

MANY IMAGES IN ONE MIRROR: A Critical Discourse on the Philosophical Foundations of *Maazi*

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Abstract

This paper examines the *Maazi* greeting of the Ngwa people of Southeastern Nigeria as a philosophical and ethical compendium rather than a mere cultural ritual. Rooted in oral tradition, *Maazi* embodies a progressive structure - *Maazi : Nde* (respect and recognition), *Naawu : Nna-Nwa-afo* (goodwill and communal belonging), *Kaanka : Nkamaragi* (reciprocity and mutual flourishing), and *Dabiri : Anyi mkpewalachi* (rest, transcendence, and hope). Each stage encapsulates a moral philosophy that resonates with classical, African, and contemporary thought: Aristotle's virtue ethics, Kant's categorical imperative, Levinas' ethics of the Other, Ubuntu's communitarian ontology, Rawls' justice as fairness, and Nussbaum's capabilities approach. The study argues that the *Maazi* greeting functions as a mirror of Ngwa philosophy, reflecting respect

for human dignity, solidarity, and the pursuit of the good life (*eudaimonia*). Yet, it also highlights the danger of moral complacency in the face of exploitation, calling for a transformation from passive humanism to what is here termed “enlightened self-interest humanism.” Drawing on Marx’s class consciousness, Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism, and Habermas’ deliberative democracy, the paper contends that *Maazi* can serve as a philosophical resource for intercultural dialogue, democratic renewal, and human development. It concludes that *Maazi*, as a lived ethic, remains a vital contribution to global philosophical discourse on justice, recognition, and human flourishing.

Key Words: African ethics; communal solidarity; recognition; human flourishing; *Mazi* philosophy.

Introduction

Philosophy, in its most profound sense, begins with wonder at the ordinary. The human act of greeting - often dismissed as a mundane social gesture - reveals, upon closer reflection, a dense moral and metaphysical structure that mirrors how a people understand personhood, community, and existence. Among the Ngwa people of southeastern Nigeria¹, the greeting *Maazi* is not a mere linguistic token but a moral system encoded in everyday interaction. It embodies an ethical orientation toward life that harmonizes self-respect, communal solidarity, and transcendence.

¹ Geographically, the Ngwa are bounded on the north by Umuahia, on the west by Owerri and Mbaise, on the east by Ikot-Ekpene and Abak, and on the south by Ukwu. With a population of over 1.5 million people and a land area of about 900 square kilometers, the Ngwa constitute the largest clan among the Igbo-speaking peoples of Southeastern Nigeria. Oral tradition traces their origin to a major migration that took place between the late fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Ukwu Onyenweala, his sons Ngwaukwu, Nwoha, and Avosi, together with his brothers Nte (Ntigha) and Nsulu, crossed from the western bank of the Imo River to the east, leaving behind relatives in Mbaise and other communities. The swiftness of their crossing earned them the description *Ndi Ngwam ghe oma mmerela*—“the privileged people upon whom fortune smiles” - while those left behind were referred to as *Ndi Ohuhu* (Araelu, 2018; Dike, 2022; Erugo, 2013; Mgboji, 2013 & 2023; Ngwakwe, 2015; Nwaguru, 2012; Oriji, 2006;).

Through its layered expressions: *Maazi* - *Nde*; *Naawu* - *Nnanwa-afọ*; *Kaanka* - *Nkamaragi*, and *Dabiri* - *Anyi mkpewalachi*, the Ngwa articulate a worldview that situates human dignity within the web of communal reciprocity and cosmic continuity.

Yet, the philosophical richness of *Maazi* remains largely unexplored within academic discourse. African philosophy has long emphasized the centrality of community and relationality in moral thought (Gyekye, 1997; Menkiti, 1984; Mbiti, 1970), but less attention has been paid to how indigenous practices such as greeting function as moral texts - performative sites of ethical reasoning. This study, therefore, seeks to interpret *Maazi* not as folklore or custom but as philosophy: a living articulation of the good life (*eudaimonia*) grounded in recognition, justice, and human flourishing.

In doing so, the paper engages both African and global philosophical traditions. It draws from Aristotle's virtue ethics, Kant's deontological respect for persons, Rawls's conception of justice as fairness, and Habermas's communicative rationality to illuminate the universal dimensions of the *Maazi* ethic. It also employs Asouzu's (2004) principle of complementary reflection as a methodological lens, situating *Maazi* within the wider African metaphysical context that affirms the interdependence of being.

However, the paper equally recognizes the need for critical reinterpretation. The same communal ethic that nurtures peace and solidarity can, when un-examined, foster complacency and dependence. The Ngwa experience, marked by episodes of exploitation and marginalization despite their moral generosity, exposes the limits of an uncritical communal humanism. Thus, this work proposes an evolved moral framework - enlightened self-interest humanism - that integrates the virtues of *Maazi* with critical awareness, justice, and active responsibility.

Ultimately, this paper argues that *Maazi* encapsulates a philosophical anthropology that is both particular and universal. It is particular in its rootedness in Ngwa moral culture, yet universal in its resonance with enduring questions of dignity, reciprocity, and human flourishing. In uncovering the philosophical foundations of *Maazi*, this study contributes to the ongoing project of Africanizing philosophy while expanding the horizon of global moral thought through the wisdom of indigenous practice.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This study is grounded in the conviction that philosophy must interrogate the lived expressions of human rationality embedded in culture. In this sense, the Ngwa *Maazi* greeting functions as what Wiredu (1996) calls a “conceptual schema of thought,” through which a people articulate their moral universe. The greeting thus serves not merely as a linguistic or sociological object of analysis, but as a philosophical text - one that encodes an ontology of being-with-others (Onebunne, J. I., 2020; Okwuosa, L., Nwaoga, C. T., & Uroko, F. 2021) and a practical ethics of recognition, reciprocity, and transcendence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual basis of this study draws from three interrelated philosophical traditions:

African Communitarian Philosophy: Following Gyekye’s (1997) *moderate communitarianism* and Menkiti’s (1984) thesis of personhood, the study situates *Maazi* within the African moral vision that defines the self through community. Mbiti’s (1970) famous dictum, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am,” as well as the Igbo Philosophies of “*Onye aghala nwanne ya and Igwe bu ike*” (Muo, A., 2021; Okwuosa, L., Nwaoga, C. T., & Uroko, F., 2021; Onebunne, J. I. 2020; Unegbu, A. C., 2024) encapsulate this relational ontology that undergirds the *Maazi* ethic.

Virtue and Deontological Ethics: Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* (2009) and Kant’s (2002) *categorical imperative* provide universal frameworks for interpreting *Maazi* as both virtue-oriented and duty-oriented: virtue in the sense of cultivating communal goodwill, and duty in the sense of respecting human dignity.

Complementary Reflection: Asouzu’s (2004) *Ibuanyidanda* philosophy provides a meta-theoretical foundation. It asserts that reality is best understood as a network of mutual dependence, where no being exists in isolation. *Maazi* is thus read as a form of “complementary ethics” in which personal fulfilment and communal well-being are mutually reinforcing rather than oppositional.

Methodological Orientation

Philosophically, this paper adopts the hermeneutic-analytic method. The hermeneutic dimension involves interpreting the symbolic and linguistic structure of the *Mazai* greeting - *Maazi : Nde*,

Naawu : Nnanwa-afọ, Kaanka : Nkamaragi, and Dabiri : Anyi mkpewalachi - as articulations of metaphysical and moral ideas. Each stage is treated as a distinct yet interconnected expression of Ngwa moral reasoning about dignity, solidarity, justice, and transcendence.

The analytic dimension engages in conceptual clarification and philosophical reconstruction. Concepts such as recognition, reciprocity, humanism, and justice are examined both within the Ngwa cultural context and through comparative dialogue with global philosophical traditions - particularly Aristotle, Kant, Rawls, Hegel, and Habermas. This approach ensures that the *Maazi* ethic is neither romanticized as a cultural relic nor diluted into abstract universalism, but appreciated as a living moral framework with both indigenous and global relevance.

Methodologically, the paper employs a critical-constructive stance. It critically exposes the limitations of unexamined communalism: what Marx (1978) would call *false consciousness*, while constructively reformulating *Maazi* into what is here described as enlightened self-interest humanism. This synthesis allows for a re-interpretation of the Ngwa moral worldview that integrates goodwill with critical awareness, and communal peace with social justice.

In sum, the conceptual and methodological orientation of this study affirms that philosophy must listen to culture without surrendering critical distance. By interpreting *Maazi* through complementary reflection, hermeneutic analysis, and ethical reconstruction, the paper situates an indigenous African practice within the larger human conversation about moral life, justice, and the good society.

Having established the conceptual and methodological foundations for interpreting *Maazi* as a lived moral philosophy, the next section turns to its concrete expressions within Ngwa life, exploring how this greeting functions as a vehicle for transmitting ethical norms, communal values, and metaphysical insight.

The discussion that follows traces the philosophical unfolding of the Maazi greeting as both a cultural expression and a moral system. It begins by examining how Maazi serves as a vehicle for transmitting Ngwa ethical norms, communal values, and metaphysical insight. The analysis then turns to the internal structure of the greeting, revealing its sequential logic as a moral journey from recognition to transcendence. This structural account opens into a broader philosophical

dialogue, situating the Maazi ethic within universal frameworks of virtue, justice, and human flourishing. The study then advances a critical reinterpretation, proposing what is here termed enlightened self-interest humanism - an evolved moral vision that integrates goodwill with critical awareness and respect with justice. The paper concludes by synthesizing these reflections, affirming Maazi as both a repository of indigenous wisdom and a universal moral paradigm that speaks to the enduring human pursuit of dignity, peace, and the good life.

Maazi: A Vehicle Conveying Ngwa Philosophy, Ethics, Norms and Values

If custom is a mirror of accepted usage, then language is a major fragment of that mirror. Language is not only the principal means of communication but also the chief vehicle through which cultures transmit their norms, values, and worldviews. As Fanon (2008) argued, “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (p. 38). For the Ngwa, the greeting *Maazi* is precisely such a linguistic vessel: it conveys the ethical fabric of life, the dignity of persons, and the philosophy of coexistence.

Philosophers of language have long underscored this ethical and cultural dimension of speech. Wittgenstein (2009) maintained that meaning emerges in “language games” situated within specific forms of life. In the Ngwa context, the *Maazi* greeting is such a language game - it is not a neutral exchange but a structured performance of recognition, respect, and mutual obligation. Similarly, Austin (1975) showed that language is performative: to say “Maazi” is not merely to label but to act, to create a relationship grounded in respect.

African philosophers have extended this insight to show how language embodies metaphysical and ethical systems. Mbiti (1990) famously noted that “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (p. 108), capturing the communitarian ontology that underpins African ethics. Kwasi Wiredu (1996) argued that African philosophical thought must be understood through its linguistic categories, since language encodes shared values and social norms. Similarly, Kwame Gyekye (1997) insisted that African greetings are not mere social rituals but affirmations of communal solidarity and moral responsibility.

The Ngwa greeting *Maazi* thus functions as what Asouzu (2004) calls a “complementary reflection”: it affirms the interdependence of human beings and the recognition that no one can

exist in isolation. To greet another with *Maazi* is to affirm their dignity, to situate oneself within a web of reciprocal recognition, and to remind both speaker and listener of the ethical obligations that sustain society.

From a contemporary ethical standpoint, the *Maazi* greeting resonates with the philosophy of Ubuntu, central to Southern African thought, which holds that “a person is a person through other persons” (Tutu, 1999). Like Ubuntu, *Maazi* embodies an ethic of recognition, mutuality, and solidarity. It is not simply a salutation but a miniature moral philosophy performed in everyday life.

This situates *Maazi* within a broader philosophical discourse: it reflects Aristotle’s (350 BCE/2009) virtue ethics, where ethical life is cultivated through habitual practices that embody respect, friendship, and justice. It also reflects Kant’s (2002) deontological principle that all persons must be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means. The Ngwa practice of *Maazi* bridges these traditions: it is both habitual virtue and categorical imperative, combining communal solidarity with universal moral respect.

In this sense, *Maazi* is a “philosophical compendium” of Ngwa life, containing within it ethical, social, and metaphysical insights. It is a mirror in which the Ngwa people recognize themselves, but also an offering to humanity at large: a reminder that true human flourishing, as Martha Nussbaum (2011) argues in her “capabilities approach,” requires mutual recognition, dignity, and the nurturing of human capacities through respect and solidarity.

The Structural Outlay of the *Maazi* Greeting

The Ngwa are blessed with a rich normative system, a set of ideals and values transmitted across generations. As Lewis (1969) observes, culture is the “integrated system of learned behavior patterns” that defines how people view and act in the world. Like a compass, culture guides people through life, shaping the lens through which they perceive, interpret, and evaluate their world (Agu, 2023). For the Ngwa, *Maazi* functions not merely as a form of salutation but as an ethical code - a condensed philosophy of life that encodes values of respect, reciprocity, and communal belonging. Each utterance in the greeting sequence is laden with meaning, affirming respect, goodwill, reciprocity, and transcendence.

The Ngwa people place great importance on the practice of greeting. For them, greeting is not merely a social courtesy but an index of moral character and a window into the inner disposition of a person. An Ngwa proverb declares: *ekele ekele, ihu achaa* - “greeting starts a relationship; when greeting is exchanged, a welcoming disposition is established.” This reflects the Ngwa conviction that the way one greets discloses whether one is respectful, kind, hospitable, or careless.

From a linguistic standpoint, J. L. Austin (1975) showed that some utterances are not merely descriptive but performative - they do something in the world. The *Maazi* greeting is precisely such an act: it does not merely state recognition, but enacts respect, solidarity, and communal belonging. In this way, it aligns with Habermas’ (1984) theory of communicative action, where speech is oriented not only toward understanding but toward establishing norms and validating social relations.

The Ngwa *Maazi* greeting unfolds in a progressive sequence of four exchanges (Agu & Abajuo, 2019):

1. *Maazi* (I greet you my elder): *Nde* (You are welcome, my child). This signifies respect, recognition, and human dignity.
2. *Naawu* (let or may it be well with you) : *Nna-Nwa-afo* (may it also be well with you, my child, child of the land); signifying mutual goodwill, health, and communal belonging.
3. *Kaanka* (may you live long): *Nkamaragi* (may you also live long; long life belongs to me and you); signifying reciprocity, long life, and mutual flourishing.
4. *Dabiri* (“rest”. The term suggests a wish for the elder, not only to get old, but to get old and live in peace and good health) : *Anyi mkpewalachi* (‘let us continue to pray to God’ ‘let us hope in God’); signifying rest, transcendence, and hope in God.

Each of these stages encapsulates what Kwame Gyekye (1997) calls “moderate communitarianism”: an ethic that balances individual dignity with communal solidarity. They also illustrate the African philosophy of Ubuntu, summarized by the maxim “I am because we are” (Tutu, 1999), as well as Menkiti’s (1984) idea that personhood is gradually achieved through social recognition and moral action.

Thus, the *Maazi* greeting is more than a cultural formality: it is a philosophical compendium, condensing Ngwa ethics and metaphysics into a daily ritual. Like Levinas' (1991) notion of the "face of the Other," it calls one into responsibility; like Rawls' (1999) principle of reciprocity, it affirms fairness in relations; and like Asouzu's (2004) complementary reflection, it sustains the community by affirming mutual dependence.

In what follows, each of these stages will be explored as distinct philosophical moments, revealing the ethical depth and logical order that underpins the Ngwa worldview.

Maazi : Nde – Philosophy of Respect, Recognition, and Human Dignity

There is, to the best of our knowledge, no single documented account of the etymology of the term *Maazi*², or of the other concepts embedded in the progression of the greeting. In the absence of written sources, the Ngwa, like many African societies, have relied on oral history as the primary medium of transmission. Far from being unreliable, oral tradition serves as what Collingwood (1994) described as the "re-enactment of past thought in the present," and what Jan Assmann (2011) calls "cultural memory": a vehicle by which communities transmit not only facts but the meaning of their historical existence. Thus, the reliance on oral tradition here is not a weakness but a philosophical grounding of identity.

Despite the disagreement on its etymology, what emerges from these accounts is that the term, *Maazi* is a product of the historical and cultural interactions among the Ngwa, the Aro, and the Ibibio peoples, and, perhaps, the English colonial authorities (Erugo, 2013; Izu Ngwa Cultural Festival, 2011; Mgboji, 2013; Nwaguru, 2012; Onukawa, 2000; Oriji, 2006). The Aro-Ibibio wars and the eventual alliance that produced Arochukwu attest to the dynamic interplay of migration, conflict, and cooperation in pre-colonial Igbo history. In this context, the Ngwa's adoption of *Maazi* reflects what Hegel (1956) called the *Volksgeist* - the "spirit of a people" that evolves through encounters and historical dialectic.

² Except, perhaps, Onukawa (2000) who posits that *Maazi* is not etymologically an Igbo word, but rather a corruption of the English word, master.

Linguistically, the word *Maazi* has multiple layers of meaning. Among the Aro Igbo, it signifies respect for elderly men, used as a prefix to names (e.g., *Maazi Okoro*), while the Ibibio cognate *Mesere* means “good day” or “may it be well with you.” The Ngwa version appears closer to the Ibibio sense than to the Aro usage, since its primary purpose is not hierarchical titling but the exchange of goodwill. As Wittgenstein (2009) argued, the meaning of a word lies in its use within a form of life. For the Ngwa, *Maazi* is not an abstract signifier but a lived practice: a performative act of recognition, akin to Austin’s (1975) theory of speech acts, where to greet is to do something: to confer dignity, to establish relationship, to affirm community. The opening of the greeting, *Maazi*, evokes not just acknowledgment but reverence. In Ngwa thought, to say *Maazi* is to affirm the worth and dignity of the other person, whether male or female, elder or parent. The response, *Nde* (“thank you,” “you are welcome”), completes the circle of recognition.

Thus, the Ngwa use *Maazi* as a symbol of respect and dignity that extends beyond gender. Unlike the Aro, who restrict its use to men, the Ngwa deploy *Maazi* inclusively for elders, whether male or female. This inclusivity reflects a moral principle: that honour and respect are not the exclusive preserve of men but belong to all human beings. Here, the Ngwa practice resonates with Kant’s (2002) categorical imperative - treating all persons as ends in themselves - and Levinas’ (1991) insistence that the face of the Other commands respect irrespective of social role or gender.

Furthermore, the reply *Nde* (derived from *Ndewo*) embodies reciprocity, affirming not only gratitude but welcome. In African communitarian thought, as articulated by Gyekye (1997) and Menkiti (1984), personhood and dignity are affirmed through mutual recognition. To greet an elder with *Maazi* and receive the reply *Nde*, *nwam* (“thank you, my child”) is to enter into a relational ontology where both elder and younger reinforce each other’s dignity.

From a contemporary philosophical standpoint, the Ngwa practice is significant for its gender neutrality and universality. It aligns with Nussbaum’s (2011) capabilities approach, which insists on the equal dignity of all persons, and with Appiah’s (2006) cosmopolitanism, which emphasizes respect that transcends particular social roles. By extending *Maazi* beyond male exclusivity, the Ngwa affirm that dignity inheres in humanity itself, not in hierarchical privilege.

Thus, the Ngwa use of *Maazi* as a greeting represents more than etymology. It is a philosophical act that unites history, language, and ethics. It testifies that honour and respect are not cultural ornaments but fundamental human values, transcending gender, status, and circumstance, and grounding the moral fabric of communal life. It echoes Immanuel Kant's (2002) categorical imperative: treat humanity always as an end, never as a means. *Maazi* embodies this principle by recognizing the other's inherent worth before any instrumental relationship. It also resonates with Emmanuel Levinas' (1991) ethics of the Other, where the face of the other calls me to responsibility. In *Maazi*, the recognition of the other is not abstract; it is performed in lived relationality.

From the African philosophical tradition, Kwame Gyekye's (1997) communitarianism highlights that respect for elders is not servitude but recognition of their role as custodians of moral and cultural memory. Similarly, Ifeyani Menkiti (1984) argued that personhood in African thought is attained through recognition by others in the community. The *Mazai–Nde* exchange is thus a daily enactment and reinforcement of personhood.

On a contemporary note, Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2006) cosmopolitanism stresses that recognition is the first step toward co-existence in plural societies. By saying *Maazi*, the Ngwa extend dignity not just within their community but, potentially, to humanity at large. Thus, *Maazi : Nde* is a microcosm of recognition, embodying both the universalist ethics of Kant and the communitarian ontology of Africa, showing how respect begins human relationship.

Naawu : Nna-Nwa-afo – Philosophy of Goodwill, Health, and Communal Belonging

The next stage, *Naawu*, literally means “be alright” or “be in good health,” with the response *Nnanwa-afo* (“be alright my child, child of the soil”). At first glance, this exchange appears simple - an expression of goodwill. Yet it is, in fact, a profound fusion of ethics and ontology: it binds together the wish for health with the affirmation of communal belonging. Linguistically, *Naawu* is probably an Aro-derived term, not common in the Ngwa dialect (Agu & Abajuo, 2019). Among the Aro it translates formally to “be alright.” The Ngwa, however, expanded its scope and significance (Agu & Abajuo, 2019), transforming it into a moral wish: not merely “be alright” but “may it be well with you, may you flourish.”

The response *Nna-Nwa-afo* deepens this ethical act by linking well-being to identity. Literally “my child, child of the soil,” affirms the one greeted as kin, indigene, and morally responsible member of the community. Here, the greeting does more than acknowledge existence - it confers recognition, echoing what Charles Taylor (1994) describes as the “politics of recognition”: to deny recognition is to harm, to grant it is to affirm identity and worth.

This greeting, as already noted, embodies Mbiti’s (1990) maxim: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (p. 108). *Naawu : Nna-Nwa-afo* affirms that true health and well-being are never individualistic but communal, rooted in the soil of shared belonging. A person is well not only in body but in relation to their people. Menkiti (1984) emphasizes that personhood is not automatically given but achieved through moral and communal recognition. To call someone *Nwa-afo* is to affirm that they have attained this communal dignity.

Philosophically, this stage of greeting can also be seen as sustaining what Rawls (1999) called the “social bases of self-respect.” By affirming someone as *Nwa-afo*, the Ngwa provide them with the moral assurance that they belong, that they are respected, and that their dignity is recognized. This practice aligns with Habermas’ (1984) theory of communicative action, where dialogue is not only about exchanging information but about reproducing solidarity, mutual recognition, and legitimacy.

The cultural taboo against failing to greet elders, or worse, addressing them by their first names, reflects an ethic of reverence that Kant (2002) would describe as an imperative to treat humanity with respect, not as mere means. For the Ngwa, such greeting is not optional politeness but a categorical moral duty, the neglect of which threatens social cohesion and communal well-being. The Ngwa belief that disregard for elders could imperil unity and progress resonates with Nussbaum’s (2011) capabilities approach: without recognition and respect, the capability to live with dignity and participate fully in society is undermined.

Moreover, the contrast the Ngwa draw between their practice and that of some neighboring Igbo groups underscores their conviction that respect is not only individual virtue but communal identity. To call someone *nwa-afo* is to say they are morally bred, “a child of the soil” unlike outsiders who fall short of such practices. While this distinction risks exclusivism, it also reveals

what Gyekye (1997) terms “moderate communitarianism”: the community confers identity, but individuals must also earn it through conduct.

Ultimately, *Naawu : Nna-nwa-afo* is more than a salutation - it is a philosophical act that fuses goodwill, health, respect, and belonging. It is what Desmond Tutu (1999) would describe under the ethos of Ubuntu: “A person is a person through other persons.” For the Ngwa, to wish health without recognizing communal rootedness would be incomplete; to affirm communal belonging without goodwill would be empty. The greeting, therefore, embodies a unity of both, sustaining the love and respect that anchor Ngwa social life.

The Ngwa belief that *nwa-afo* (“child of the land”) is a moral category recalls Aristotle’s (350 BCE/2009) idea that friendship (*philia*) is the glue of political life. By affirming one as *nwa-afo*, the Ngwa stress that belonging to the community is inseparable from moral character.

Thus, *Naawu : Nna-nwa-afo* unites goodwill, wellbeing, and communal belonging; showing that for the Ngwa, health is not merely biological but relational, bound to moral character and community.

Kaanka : Nkamaragi – Philosophy of Long Life, Reciprocity, and Mutual Goodwill

The third stage of the greeting is *Kaanka*, literally meaning “may you live long,” with the response *Nkamaragi*, “old age belongs to both of us.” On the surface, this exchange is a simple wish for longevity. Yet, within Ngwa culture, it is laden with philosophical and ethical meaning, affirming not only the desire for extended life but the communal reciprocity that sustains human flourishing.

To wish someone long life is, in Aristotelian terms, to wish them *eudaimonia* - not just survival, but the fullness of human flourishing achieved over time through the practice of virtue (Aristotle, 2009). Longevity is valued because it allows the gradual unfolding of personhood, the attainment of wisdom, and the enjoyment of moral authority within the community. This is why elders in Ngwa society are revered: they embody a life well-lived, a trajectory of virtue actualized over time.

The response *Nkamaragi* underscores that such flourishing cannot be monopolized. “Old age belongs to both of us” expresses reciprocity: the wish for long life is not complete unless it is

shared. This captures Rawls' (1999) insight that justice is grounded in fairness and reciprocity. Just as benefits in society must be shared equitably, so too the blessing of longevity must not be seen as the privilege of the few but the aspiration of the community as a whole.

Philosophically, the reciprocity of *Nkamaragi* resonates with Levinas' (1991) ethics of responsibility. In affirming that old age belongs to us both, the greeter acknowledges that their own future is bound to the other's, that one's life is inseparable from the life of the other. It is an ethical call to mutual responsibility, an ontological reminder that human existence is always relational.

African philosophy further clarifies this moral dimension. Menkiti (1984) argues that personhood is not an automatic given but is achieved through stages of life, culminating in the recognition granted by the community. To wish someone *Kaanka* is to affirm their journey toward full personhood; to respond *Nkamaragi* is to affirm that such personhood is collective, not individual. Similarly, Asouzu's (2004) philosophy of *ibuanyidanda* (complementary reflection) insists that no being flourishes in isolation; rather, each achieves meaning in relation to others. The *Kaanka : Nkamaragi* exchange enacts this complementarity, situating longevity within shared human destiny.

From the perspective of contemporary moral philosophy, this stage resonates strongly with the capabilities approach articulated by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011). Among the core human capabilities is the ability to live a normal life span, free from premature death. By wishing long life and affirming its reciprocity, the Ngwa recognize longevity as a moral entitlement, a fundamental aspect of human dignity.

Dabiri : Anyi mkpewalachi — Rest, Transcendence, and Hope philosophically grounded

The final stage of the Ngwa greeting sequence is *Dabiri*, meaning "rest," with the response *Anyi mkpewalachi*, "let us continue to pray to God." At this point, the greeting transcends the temporal concerns of recognition (*Maazi*), wellbeing (*Naawu*), and longevity (*Kaanka*) to confront the ultimate horizon of human existence: rest, transcendence, and hope.

To wish *Dabiri* is not merely to wish someone a break from labor. It is a recognition that the rhythm of life culminates in rest, that the human journey finds its closure in peace. In Plato's *Phaedo* (1997), Socrates described philosophy itself as a preparation for death, a training of the soul to detach from the distractions of the body. The Ngwa sense of *Dabiri* echoes this insight: to live well is to be prepared for rest, not as annihilation but as peaceful fulfillment.

Aristotle (2009) also suggested that the goodness of a life can only be fully judged at its end; *eudaimonia* includes not just virtuous activity but a noble conclusion. Thus, to wish *Dabiri* is to affirm that the other may attain the completeness of the good life, rounded out in peace.

The reply *Anyi mkpewalachi* expands this wish into a collective act of transcendence: "let us continue to pray to God." Here, the greeting acknowledges that human destiny is not exhausted in temporal life but oriented toward the divine. In Kant's (2002) moral philosophy, the highest good (*summum bonum*) - the harmony of virtue and happiness - requires belief in immortality and God as guarantors of moral order. The Ngwa echo this teleological intuition: morality and prayer sustain hope in the justice and goodness of the divine order.

Within African thought, this stage resonates deeply with Mbiti's (1990) conception of the "living-dead." Death, when peaceful, does not terminate belonging but integrates the individual into the community of ancestors, where they continue to participate in the moral life of the living. *Dabiri* is, therefore, not only rest but transition; *Anyi mkpewalachi* affirms the community's responsibility to sustain this transition through prayer and ritual.

The ethical dimensions are equally profound. Levinas (1991) suggests that responsibility to the Other extends even beyond their life, in memory and reverence. The Ngwa greeting acknowledges this continuity, situating rest not in isolation but within a communal horizon of responsibility and prayer. Asouzu (2004) reinforces this with his philosophy of complementarity: life and death, presence and absence, are interwoven moments of the same continuum of existence.

Contemporary philosophy also sheds light on this stage. Nussbaum (2011) includes among her central human capabilities the capacity for affiliation, practical reason, and spirituality - dimensions that orient life toward meaning and transcendence. *Dabiri : Anyi mkpewalachi* enacts these capabilities by affirming rest, reflection, and openness to divine hope. Similarly, Taylor

(1989) reminds us that human beings live within “strong evaluations,” ultimate frameworks of meaning that orient their lives. For the Ngwa, the ultimate framework is theological: prayer to God grounds the hope that rest is not futility but fulfillment.

Thus, this final stage of the *Maazi* greeting completes its philosophical arc. It moves from recognition (*Maazi*), to goodwill (*Naawu*), to reciprocity (*Kaanka*), and finally to transcendence (*Dabiri*). In doing so, it reflects the Ngwa conviction that human life is not only about dignity, health, and longevity but about peaceful integration into the divine order, sustained by communal prayer and hope.

The Ethical and Universal Dimensions of the Ngwa *Maazi* Tradition

Taken together, the four stages of the Ngwa *Maazi* greeting articulate a compressed yet comprehensive philosophy of life. *Maazi: Nde* grounds human interaction in recognition and dignity, echoing Kant’s (2002) imperative to treat persons as ends in themselves and resonating with the communitarian ethics of Gyekye (1997) and Menkiti (1984). *Naawu: Nnanwa-afo* extends this recognition into goodwill and belonging, embodying Mbiti’s (1970) communitarian ontology and Taylor’s (1994) “politics of recognition,” in which identity and moral worth are rooted in social relations. *Kaanka: Nkamaragi* projects life forward, affirming reciprocity and shared flourishing consistent with Aristotle’s (2009) *eudaimonia*, Rawls’s (1999) justice as fairness, and Nussbaum’s (2011) capability of longevity. Finally, *Dabiri: Anyi mkpewalachi* transcends temporal existence, situating life within a horizon of rest, hope, and divine continuity reminiscent of Plato’s vision of the soul’s immortality, Kant’s (2002) concept of the highest good, and Mbiti’s (1970) notion of the “living-dead.”

In this sense, the *Maazi* greeting functions not merely as social etiquette but as a lived metaphysics, an enacted ethic, and a communal ontology. It traces the moral journey from recognition to transcendence, offering what Asouzu (2004) describes as “complementary reflection,” in which respect, well-being, reciprocity, and transcendence form interdependent dimensions of human flourishing. The Ngwa thus encode in their everyday salutation a moral system that bridges African communitarian wisdom with universal philosophical concerns about dignity, justice, and the good life.

Each stage of the *Maazi* greeting encapsulates virtues that are both particular and universal. *Maazi* enjoins respect for elders and authority; *Naawu* emphasizes reciprocity and mutual recognition; *Kaanka* affirms goodwill, hospitality, and peaceful coexistence; while *Dabiri* highlights upright living as a condition for social harmony and transcendence. These values, far from being mere traditional norms, embody what Aristotle (2009) terms *phronesis* - practical wisdom guiding moral life.

Achebe's (2008) *Things Fall Apart* vividly demonstrates the moral logic underlying such indigenous ethics: the quality of one's life and death mirrors one's fidelity to communal values. Just as Unoka's ignoble life led to a shameful death, and Ezeudu's virtue earned him an honourable passing, the *Maazi* code similarly aligns moral conduct with metaphysical fulfilment.

Philosophically, the *Maazi* values align with Kant's (2002) categorical imperative and Rawls's (1999, 2001) conception of justice as fairness - each insisting on reciprocity, respect, and the preservation of the "social basis of self-respect." They also resonate with Appiah's (2006) cosmopolitanism, in which human dignity transcends cultural boundaries, making the *Maazi* greeting a potential ethical model for intercultural dialogue and peace-building.

From a democratic standpoint, Habermas's (1996) theory of deliberative democracy finds a local analogue in the *Maazi* tradition, where communicative rationality and mutual validation sustain social harmony. Likewise, in the domain of human development, the greeting's invocation of health, long life, and peace parallels Sen's (1999) and Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach, emphasizing the conditions necessary for human flourishing.

Reinterpreting the Maazi Ethic: From Communal Humanism to Enlightened Self-Interest Humanism

Building on the ethical and universal dimensions of the *Maazi* tradition, it becomes necessary to examine how this communal philosophy can be reinterpreted within contemporary social and political contexts. The philosophical ideal underlying the *Maazi* greeting represents a profound moral vision - one that embodies a communal orientation toward *eudaimonia*, or the good life, as Aristotle (2009) conceived it. For the Ngwa, to live well is not merely to satisfy personal desires

but to flourish within a moral community where respect, health, reciprocity, and peace are sustained. In this sense, the Maazi greeting functions as more than a social courtesy; it is a daily enactment of virtue, an affirmation of the shared moral space that undergirds communal flourishing. This worldview exemplifies a practical humanism: an ethic that translates metaphysical ideals into lived social values.

Yet, the very moral disposition that sustains harmony and cooperation can also generate vulnerability in situations of unequal power or exploitation. The historical experiences of the Ngwa - such as the 1953 protest against the creation of the Aba Ngwa County Council and the 1957 resistance to the creation of Ngwa Province - illustrate how an ethic of openness and hospitality may be manipulated or betrayed in the face of structural injustice. The Coatsworth Commission of Inquiry (1957), as cited by Elele (2012), observed that while the Ngwa welcomed outsiders as compatriots, this goodwill was often met with hostility and exploitation.

This tension between moral virtue and political vulnerability exposes the limits of an uncritical communal humanism. Erugo (2013) insightfully observes that the Ngwa man “is content and satisfied in any state he finds himself; he is at ease and will not complain, even in obvious poverty” (p. 14). Such complacency recalls Marx’s (1978) notion of *false consciousness*: a moral blindness that allows structural inequalities to persist under the guise of harmony. Similarly, Hegel’s (1977) *master–slave dialectic* helps illuminate how recognition can become one-sided, when one party acknowledges the other’s humanity without receiving reciprocal validation.

The appropriate philosophical response, therefore, is not to repudiate the Maazi ethic but to reinterpret it pragmatically for the demands of modern life. Kwame Gyekye’s (1997) theory of moderate communitarianism provides a useful framework here: while African ethics rightly emphasize community, they must also safeguard individual autonomy and agency. Without this balance, moral generosity risks degenerating into self-effacing complacency.

In this light, what is required is a reformulated ethic: what may be termed enlightened self-interest humanism: an ethic that combines goodwill with critical awareness, respect with justice, and transcendence with active responsibility. This philosophical renewal calls upon the Ngwa to transform their inherited humanism into a dynamic moral consciousness that retains its hospitality

yet insists on reciprocity, fairness, and self-assertion. By doing so, the Ngwa can bridge ancestral wisdom with contemporary social realities, positioning themselves not as passive bearers of tradition but as active agents of their collective future.

Thus, the critique of Ngwa complacency is not a negation of their moral ideal but its necessary evolution - a dialectical progression from inherited virtue to self-conscious agency. Reinterpreted in this way, the Maazi greeting endures not merely as a symbol of peace but as a living praxis of dignity, justice, and communal renewal.

Conclusion

This paper has offered an expository and philosophical presentation of the *Maazi* greeting. We have shown that what appears, at first glance, as a simple Ngwa salutation is, in fact, a condensed moral and philosophical system. It is a mirror reflecting multiple images: respect (*Maazi : Nde*), goodwill (*Naawu : Nnanwa-afo*), reciprocity (*Kaanka : Nkamaragi*), and transcendence (*Dabiri : Anyi mkpewalachi*).

Thus, the *Maazi* greeting is not a relic of the past but a living philosophy. It can enrich contemporary debates on justice, democracy, and development if re-interpreted and applied with critical awareness. Its emphasis on respect, goodwill, reciprocity and transcendence can help Nigeria overcome ethnic antagonism, political exploitation, and moral complacency. Its universalizable moral vision aligns with both African communitarian ethics and global theories of justice, making it a unique cultural contribution to the philosophical heritage of humanity.

Furthermore, the *Maazi* greeting has universal significance. Its stress on dignity, recognition, and solidarity resonates with Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach, which identifies respect for human dignity, health, and affiliation as central to justice. By affirming these values, the Ngwa contribute not only to their own moral horizon but to the broader philosophical project of global justice and human flourishing.

Ultimately, the *Maazi* greeting reminds us that philosophy need not always be abstract speculation. It can be embodied in ordinary practices that affirm dignity, sustain solidarity, and orient human beings toward the good life. If critically re-appropriated, it can serve as both a mirror for the Ngwa

and a gift to humanity: a daily enactment of the ethical truth that no one flourishes alone, but only in community with others.

Schema of the Ngwa Mazi Greeting and Its Philosophical Dimensions

Greeting Stage	Literal Meaning	Ethical/Philosophical Significance	Relevant Thinkers/Traditions
Mazi : Nde	<i>Mazi</i> = respect, honor → <i>Nde</i> = thank you / you are welcome	Recognition of dignity; reciprocal respect; moral worth of the other	Kant (dignity, ends-in-themselves), Levinas (the face of the Other), Gyekye (moderate communitarianism), Menkiti (personhood through community)
Naawu : Nnanwa-afo	<i>Naawu</i> = be well, be in health → <i>Nnanwa-afo</i> = child of the land	Goodwill, health, and communal belonging; identity through recognition	Mbiti (“I am because we are”), Taylor (politics of recognition), Rawls (social basis of self-respect), Ubuntu/Tutu (personhood through others)
Kaanka : Nkamaragi	<i>Kaanka</i> = may you live long → <i>Nkamaragi</i> = old age belongs to us both	Reciprocity, longevity, mutual flourishing; justice and shared destiny	Aristotle (<i>eudaimonia</i> , friendship), Rawls (reciprocity, fairness), Nussbaum & Sen (capabilities – longevity), Asouzu (complementary reflection), Menkiti (stages of personhood)
Dabiri : Anyi mkpewalachi	<i>Dabiri</i> = rest → <i>Anyi mkpewalachi</i> = let us continue to pray to God	Transcendence, peaceful death, hope in divine order; communal spirituality	Plato (<i>Phaedo</i> : philosophy as preparation for death), Aristotle (the noble end), Kant (highest good, immortality), Mbiti (living-dead), Taylor (strong evaluations), Levinas (responsibility beyond death), Asouzu (complementarity of life and death)

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