend in Nigeria especially among young people. This ugly trend is often traced to many factors. Such factors according to Amare et al (2018) include harsh economic conditions, inability on the part of some students to meet up with academic demands, poor human relationship culminating into pressure and many psychological problems such as depression among others. In response, attempts in the form of government policies, religious activities, therapies among others have been channeled towards addressing the trend of suicide with none providing a possible lasting solution. Thus, in a renewed effort to grasping other possible ways or frameworks through which the trend of suicide could be ameliorated, it becomes very essential that some salient questions be addressed. Among such question is, what other ideology can provide a better framework through which the problem of suicide is understood and addressed? However, note should be taken first about the fact that, it is in espousing the possible causes of suicide and associated problems that anyone can possibly offer suitable response towards addressing it. In other words, a problem such as suicide may persist until there is an attempt to trace possible root causes as well as inherent problems. Thus, the writers hold the view that, one may not be able to participate in an appraising such ideology as *onye aghala nwanne ya* especially with regards to addressing social menace such as suicide until there is an attempt to first comprehend fully the concepts of *onye aghala nwanne ya* Igbo ideology, suicide and other major thrusts of the topic. At this point therefore, there is need to pause and clarify the major thrusts of the topic in order to ensure intelligibility and flow of thought.

Conceptual clarifications

Meaning of Ideology

Every society is characterised by a belief system. This belief system shapes individuals' worldviews and the formation of different ideologies needed for social action and change. As a concept, ideology can be traced to the eighteenth-century era of French philosophical thought. Thus, Zajda (2014) stated that the concept ideology (*idéologie*) was first devised by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy in 1795. Tracy used the concept of ideology to define ideas that are to be utilized in clarifying and improving discourse of public issues. The concept was formed by combining Greek 'idea' (form) and 'logos' (knowledge). Ideology was thus used in Europe during the nineteenth century by various philosophers. The concept 'ideology', has been given numerous meanings and interpretations, ranging from a set of ideas, beliefs or values used to justify the system, systematic doctrines, cultural beliefs that legitimize particular social and political system. Ideology according to Zajda (2014), refers to a system of dominant ideas and beliefs affecting every sphere of human social interaction and organization, be they political, economic, scientific, educational or cultural. In other words, ideology denotes any organized and all-inclusive doctrine, which is used to explain the society, its complex social institutions, power, class, status, wealth, and education. Following this line of thought, ideology is used as a doctrine for social action often aimed at effecting some changes in any system. An example of such doctrine is collectivism as embedded in *onye aghala nwanne ya* which is

aimed at maintaining complementary living as well as putting a check on certain social menace like suicide and such ravaging effect it portends.

***Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya* Igbo ideology: An Insight**

Onye aghala nwanne ya when translated means, 'be your brother's keeper'. It is one of the major ideologies upon which the Igbo people hinge their social existence. There is no doubt the possibility that such ideology as *onye aghala nwanne ya* could as well be expressed in different ways in other Nigerian indigenous societies and/or cultures. *Onye aghala nwanne ya* is an ideology of love and acceptance that is required to guide social relationships for a stable society devoid of social menace. Of course, one cannot actually be one's brother's keeper outside love and acceptance. Thus, *onye aghala nwanne ya* according to Onebunne (2020), suggests that for a people to strengthen their collectivism, they must love and accept one another. This love and acceptance for the author must be unconditional. This is based on the fact that, it is through unconditional acceptance, loving and serving one another, being kind, having fellowship, offering hospitality, carrying one another's burden and encouraging one another, that any man can actually express being his brother's keeper.

Again, *Onye aghala nwanne ya* is an ethical principle that supports and encourages relationships on the basis that everyone assumes responsibility for the welfare of another. Thus, in this type of relationship, when the other man has a specific need, requires support in striving towards a goal, would enjoy being included in an activity, or simply could use the reassurance of care, another strives to be responsive (Onebunne, 2020). Importantly, such is done with no encumbrances or strings attached. In any case, the benefit enhances or maintains the welfare of the recipient, and the recipient incurs no debt. This ideology guides the Igbo societies and ensures that problems in whatever form are solved collectively and no one is left to be overwhelmed by any problem amounting to or predisposing such person to self-harm or suicide.

As a pluralized state that is deeply emersed in serious socio-economic problems, many Nigerians appear to suffer helplessly and hopelessly. A lot of well-to-do people are so engrossed with the responsibility of catering for their immediate welfare that they now have little or no time to care for others. This has resulted in heightened individualism as against the spirit of collectivism that the culture of the Igbo people is hinged on. The care and assistance that was otherwise made available through collectivism appear to be indeed lacking or dwindling, thus creating so much room for severe difficulties for a lot of people including the undergraduates. It is as well resulting to family-related conflicts and problems, individual problems, negative self-images, academic stress, low grade in school, substance abuse, loneliness, depression among others. The above is believed to culminate in predisposing or making some undergraduates more vulnerable to suicide. The prevalent trend of suicide in tertiary institutions in the recent times could serve to validate the above avowal. However, in an attempt to explicate the problem of suicide among undergraduates in Nigeria with the view to addressing it, the *onye aghala nwanne ya* ideology is considered important. This is for the fact that the ideology is believed to embody some underlying guideline or approach that can be espoused to address the menace of suicide among undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary

institutions by engendering acceptance and love for one another who may or may not be related by blood.

Undergraduates: Who are they?

When an undergraduate is mentioned, what comes to mind is a student of a tertiary institution. Accordingly, Ugbagir (2014) describes an undergraduate as an individual currently running an academic program in a college or university, who is yet to receive a degree, a diploma or a national certificate in education as the case may be. In other words, undergraduates comprise of all students attending academic programmes up to the level of a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. On the part of Egbe (2016), an undergraduate is a student attending a post-secondary education and prior to post-graduate education. This implies that undergraduates are different from postgraduate students who usually have already been awarded a bachelor's degree or its equivalent in relevant courses. Inferring from the supra stated submissions, undergraduates are students of tertiary institutions that have graduated from high school and have been admitted into university, polytechnic, monotechnic, college of education among others, and are currently running for a bachelor's degree, diploma or national certificate in education. Worthy of note is the fact that undergraduates usually fall within the age bracket of young individuals considered to be vulnerable to suicide (WHO, 2014).

Suicide: Meaning and Sources

Suicide is a practice that has been in existence in the history of man. Thus, it has attracted the attention of various scholars over the years. Suicide as a construct was first used by Sir Thomas Browne in his 'Religio Medici' in 1642 and subsequently by Walter Charleton in 1651 (Barraclough & Shepherd, 1994). It is however worthy of note that prior to the word 'suicide', self-destruction, self-killing and self-murder were in practice. Suicide has been defined by Schneidman (2008), as an intentional act that causes harm to a person, amounting to death and committed by person himself in the absence of contribution from any external agency particularly in the commencement of the act.

Remarkably, suicide as a social menace is regarded as the second leading cause of death worldwide especially among young people aged 15-29 years (World Health Organization, 2018). This is the age bracket within which most undergraduates fall. Also, over 79% of global suicide attempts occurred in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), including sub-Saharan African region. Nigeria is not exempted from the increasing trends in suicide especially among young adults. Accordingly, with a population of over 200 million people, the country has become one of the hotspots of suicide in the world with a suicide rate of 17.3 per 100,000 definitely above the global (10.5 per 100,000) as well as Africa's (12.0 per 100,000) estimates (WHO, 2019). However, Muanya et al (2019) reported that 20% of all suicide cases in Nigeria occur among young people aged 13-19 years. The above implies that young people many of whom are undergraduates are at high risk of/are vulnerable to committing suicide. Research evidence in Nigeria lists the use of chemicals, self-cutting, burning with kerosene, hanging and firearms as prevalent methods of suicide (Oyetunji et al, 2021).

Notably, in traditional societies such as the Igbo nation as maybe applicable in other societies, suicide is considered a sacrilege or taboo. Consequently, there are various cultural prescriptions advanced to discourage and curtail incidences of suicide among individuals. Among such prescriptions are social welfare, care for the bereaved, bad treatment at death, stigma, excommunication and/or banishment of any family whose member attempts or commits suicide among others (Ele, 2017). When excommunication or banishment is applied, interaction or any form of relationship between the family in question and other families in the community ceases. In fact, most times, such family is forced into exile. The above practices show just how distasteful suicide is seen in the traditional Igbo society. It also helped in checkmating the prevalence of suicide in the traditional societies. However, suicidal gesture, attempted suicide, well successful suicide cases appear to have become extensive in the current Nigeria (WHO, 2019). Thus, increasing number of deaths from suicide has become a major source of worry across the country even in tertiary institutions.

Many factors have been fingered with regards to undergraduates' vulnerability to suicide. Such factors include and not limited to financial difficulties, failures or low grade in school, academic stress, substance abuse, family related conflicts and problems, personal problems, and achievement-related conflicts, negative self-images, loneliness, bully from peers among others (WHO, 2008). Many undergraduates have to deal with difficult economic situations such as continuous failure to pay their fees, buy crucial materials for their academic activities, get food and clothing for themselves or handle the stress arising from school activities and access sound medical care while on campus (Eneh, 1998). Others that possess adverse self-esteem may as well contemplate engaging in self-destructive behaviours. In this regard, Oh et al (2008) averred that poor academic performance could as well aggravate depression and suicidal behaviors among these students. Indeed, these factors as found among many undergraduates in Nigeria could predispose them to suicide. In their own view, Ajibola and Agunbiade (2022) summarised the myriads of factors that increase the risk of suicide among undergraduates to include family factors, academic challenges/pressures, substance abuse/alcoholism, and financial constraints. What is more, Amare (2018) emphasised that weak family ties, poor family structure and parental relationship, improper parenting style and poor social relationship could make any student to consider suicide as the best option. With the above, one can infer undergraduates' very many sources of vulnerability to suicide. Thus, given the very many sources of suicide, a question that arises at this time is, how can *onye aghala nwanne ya* Igbo philosophy possibly serve in the fight against suicide especially among undergraduates?

***Onye Aghala Nwanne ya Igbo* ideology: A framework for addressing suicide among undergraduates in Nigeria**

Inherent in the *onye aghala nwanne ya Igbo* ideology is a very crucial awareness of being one's own brother's keeper. As a framework, the idea of being one's own brother's keeper is regarded as one of mechanisms inherent in the *onye aghala nwanne ya Igbo* ideology that can be utilised in tackling the trend of suicide. Be that as it may, the idea necessitates an important question which must first be answered. Who is a brother? As captured or reflected in the *onye aghala nwanne ya Igbo* ideology, a brother does not strictly mean or suggest one's own biological relative. A brother as captured in the ideology goes beyond blood relationship to include or

incorporate other people that are close to one by other reasons such as acquaintance, affiliation and so on. In this regard, one's very own immediate neighbours, friends, schoolmates and associates are also regarded as one's brothers whether or not they share any blood relationship. Thus, in tertiary institutions, every member of the school community has their students, teachers, classmates, lodge mates, roommates and any other person that they come in contact with within the school environment as brother. With this mindset and consciousness, it will now become easier to accept and acknowledge one's fellow in any immediate environment as one's own brother as well as become properly predisposed to exhibit the right attitude and extend gestures of unconditional love while relating with them as would be naturally done to those related to us by blood.

The above as one of the very bases of the Igbo ideology of *onye aghala nwanne ya* is regarded as an important step in the right direction in any attempts or efforts geared towards addressing social menace like suicide. This is for the reason that it will first of all work in providing the needed fertile ground (right mindset/predisposition) upon which people will stand to consciously cultivate the virtue of encouraging one another in times of difficulties thereby strengthening collectivism among themselves even when they are not necessarily related by blood. With this, little or no room will be left for depression and other suicide triggering factors, as people would normally receive a level of care and support from their immediate neighbors (brothers). Many incidences of suicide have been traced to depression often resulting from financial difficulties, academic stress, achievement-related conflicts/failures or low grades in school, bullying, substance abuse, family-related conflicts and problems, personal problems, negative self-images, loneliness among others. Thus, accepting and extending unconditional love to one another in school through various means as prescribed by the *onye aghala nwanne ya* ideology will definitely be helpful in reducing stress and consequent depression possibly emanating therefrom as well as discourage and/or lessen the risk of suicidal thoughts and/or suicide. Suffice it here to state that, unconditional acceptance to love and serve one another is a practical way or approach through which *onye aghala nwanne ya* ideology can actually be expressed in order to tackle the trend of suicide.

It is worthy of note that the love and service to one another could serve as a driving force, enabling anyone to assume to a reasonable extent, the responsibility for the welfare of others through care, show of support towards another's life goals, reassuring one another of a better future especially in the face of difficulties among others. These amount to collective solution to problems which is a major foundation upon which the ideology of *onye aghala nwanne ya* is based. In other words, being kind, having friendship, offering hospitality, offering to carry one another's burden in whatever means possible and encouraging one another are made possible by love and commitment to service to others. The above no doubt, could serve as a potent framework in efforts such as; campaigns, policies, laws, etc. aimed at tackling the trend of suicide among undergraduates in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has been able to review suicide and its trends among undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions. In this study, suicide especially among undergraduates is believed to be traceable to the overwhelming inability of many undergraduates to handle stress often emanating from factors such as family-related conflicts and problems, financial difficulties, academic stress, failures or low grades in school, achievement-related conflicts, bullying, substance abuse, negative self-images, loneliness among others and made worse by individualism that now characterize our current society (even in schools). Many activities in the recent times have shown heightened individualism as against collectivism for which the traditional societies are known for. Many individuals hardly regard one another as brothers anymore. Consequently, there are little or no commitments towards the welfare of others. Thus, this paper concludes that ideals inherent in *onye aghala nwanne ya Igbo* ideology could provide a framework for developing a workable roadmap to addressing the trend of suicide. A calculated policies and campaigns that shed light on the ideals of *onye aghala nwanne ya Igbo* ideology will enable individuals to become properly predisposed to exhibit right attitudes and extend gestures of unconditional love when relating to individuals who may or may not be related to them by blood.

Recommendations

Through this discourse it has been demonstrated that heightened individualism especially in the face of the current unprecedented socio-economic hardship resulting to many family-related conflicts and problems, academic stress and failures, negative self-images, loneliness, substance abuse among students make up key factors behind the prevalent rate of suicide among undergraduates of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Consequently, the researchers believe that the family, religious institutions and various school managements have very important responsibilities which is to make concerted efforts to among other things;

- mediate in their children/followers/students, the virtue of unconditional acceptance to love and treat their neighbours as brothers regardless of ethnic, religious and/or other affiliations and to;
- consciously set examples to these young individuals through social activities, acts that portray selfless love for others and their welfare.

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