

## ON THE SOURCES OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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### **1. Introduction**

Gbadegesin (1991) observed that there are four lines of thought as regards what African Philosophy constitutes: the universalist, particularist, eclectic and national-ideological perspectives. However, for the sake of this piece on the sources of African philosophy, the perspectives of the universalist and particularist schools would be entertained:

- i. The particularist school understands African Philosophy as the philosophical thought of Africans as could be sifted from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, and untainted by foreign ideas.
- ii. The second group understands African philosophy as the philosophical reflection on, and analysis of, African conceptual systems and social realities as undertaken by contemporary professional philosophers. This reduces African Philosophy to reflections by professionally trained philosophers who operate in collaboration with traditional thinkers.

The basic question looming at the horizon of this piece is: “what are the sources of the ideas categorized as African Philosophy?” This speaks of the raw materials from which African philosophy is realized. A cursory glance at the two definitions of African philosophy sets the pace for this investigation. Drawing from the above definitions, the sources of African philosophy would include African proverbs, African folk tales, African myths, African languages, African symbols, African historical experience or social

realities and African artistic expressions. This piece would be concerned with investigating the contributions of these sources to African philosophy.

## 2. African Proverbs

There is no clear and exact definition of a proverb. However, according to the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, *proverbs are vegetables for eating speech*. They further define proverbs as *the palm oil with which words are eaten*. Because of the centrality of proverbs to the Igbo people, they say that *a child who knows how to use proverbs have justified the dowry paid on his mother's head*. According to the Zulus, *without proverbs, language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul*. According to the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, *proverbs are horses for chasing missing words*. These notwithstanding, generally, proverbs from the African context are the wisdom and experience of the African people, usually of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. They spring from the people and represent the voice of the people and express the interpretation of their belief, principles of life and conduct. It expresses the moral attitudes of a given culture, and it reflects the hopes, achievements and failings of a people (Kanu, 2013a).

Proverb is an integral element of the African culture and undoubtedly a strong base in African traditional system, and as such it can be a living stream where the philosophy and religion of the African people is preserved. The centrality of proverbs in African oral tradition is manifested in the frequency of its use by Africans in conversations, speeches, instructions, judgment, drama, arguments, storytelling, in fun making and name them; and this is based on the fact that the African regards proverbs as an essential vehicle through which a message can be adequately transmitted. Kofi (1978) further avers that:

Proverbs may serve as prescriptions for action or act as judgment in times of moral lapses. Often a proverb, cited at an appropriate time during an argument can settle the dispute instantly, for the proverbs are believed to have been handed down by the ancestors and predecessors to whom we owe our communal experience and wisdom. (p. 158)

In the contention of Ambrose (1986),

A proverb can be used as a language of diplomacy to avoid giving direct answers to direct questions. With a proverb, one can reveal a secret without being committed. A proverb is also a very simple shorthand of sending message. It is therefore a time saving device, and helps to avoid unnecessary repetitions. (p. 41)

In African traditional society, a proverb on God is a serious talk. It embodies a profound reflection on God, such that when unravelled in theological terms would file into volumes of books. Below is a list of African proverbs on God from the Igbo-African cultural background, which expresses the Igbo native wisdom and philosophy of God.

- The same God created the rich man and the poor man.
- God drives away flies for a tailless cow.
- God has both the knife and the yam; only to those whom he gives may eat.
- God always gives each person a hook to draw things with.
- May God who gave the coconut its milk give us life and where withal to sustain life.
- Whoever wants to do an evil against another person does not remember God.
- When man is thinking, God is also thinking.
- If God is not in the plot death cannot kill a man.

- God knows whom he will give but he whom he will give to does not know.

These proverbs give us a great deal of information about how the African conceive God, and from here, the philosophy of African religion begins to emerge.

### **3. African Folk Tales**

According to Brosnan (1976), the African form of education was never by definition or the use of abstract terminology as in the West. Apart from the African system of education which are tied to role such as farming, hunting, firewood gathering or adult roles, the African got much more instruction also, and this was in the main moral instruction. This was usually given at night after the evening meal. Those to be instructed sat on logs within the compound and instruction was given by the elders or the head of the household. If the head of the household is not well or is absent, it is normal for the next senior to take his place. There are times when the boy sat with the father differently and the daughters with the mother, while the father told stories about war, the mother told stories that would help the girls fulfil their roles as mothers. Shorter (1973) further observes that instructions during this period were usually given in the form of stories. Elders also use stories when judging cases in village courts. They tell them in such a way that people are able to pick up their meanings without any explanation. According to Zani (1972), Africans are parable and story telling people. From their childhood they are used to listening to different kinds of stories: true or made-up fables, just like those of Jesus.

African stories are mainly of two types: one about animals, others about people, and sometimes involving spirits or the gods, and always with a moral lesson.

#### **i. The Thieving Grass cutter**

Gwahaka had a field of groundnuts. He had a friend- Mr. Grass cutter. His good friend Mr. Grass cutter usually went to the

groundnut field by night and removed some without the knowledge of Gwahaka. And as the Grass cutter goes to his friend's house, Gwahaka tells him about the removal of his groundnuts. The hare tells him that it is the eagle because eagles eat so much of groundnuts. So one day, Gwahaka moulded a mud statue and made it very gummy and placed it in the farm with delicious variety of food around it. One day, the Grass cutter went as usual to steal his friend's groundnuts. As he reached the farm, he saw the beautiful lady in the farm. He decided to go and speak to the lady. He said to her "Lady how are you?" There was no response. So the hare was angry and used one hand to slap the lady, and the hand gummed to her. He used a second hand and the other hand stuck there. He decided to use his two feet and the two stuck there as well. He used his forehead to hit her and it remained there. There was no remedy until the friend caught him, and said, "So you are the thief?"

### **Lesson**

Stealing does not pay. The thief may escape for some time, but eventually, he will be caught.

### **ii. The Brave Man**

In a certain village called Kpanke near the forest of Olumedia, a lion tormented the life of the people: it killed many, injured many and left the living in fear of attack. This continued until a brave man rose up from among the people. His braveness was signed in the peculiar nature of his birth and straight forward kind of life. He was believed to have been sent by the gods to redeem the people. When he grew into a man, he fought the lion and killed it. But in the battle, he was fatally injured. This marked the redemption and freedom of the people of Kpanke.

### **Lesson**

God will always redeem his people.

These stories unveil the beliefs and worldview of the African people.

#### **4. African Myths**

Investigating the nature and origin of the universe: the origin of the national god, origin of the world, the origin of humanity, its place in creation, the deity that governs the land, the temple, the cult, etc., have been the objects of human reflection right from the ancient times. The outcome of this investigation is usually preserved in myths. They are thus, the outcome of the human attempts to explain historical institutions and developments by appeal to non-historical factors and forces. The African myth thus exposes the pattern of behaviour of the African people. It is a veritable mine of materials on African philosophy (Kanu, 2013b).

According Marshall (1988):

The word ‘myth’ is used to refer to stories that are fictional, and hence, it has come to have a pejorative sense. Traditionally, it refers to invented stories about the gods in which they behave like human beings with superhuman powers. Closely associated with this sense of the word is its usage to refer to the stories which may accompany and allegedly form the basis of religious rituals. (p. 449)

Gunkel (1901), corroborating Marshall, define myth as “Stories of the gods in contradistinction with legends (better, sages) in which the actors are men” (p. 14). Esposito, Easching and Lewis (2006), explain that the word “myth” comes from the Greek “mythos”, which means “story”. Myths are symbolic stories about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world. They relate human beings to whatever powers they believe ultimately govern their destiny, and explain to them what those powers expect of them. Unlike the contemporary English use of myth to indicate an untrue

story or a misunderstanding based on ignorance, in every religious tradition, myth conveys the eventual truths of life.

**i. The Nri Myth**

The Nri hegemony and its influence on Igbo history cannot be over emphasized. It is in this regard that Madubuko (1994) observes that the story of the Igbo people, no matter how briefly considered, would be incomplete if one omits the Eri-Nri contribution. Afigbo (1981) shows Eri clan as originating from the regions of Anambra River, at Aguleri; from there they fanned eastward and established various communities. According to Uzuoku (1988), Eri is the father of all Nri; and tradition says that he came from Chukwu. It is reported that the earth was not firm when he came to the world. To solve the problem of flood, he employed blacksmiths from Awka to use their bellows to dry the flooded land. There was no food as well for the people. To provide food, he prayed to God and He demanded that he should sacrifice his first son and daughter to him. After the sacrifice and burial of his son and daughter, as though all were lost, yam and palm tree began to grow out of the place where he buried his first son while vegetables and cocoyam grew out of the place where he buried his daughter. If yam germinated from where Eri's first son was buried, it means that yam is the resurrected son of Eri, and since it was given to man to sustain life, it is regarded as life itself. This myth reveals so much about Igbo life and value system, which is equally relevant in our Christological considerations.

Madu (2004) observes a cosmological drama in the whole myth. It reveals the dynamics of the cosmic drama between god, man, land and crops. Eri, the civilization hero enjoys a special relationship with Chukwu, and through Eri's sacrifice, humanity now enjoy a special relationship with the land which offers food for his sustenance. The ritual act performed by Eri established a covenant between Eri, his descendants and Chukwu. From the sacrifice of Eri, we come to discover why yam is very prominent in Igbo

sacrifice and life, a situation which warrants its annual elaborate festival throughout Igbo land. The growing of yam from the spot where Eri's first son was buried accounts for the respect given to *okpara* (first son) in Igbo life, he is in fact considered to be closer to the ancestors.

## ii. Lugbara Myth

The Lugbara are a Sudanic-speaking people and are members of the Moru-Madi sub-group of the Eastern Sudanic group (Tucker, 1940). They believe that *Adronga*, the Supreme Being created the world. He created *Gborogboro* (male being) and *Meme* (female being). *Adronga* is conceived in two ways: as God in the sky, remote from mankind and good (*Onyiru*); and as God in the streams, close to mankind and bad (*Onzi*). He is the ultimate fountain head of all power and authority, of all sanctions and order relations among human beings. His power may be manifested in lightening. Although the Supreme Being is the head of all power and authority, according to Middleton (1960), the ancestors composed customs, rules, rights and duties operative in the society. They are the words of the ancestors. Mountains are also the abode of God and the two hero ancestors: *Gborogboro* and *Meme*, who are common to all Lugbara people; they lived before the formation of the Lugbara society and were close to God (Kayode, 1984).

## 5. African Names of God and Persons

The names of God and persons are significant sources of African philosophy. For instance, among the Igbos, he is called: *Chineke* (the God who creates), *Chukwu* (the great God), *Osebuluwa* (the sustainer of the universe), *Ekekereuwa* (he who created the world), *Chi-oke* (God that apportions lots), *Nna-di-Ebube* (the awe-inspiring father), *Odogwu-nagha* (victorious warrior), *Ome Mgbeogharike* (actor in times of difficulty). These names reveal that God is the absolute controller of the universe. The names



given to people could also be a source of African philosophy. Names such as:

*Chi-nyere ndu*: God gave life  
*Nke-chi-yere*: the one God has given  
*Chi-n'eye ndu*: God gives life  
*Chi-di-ogo*: God is generous  
*Chi-nwe- ndu*: God owns life  
*Chi-ekwe*: God has agreed  
*Chi-ji-ndu*: God owns life

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These names speak of the various things God can do, especially as it relates to his relationship with human beings.

## **6. African Artistic Expressions**

Another source of African philosophy is African artistic expressions or artefacts. Africans have a lot of Artefacts that speak of the divine and the relationship of the human with the divine. They express the African's belief in God, divinities and the ancestors. For instance, during worship, the Priest uses the *Ofọ*, which is an insignia of authority among the Igbo. It is obtained

from a specific sacred tree. It is also used by every man who has a family and indeed kindred (*Umunna*). It is usually portable so that it can be carried in a goat skin bag by elders. It symbolizes justice and a clear mind. Thus, in the Igbo world, nothing important can be done without the invocation of the *Ọfọ*. Through it, the righteous dead, good spirits are invoked to uphold justice, decisions and settle disputes. During covenants, the *Ọfọ* is knocked on the ground so as to seal the event. It is carried around by priests, elders and heads of the *umunna*. It grants them the authority to offer prayers for people. It gives them the authority to decide cases and settle disputes. As such, African artistic expressions of this kind speak volumes of African philosophy.

## 7. African Languages

Language is any one of the thousands of various tongues that have developed historically among populations of human beings, and have been used for everyday purposes. It could be Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, English, Latin, French, just to mention a few. While these might be grouped as natural languages, there are artificial languages, as invented by mathematicians, logicians, computer scientists or even criminals (William, 1999). This notwithstanding, whether artificial or natural, language is an instrument of communication.

As regards African philosophy, language is a fundamental source. Its interpretation could lead to a stream of materials. According to Abanuka (2011), an analysis of words and their meanings will lead to a better grasp of the reality which they seek to express. The analysis of *Chi* by Ezewugo (1987), as having three connotations in Igbo ontology have led philosophers like Okere (1983), Abanuka (2003) and Njoku (2010) to develop an African concept of being as *Chi*: in its narrow and primary sense, it applies to the Supreme Being and carries here the force of a proper name. Second, it denotes any being, human or divine that is acting solely in the name and authority of the Supreme Being: *onye kwado ije*

*chi ya akwadobe* (if a person gets ready to go on a journey, his *Chi* gets ready too); *chi ya edulugoya naba* (His *Chi* has taken him home with him). Human agents could also be called *Chi* if he or she has acted as an agent of providence to a fellow human being, like saving the life of a person who wants to commit suicide: *chi nwayi bu diya* (a woman's *chi* is her husband); *ogō bu chi onye* (one's father in-law is one's *chi*). *Chi* also has an abstract and impersonal reference to providence. In this case, it refers to a divine decree or fate. The Igbo believe that before a child is born, his life course has been charted by his *Chi*: *onye ajọ chi kpatalu nku ewa ta ya*. An interpretation and understanding of African languages leads to a better understanding and appreciation of African Traditional Religion.

## 8. African Symbols

The Dictionary of Sociology and Related Science (1965), describes a symbol thus:

That which stands for something else particularly a relatively concrete explicit representation of a more generalized, diffuse, intangible object or group of objects. A very large part of social processes is caused on by use of symbols such as words, money, certificates and pictures. A true symbol excites reactions similar to, though perhaps not quite as intense as those created by the original object. (p. 314)

It is from the above perspective that Madu (2011) avers that symbolism implies the practice of using acts, sounds, objects or other means which are not of importance in themselves for directing attention to something that is considered important; it is the substitution of a symbol with the thing symbolized. For instance, Kola nut: It is a symbol of life, and that is why during the formal introduction of the Kola nut ritual, it is said: *onye wetara oji wetara ndu* (he that brings the kola brings life). The kola is also a symbol of peace and good will. This is why the first thing an

Igbo man offers a guest is the Kola to indicate that the guest is welcome. It is sometimes an indispensable element when sacrifices are offered to the gods. It is also a sign of communion, not just among the living, but also between the living and the dead. It could be referred to, in a traditional sense as the Igbo sacramental communion, specially presented, broken, shared and partaken of. During the breaking of the kola, heaven and earth comes together. And this is seen in the invocation of God (*Chukwu Abiama bia taa oji*), the heavens and the earth (*elu na ala bia ta oji*), the deities (*amadioha bia ta oji*), and the dead ancestors (*nnam... bia taa oji*). It speaks so much about the Igbo-African philosophy.

## 9. African Songs

According to Quarcoopome (1987), among Africans:

Singing generates the avenue for expressing certain sentiments or truths, and in the context of rituals they demonstrate the faith of the worshipper from the heart- faith in God, belief in and about divinities, assurance and hope about the present and with reference to the hereafter. (p. 37)

There are times when these songs, even outside liturgical celebrations mirror the power of God and the African philosophy of causality. For instance,

Onye Kugbulu nwankelu?: who killed nwankelu?  
 Kerere Nwankelu (reframe)  
 ukwa kugbulu nwankelu: the bread fruit killed nwankelu  
 Kerere Nwankelu  
 Gini mere ukwa ahụ?: What happened to the bread fruit?  
 Kerere Nwankelu  
 Obi mara ukwa ahụ: a digger pierced the breadfruit  
 Kerere Nwankelu  
 Gini mere obi ahụ?: What happened to the digger?

Kerere Nwankelu

Akika kp ọrọ obi ahụ.: The digger was infested by a termite.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gịni mere akika ahụ?: What happened to the termite?

Kerere Nwankelu

ọkọkọ t ụga akika ahụ: A cock was eating the termite.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gịni mere ọkọkọ ahụ?: What happened to the cock?

Kerere Nwankelu

ufu chuga ọkọkọ ahụ: a hyena was pursuing the cock

Kerere Nwankelu

Gịni mere ufu ahụ?: what happened to the hyena?

Kerere Nwankelu

Mmadu chuga ufu ahụ: a man was pursuing the hyena.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gịni mere mmadu ahụ?: what happened to the man?

Kerere Nwankelu

Chukwu kere mmadu ahụ: God created the man.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gịni kere Chukwu ahụ?: what made God?

Kerere Nwankelu

Anyi amaghi ihe kpuru Chukwu, Chukwu kpuru mmadu, mmadu chuga ufu, ufu chuga ọkọkọ, ọkọkọ chuga akika, akika turu obi, obi mara ukwa, ukwa kugbulu nwankelu- Kerere Nwankelu.: (we do not know what made God, who made man, man was in pursuit of the hyena, the hyena that was going after a cock, the cock that was eating termite, the termite that infested the digger, the digger that pierced the bread fruit, the bread fruit that eventually fell and killed nwankelu- Kerere Nwankelu). This song speaks of the African philosophy that traces every cause to God.

## 10. African Historical Experience

The historical experience of the African people is also one of the basic sources of African Philosophy; it provides materials for this African philosophy and further shapes it. It is like the rallying

ground of other sources of African philosophy, for it is only within a context that they find great meaning. Thus African philosophy is concerned with a lived experience (Kanu, 2012). The daily experience of the African continues to shape his philosophical reflections, and in fact the content of that reflection. And the different seasons in the historical evolution of Africa philosophy testifies to this. For instance, during the modern period of African philosophy, Nationalistic tendencies dominated in response to the spirit of the time. Thus, as a philosophy, African philosophy is creative, dynamic and not static. This is very much expressed in the works of Azikiwe (1937; 1965; 1964; 1978; 1981), Leopold (1964; 1973), Nkrumah (1962; 1963; 1964), Nyerere (1968; 1985) etc.

### 11. African Traditional Prayers

African traditional prayers also reveal so much about the African traditional philosophy of religion, especially about the relationship between the human and the divine. In many African prayers, God is approached as a Dependable Being, Friend and as Benevolent. The general format is usually the giving of praise to God, then the needs of the worshipper is put forward, and such needs include protection, procreation and prosperity. From these prayers, we come to learn about the names of God and the divinities that serve as the dean of the Supreme Being. For instance, in a prayer offered during sacrifice for marriage traditional rites:

*Chineke kere mmadu:* God created man

*Nee okuko nkea:* behold this fowl

*Chineke kere mmadu:* God created man

*Nee ugwuaku nwam:* behold *ugwuaku* my child

*Chekwabara m ya:* protect her for me

*Ihe kasị ihe n' uwa bu nwa:* offspring is the main thing in the world

*Chukwu, gin a-eme ka osiri masị gị:* God you act as you have designed

*Nye ya ụmụaka:* give her children

*Debe nwa okorobia nkea:* preserve this young man

*Ga-abụ diya:* her husband to be

*Nye ya akụ n' ụba:* give him the means

*Ka owe nye m ihe m ga-eri:* of giving me wealth to eat

*Ọburu na ọmụa nwa nwayi:* if she gives birth to a female child

*Ọ ga-dị:* it will live

*Ọburu nwa nwoke, ọ ga-adị:* if a male, it will live

*Ka ọ ghara inwe nsogbu ọbụla n'imụ nwa:* may she not have difficulty at childbirth

*Ka o nwee aru ike:* may her health be good

*Ka diya nwee aru ike:* may the health of her husband be good

*Ekpere dire na be mụọ:* prayer obtains among the spirits

*Na be mmadụ:* and among men

*Chukwu mete m mma:* God treat me well

*Ihe ọma ka m nayo:* I am asking for goodness

*Ka ọgom n' enye m:* my son-in-law shall give me

*Ihe m ga-eri:* things and I will eat

*Ihunaya ga-adi n' etiti anyi:* love will exist between us

*Chineke, nkea bu ihe m na-ayo:* God this is what I ask for

*Ala, mụọ nine nke iha, Eze Chitoke:* Spirit of Ihe, God the creator

*Ekene m unu:* I thank you.

*Ekwusigo m:* I have finished.

This prayer reveals the holistic and totalitarian character of African traditional prayers. It covers not just the human world, but also the spirit world, which interacts with the human world. As the prayer is said, it also reflects the corporate personality in African traditional prayer: the subject who prays embodies the sentiments, the hope, faith and expected values of all and not just himself. It is a prayer for the community and not the individual.

## **12. Conclusion**

This piece, from the foregoing has studied the sources of African philosophy. On the one hand, as sources, they relate to philosophy in two ways. First, they provide raw materials for philosophical reflection. Second, they are embodiments of African philosophy. The philosophical dimension of these sources of African philosophy is usually observed when reflection goes beyond the literal and textual meanings of these sources to the meaning behind the text or words used; a kind of a move from the literal to the allegorical. Furthermore, on the other hand, philosophy relates with these sources at the level of investigating their reasonableness, not whether it really happened, but whether it does reasonably answer the questions looming at the horizon of the human heart. This is because myths, folklores, proverbs, etc., are not so much concerned about truth or falsity, but appeal to the accent of the mind by giving hints.



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