

# THE TASK OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE SEARCH FOR AFRICAN IDENTITY

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## Abstract

The crisis of identity looms around the African today because the contemporary Africans have lost their roots; they have almost lost the qualities that once made them who or what they were. This paper argues that the African identity is in danger of being totally lost by the present day Africans who are becoming more Europeans and less Africans due to the net-effects of the so-called 'modern civilisation' with its invasion of alien cultures and values. In the sequel, core values and cultural patterns that are unique to Africa have been on retreat hence the paper focuses on the search for African identity. But since the search will centre on self-discovery and recovery, the paper emphasises the task of African philosophy being a critical reflection on the African experience of reality with its goal of searching for the truth of the African. The interest of the paper therefore, is to determine the distinctive trait that characterises a person as African and build on it as a compass to regain the lost identity of the African.

**Keywords:** African, African Identity, African Philosophy, 'Being-with'.

## Introduction

The issue of self-identity or a people's identity hinges on genuine self-knowledge and self-understanding. Thus, African identity centres on the African self-hood. It is surprising to observe that the African, as it were, has no precise identity. Is it the fact of 'blackness' that confers the African identity on someone? Or is it being born in the African continent that passes one as an African? What exactly is the distinctive content of the African self-hood or identity? The plagues of colonialism cannot be disassociated from the current pandemonium of the contemporary African who is in search of an identity. Through acculturation and exploitation, the vestiges of African culture and identity were bastardised, mutilated, and at best, mixed up or perhaps replaced with the Western civilisation and culture. What then can best describe the fate of the African in the search for cultural identity? Perhaps, as some have said, "Black skin, White masks" (Fanon, 1967) becomes the lot of the African.

However, since African philosophy is a quest into the African past and present in a bid to make sense of the people's existence, many scholars have argued that it is inestimably relevant in the search for African identity. The task of this study therefore, is to carefully elucidate the concepts of African philosophy, African identity, crisis of African identity, and then systematically illustrate the role of African philosophy in the search for African identity.

## What is African Philosophy?

The question 'What is African philosophy?' implicitly presents the debate on whether or not African philosophy exists. But if African philosophy is the search for knowledge, that is, the search for the nature and meaning of existence, then it is obvious that Africans engage themselves in philosophic venture. The Africans have their views on the problems of life; they discuss and speculate about the unfolding of nature and other natural events around them. They have tried according to their desires and propelled by the *corpus* of knowledge built up from experiences and observations, to devise means to control the environment and remake it for given goals. This is not exclusive to any people; it is a universal role that pertains to man as such.

Put lucidly and succinctly, African philosophy is essentially a critical reflection on African experience of reality. It is neither the philosophy of the African people, nor is it the common beliefs of African peoples. These are loose senses of African philosophy, which some have called ‘ethno-philosophy’ or ‘folk-philosophy’. In explaining that this is not African philosophy in the strict sense, Gyekye (1978, p.278) notes that “Philosophy of some kind is behind the thought and action of every people. It constitutes the intellectual sheet anchor of their life in its totality”. However, to arrive at a precise definition or a unanimous endorsement of a formal definition of African philosophy among scholars is not an easy task. In the light of this, African philosophy could be conceived as:

a path to a systematic coherent discovery and disclosure of the African as a being-in-the-African-world. Through this knowledge and disclosure of himself and his world by critical reflection, the African grasps reality, that is to say attains the truth about man and the cosmos in its entirety (Okolo, 1983, p.8).

Alternatively, African philosophy has been defined according to Anyanwu and Ruch (1981, p.7) as that “which concerns itself with the way in which African peoples of the past and the present make sense of their existence, of their destiny and of the world in which they live.”By and large, since “philosophy is *en route* to the Being of being” (Okolo, 1992, p.11), the ultimate aim and goal of African philosophy easily surfaces as the search for the truth of the African, his world, his place and role in it, which implies the ultimate search for the authentic African identity. As such, the focus of this study now turns towards African identity which is our task, *ab initio*.

### **African Identity**

Who is an ‘African’? What does the term ‘African’ imply or refer to? What exactly qualifies as ‘African’? What identity does the African bear? All of these questions have as their pivot the issue of self-identity. In the parlance of contemporary African philosophy, the search for African identity has been a central task. Thus, what has thrown the African back to a much more serious search for who he is in concrete life, that is to say, in his cultural characteristics and identity as African, is African philosophy, which at present is a vibrant intellectual pursuit (Okolo, 1993, p.3).

Many scholars have argued that the search for African identity is in vain and not feasible because Africans are not one but many peoples and races with a diversity of cultural beliefs and traditions. Whether the African is one people or many is grossly insignificant or inconsequential in ascertaining the fact of African identity. What is important rather is to assert that the African is easily identifiable ontologically. Seen in this light therefore, the African is a being-in-the-African-world. He is not just a being but a ‘being-with’ (Okolo, 1993, p.4). This concept of ‘being-with’ is in fact the fundamental idea or explanation of African identity.

The spectre of self-identity constantly confronts the African. Is it arguably that to be born black suffices to be an African? Indeed, “the African child is born black but becomes African” (Masquet, 1972, p.55). Then, what is to become African? What culturally characterises a person as African? As noted above, the African is not just a human being but essentially a ‘being-with’, and this is the very basis of his claim to the title ‘African’. In African metaphysics, the self is conceived essentially towards others, that is, a being-with-others. As a matter of fact, the African, according to Tempels (1959, p.103), “cannot conceive of man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationship with other living beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it.”

Consequently, it is the community which makes the individual, because of his relationship with others in the community. In other words, the African self is defined in terms of 'we-existence' (Okolo, 1992). However, 'being-with' as an ontological category and as defining culturally the mode-of-being of the African, is beyond egoistic and utilitarian needs of self. In its ontological relationships, 'self' in African metaphysics is attuned to both the visible and invisible worlds. Senghor (1991, cited in Anyanwu and Ruch, 1981, p.206) has argued that African identity is epitomised in the sense of communion, the openness of man to man. For him, the sense of communion and the gift of rhythm are "the traits of negritude that we find like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the black man."

On the general range, most African scholars regard African concepts of the individual and self to be almost totally dependent on and subordinate to social entities and cultural processes. J.S. Mbiti, for instance, believes that the individual has little latitude for self-determination outside the context of the traditional African family and community. He writes:

Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' This is a cardinal point in understanding the African view of man (Mbiti, 1969, p. 109).

Besides, there is a far less egalitarian view of the individual in African society which holds that:

Everything boils down to 'me' in the 'we' or rather to the survival of the self through the enhancement and consolidation of the 'we' as a generic whole.... Thus, in Africa, the individual will go to all length to ascertain the condition of the corporate 'we' and to play his part, if necessary, to restore the balance of wholesomeness (Nyasani, 1997, pp. 81-82).

Furthermore, this distinctive African trait can simply be called 'African brotherhood', with its root in the African extended family system. As a result, Nyerere (1976, pp.12-13) built his own concept of social progress, unity, and peace for Africa upon this concept of African brotherhood. In addition, African socialism embodies the basic human values characteristic of inter-personal relationship among the Africans as clear manifestations of 'being-with', expressed in communal spirit, hospitality, generosity, acceptance, and practice of egalitarianism (Mboya, 1962, p. 16).

What then is African self-identity, that which makes the African become who or what he is? It is the African 'being-with', that is, the self being-with and-for-others in social existence. Maquet (1972, p.54) calls it Africanity, and he defines it as "the totality of cultural features common to the hundreds of societies of sub-Saharan Africa."

### **The Crisis of African Identity**

'Being-with' is a by-product of culture, rooted in Africa's extended family system and in the essential religious worldview and tradition of the African himself. Culture being dynamic and fleeting, implies that the qualities of 'being-with' can be eroded with time, with the incursion of alien cultures and values, which may result from industrialisation and urbanisation. As a result, 'being-with' as the seal of identity and a distinguishing cultural characteristic of the African becomes more or less fluid. What this implies is that, the African is not a 'being' in the sense of ultimacy but a becoming. As such, one may decide or which to become as well as remain African.

The implication of the above is that 'being-with' is not automatic with blackness. That one is born 'black' does not necessarily mean he is an African: "It does mean that 'being-with'

in its qualities and dimensions can be lost, regained or even lost forever” (Okolo, 1993, p. 33). It becomes obvious therefore, that the black or Afro-American who is born black but without “the African being-with” is not African, whereas an African born in the culture of ‘being-with’, could lose it with time through cultural alienation. In any case, he can always regain or recover his former African status by recovering his ‘being-with’.

The crisis of identity which looms around the African today is sequel to the fact that the contemporary Africans have almost lost their roots, that is, they have almost lost the qualities that once made them who or what they were. These qualities are simply the concretisations of ‘African-being-with’. It is the human factor, the humane attitude or involvement of man-with-man, which is intrinsic in the ‘African-being-with’ and serves as the cultural characteristics of African, that some notable African leaders have differently called ‘African brotherhood’, ‘African socialism’, or ‘African communalism’. And these are the qualities that constitute African identity.

However, this African identity is in danger of being totally lost by the present day Africans due to the net-effects of the so-called ‘modern civilisation’, which is the invasion of alien cultures and values, industrialisation, urbanisation, the acquisition of all sorts of scientific and technical skills and knowledge and the effects of this acquisition. Okolo (1993, p.36) states succinctly that:

Contemporary Africans are becoming more and more Europeans and less and less Africans in their values, mentality, and general outlook just as much or nearly as much as Fanon depicted black Africans over twenty five years ago as ‘Black Skin white masks’.

Numerous core values and cultural patterns unique to Africa have been on retreat or perhaps unceremoniously divorced from the African experience. Most African writers effectively argue that there is a widespread pattern of social and cultural maladaptation within African societies. This is regarded by the majority of the writers to be a post-colonial legacy, the result of on-going external interference, and a new endemic and intense African admiration of Western culture over African culture. One of such scholars, Nyasani (1997, pp.51-55), believes that:

in the same way reference is made to the Greek or Roman civilisation, it must be quite appropriate and legitimate to refer to a particular strand of mind that is quite peculiar to Africa and which shapes the prevailing conditions or permits itself to adapt to those conditions.... There is a distinctive feature about the African mind.... It is the way our mind functions and operates under certain conditions that we are able to arrogate to ourselves a peculiar status, social identification and geographical label.

He further asserts that African, Asian and European minds are products of unique ‘cultural edifices’ and ‘cultural streams’ that arose from environmental conditioning and long-standing cultural traditions. Within the African cultural stream, Nyasani (1997, pp.56-57) claims, are psychological and moral characteristics pertaining to African identity, personality and dignity. Furthermore, Makgoba (1997, pp.197-198) argues boisterously that the African peoples of African descent:

are linked by shared values that are fundamental features of African identity and culture. These, for example, include hospitality, friendliness, the community rather than the individual. These features typically underpin the

variations of African culture and identity everywhere. The existence of African identity is not in doubt.

Caught in a social pyramid characterised by a one-way vertical authority structure and a two-way horizontal family and communal support system, the African mind, destabilised by the Western acculturation, is relatively unilinear, uncritical, lacking in initiative and therefore 'encapsulated'. This has been extremely negative for Africa, especially in terms of the African individual's creativity and ability to innovate. Nyasani (1997, pp.130-131) observes that:

What we experience in the practical life of an African is the apparent stagnation or stalemate in his social as well as economic evolution.... It is quite evident that the social consequences of this unfortunate social impasse (encapsulation) can be very grave especially where the process of acculturation and indeterminate enculturation is taking place at an uncontrollable pace.

From the foregoing, it is indubitable that social emancipation does not promote fully the exercise of personal initiative and incentive. These are the painful and dehumanising effects of identity distortion, otherwise known as crisis of African identity. Categorically, it becomes an unblemished piece of truth that the African has been immersed into the harmful and muddy waters of identity crisis. How do we refer to or characterise a being who has lost hold with his cultural background in the light of an alien cultural influence? What identity does the African bear, cognisance of his truncated and inter-mingled personality? This is at best, a huge pity, and an unprecedented disservice of the Western world to the African. It is quite pathetic a scenario that the worldview of the African under colonialism became one where the African cultural traditions, beliefs and behaviours were regarded even by Africans to be inferior when compared to non-African ways. This resulted in self-loathing among Africans. In fact the worldview of most contemporary Africans was either replaced by or mixed with, aspects of the European worldview. However, the attention of African philosophy is seriously required in the ultimate search for the authentic, original and pristine identity of the African, since this, perhaps, would be the only therapy to remedy the plight of the African.

### **The Search for African Identity: The Task of African Philosophy**

Since his independence, the African is increasingly emerging from years of cultural slumber in his quest for full status as a subject. He ceaselessly and consciously makes manifest efforts to be conscious of himself as an African and to fight decisively those causes which alienate him from self and self-world. Thus, the twin-tasks of self-discovery and recovery have remained top priority values since the African independence from his colonial masters. Through the European contact with Africa, we have indeed lost in terms of human, material, intellectual and scientific development, by means of exploitation that accompanied the colonisation of Africa. The greatest of these losses is that of self-identity which have plunged the African into experiencing an excruciating crisis of identity. Considering these antecedents and decimals of the African experience, it is up to scholars in Africa, especially African philosophers, to begin to think with better resources of wisdom and experience that the best way to confront the situation is not to continue to bemoan themselves for our present philosophical and historical backwardness, but rather by articulating a more convincing philosophical programme of action. On the path to the rediscovery of African identity, African philosophy is leading among others. This is because "philosophy is both a path-finder and a heuristic for speculating for the future and for psychologically equipping men for the challenges of the present and the future" (Ozumba, 2003, p.1). Philosophy is a critical enterprise, something dynamic, a quest, a search, or even a spirit of evaluative exploration or inquiry into all areas of human experience, of the

world, of man himself and his place in the universe. There is no gainsaying therefore, that African philosophy in its critical role seeks to understand, clarify and explain every aspect of African experience. In fact, what has indeed thrown the African black to a much more serious search for his cultural characteristics and identity as an African, is African philosophy.

African philosophers have conceived this African-identity-crisis as a cultural suicide and have sharply called upon modern or contemporary Africans to assert their unique personality in the world and to find their essence in the wells of their souls; from within and not outside their culture (Okolo, 1993, p.36). In the search for identity, African philosophers assert that the 'African being-with' particularly as embodied and practiced in traditional Africa is retrievable and can be easily utilised in the pursuit of progress, prosperity, peace, unity, brotherhood, etc. by modern Africans (Okolo, 1993, p.36).

The efforts of African philosophers are significant and provocative contributions to understanding Africa and its people with their distinctive identity. African philosophers have argued that the African individual's response to overpowering foreign influence has been and remains derived from the personal strategy he uses for survival within the African family and community contents. As such, African philosophers argue that Africa should chart its future from its indigenous cultural tradition and adopt and adapt only those aspects of non-African cultures that are compatible with Africa's needs, goals and circumstances. They believe that the loss of identity was due to Africans too often forsaking indigenous African values and their wholesale and uncritical adoption of Western ideologies and institutions.

The emphasis on Africa's traditional past as proposed by African philosophers, however, is not without its African detractors. Masolo (1995, p.225), for example, believes that Philosophers who are seeking to revive and reinstate the traditional African philosophy as the appropriate philosophy for Africa today are... doing disservice to Africa in trying to pretend that philosophy is still sufficient or useful or applicable to Africa's needs.

In conclusion, in spite of the benefits of Western civilisation, the way forward to regain the lost identity of the African is not far-fetched only if and when the Africans themselves recover and put into practice the qualities of 'being-with', which is the authentic African identity.

## **Conclusion**

There is a necessary temptation of being aggressive though out of sympathy, when discussing a people's stolen heritage. Nevertheless, this study has been less sympathetic but instead, it has refused to economise the truth. How can we label a people that possess a multi-identity if not confused identity? The ultimate search for the African identity is the starting point for economic and social transformation in Africa. And, as it were, the practice of African communalism that is 'being-with' will once more breed the spirit of brotherhood in the African world, and all such crimes and inhuman acts associated with the Western world would be eliminated. It is only then that one can comfortably refer to the Africans as possessing an African identity.

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