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African Conception of Man and the Challenge of Secure and Peaceful Co-Existence in the Contemporary Time

Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Madonna University, Nigeria
epury@rocketmail.com

Abstract

Through all ages, man seeks to understand himself more in order to achieve his ultimate goal in life. In the recent times, the so treasured African secure and peaceful co-existence is significantly challenged. This paper exposed the African understanding of man as a communitarian being who belongs to a network of family with implicit social relationships and active participation in the community activities that define and offer him full actualization and fulfilment. Using philosophical method of analysis and critical evaluation, it also critically evaluated and brought to limelight various factors that threaten the security of members and the so cherished 'we-existence' spirit of collective living that consequently challenge the peaceful co-existence of Africans especially in the recent times. Major factors as lack of proper sense of human worth and dignity, poor governance, attitude of violence and poor sense of order, socio-economic status, individualism, ethnic diversity and implicit prejudice among others were identified. Having interrogated the issue of insecurity and the consequential lack of peaceful co-existence, the paper suggested practical guides which include dynamic education of the mind, inculcation of moral consciousness and national values, creative and critical grooming of citizens, skilful training of servant leaders, enhancement of communal living and stronger African Union for optimal and effective restoration of peace and security of life and properties for more authentic living, promotion of brotherhood, healthy, peaceful and harmonious existence that support human dignity. It concluded that major challenges to security and peaceful co-existence in Africa can be properly addressed through dynamic education of the mind, skilful guidance towards creative and critical thoughts and inculcation of moral rectitude.

Key terms: Africa, man, secure, peaceful, co-existence, contemporary time.

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Introduction

It is a well known fact that philosophy is a way of life. African philosophy earns the credit of touching the core issues with regard to human existence especially as it concerns Africans themselves. At this period of heightened violence in its multiple forms in African nations that threaten the well-being of her members, it seems very appropriate to philosophically enquire into the understanding of man by Africans themselves and relate it to their present conditions of life so to situate the causes and the effects of obvious challenges to her secure and peaceful co-existence in order to proffer useful solutions that will restore sense of security that supports human dignity. Palpably, the insecurity in its manifold shapes and models pose existential problems that increasingly threaten and destroy lives even in strange and alarming manners in African countries, including Nigeria. Consequently, there are serious feelings of social anxieties, physical, emotional and psychological insecurity that the members no longer enjoy their valued African life in peaceful co-existence.

African Conception of Man as a Communitarian Being

The understanding of oneself reveals the *why* of one's feelings, thought and actions; in other words, one's attitude. As Egbekpalu (2011, p.5) hinted "Man is an ultimate question for man himself for the fact that man grills himself on his own reality, his nature and place in the universe, the sense and goal of his existence." Here, the question of who man is or even more specifically who an African man is, is an ontological, anthropological, existential, humanistic and metaphysical one that points to the being, nature and life of man in the society. It is interesting to note that in African understanding, man is not just defined on the basis of his ontology but more importantly too, on his relationship with his world. This is one of the remarkable features of African philosophy that distinguishes it from Western ideas. From the background of African thought and lifestyle, he is so conceived at the grip of his ultimate origin and profundity of the nature of his being. Together with his nature and being, the meaning of his existence that is rooted in his lived experience within his community becomes apparent. Hence, the African concept of man as a communitarian being brings us very close to the

depth of his humanity. Metaphysically, he is also viewed in the light of his religiosity. Divinely intoxicated, an African perceives himself not just at the physical realm but also as possessing a divine element with superlative dynamism beyond every other created being. The father of Igbo metaphysics (Edeh, 2007 p.56) expresses, "Having been created by God, he is a product of his Maker and hence shares in the being of his Maker, the highest good." Therefore, the anthropologico-metaphysico-existential analysis of man portrays a triangular form of existence that has at its vertexes the individual, the community and the creator. Actually, the inextricable interplay of man's anthroplogical, humanistic, existential and metaphysical dimensions bring to limelight his ontological quality as a divine descent which is in turn intertwined with his daily experiences of life. The actualization of his human nature is possible only within his human community where he reasonably shares his human existence with other human beings. In fact, an African man is and remains an African (Egbekpalu, 2011, p.145) "in so far as he identifies himself with his community, lives and acts in accordance with the given norms and code of conduct of his culture, custom and tradition that form and guard the moral consciousness of the people." In this vein, Mbiti's affirmation which has been extensively adopted captures the African life as a 'we-existence'. In his words (Mbiti, 1981 p. 108), "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am." Daly (1994 p. xvi) depicts it even more aptly,

> As an individual, each person has a unique identity defined by a subjective consciousness, forms and carries out projects that unfold in a personal history, holds an inalienable right to pursue this life plan, and follows universal principles of morality in relationships with others. But at the practical level of everyday life, a communitarian conception can be felt. As a member of a community, each person belongs to a network of family and social relationships and is defined by this membership, and each person seeks personal fulfilment through participation in the evolving social structures of this community, finds personal liberty in the expanded self-development cultivated through these activities, and honours a traditional complex of agreed-on commitments.

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In illustrating the imperative communal nature of African life, Iwe (1987 p. 379) submits,

> The community is a self-world that demands an undivided union with others. Existence apart from the community or the universe of life-force is unthinkable…community creates man and the African concept of man is inadequate without the idea of shared existence.

Explaining further, Mbiti (1981 p. 108) highlights,

> In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately…He is simply part of a whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group.

African community is much more than just the co-existence or aggregate of a group of people but a place and metaphysical cord that joins the members together, where communal spirit and family affection are well felt in the promotion of brotherhood and mutual responsibility as no man exists only for himself because a tree does not make a forest. Pragmatically, these buttress the African proverbial expression that 'unity is might'. Life in the community is human and humane, while security of life and properties are assured.

An authentic African exists in the community and is relevant only within the community where he is richly identified and recognized. This common life portrays relatedness and close-ness. As Edeh (2006 p.115) stated, "There is a close-ness in living because each person belongs to others and in turn is belonged to by others…and by love he acquires a fulfilment as a person beyond mere individuality." Nwala (1985 p.45) explains it further,

> The community itself has its being or existence defined by this common blood. The life of a member of the community is interwoven with the others through the common blood which they share and through the web of

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> economic and social interdependence which practically exists in the community.

In African setting, family members include parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephew, in-laws, etc. Usually, a child is identified not actually by his personal name but by that of his or her father as the son or daughter of such a person. Highlighting on this, Onwubiko (1991 p.14) articulates,

> Every man is linked to his parents on the natural level…his parents in turn are bound to their grand parents, etc. This link which binds all members of the same family by propagation is broadened to include all members of the community or clan who are believed to be descendants of the same ancestors.

In other words, families constitute the kindred, kindreds make up the village, villages build a town, towns form states and so on.

Understandably, the African notion of man has at its base respect and care for life due to its sacred origin. Hence, the vitality of community life has high respect for life. In this way, the community co-existence which is the life-wire of Africans demands optimal respect for one another through which safety and practical solidarity are assured. As such, each member is expected to be his brother's keeper. Man's realization of himself in the community is embedded in his nature with the understanding that he is of a divine origin and should act accordingly. The anthropocentric and theocentric dimensions of man are demonstrated through various African names given at birth. The triangular Man-World-God relationship serves as a guiding principle for actions. Life in the community where every one is a *being-with* and a *being-in-relation-to-others* offers ultimate security; physically, socially, psychologically, economically, emotionally, etc. It is a custodian of morality and good life of the people. Melladu (2011 pp.52-53) avows,

> Families and members of kin groups from minimal to maximal lineages generally live together to form

> community…The crucial need for security and better performance in means of livelihood are relevant factors that deepen the natural impulse for gregariousness and sense of community… For traditional Africans, community is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin and/or deep common interests and values. It is both a social as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds (ancestors, divinities and souls of children yet to be born).

Unfortunately and palpably too, the infiltrations of certain factors adversely dilute the so cherished African spirit and the members are faced with conflictual experiences of disharmonious living. In the recent times, the so treasured African secure and peaceful co-existence is significantly challenged. However, all hope is not lost. Philosophy still exerts its relevance in the life of people. It analyzes, criticizes, enlightens and guides human conduct. The ethical principles of autonomy, beneficience, nonmalefficience and justice are the keys to desirable behaviours in the society.

The Challenge of Secure and Peaceful Co-existence in Today's Africa

In the recent times, the situation in African has been very critical given the complexity of threats to security and peace of the members. Various crises occur at socio-political, ethnic, educational, economic and even at religious spheres. The nature of the conflict is more of national than international affairs. Often, post-conflict effects are so destructive and lasting. Africa is now considered a conflict-ridden continent that even poses enormous challenge to United Nation's realization of global peace. The increasingly incessant security crises are quite palpable and can simply be summarized as resulting from the transvaluation of African core values. The contributive factors include:

Negligence of Human Worth, Dignity and Goal of Human Existence

Through man's daily dainty activities, he expresses his worth, dignity and goal of existence. Against this background, man's activities must correspond to his *raison d'etre*. A lot of philosophical endeavours exhume that man is created for

meaningful purposes; to subdue the earth and maintain the order of created things in the universe to which he is part of. Endowed with the power of orderliness, he is bequeathed with sense of law and order. All things being equal, it is natural for man to act in favour of good and care in accordance to his human nature. To this end, ethnicism, nepotism, conflict, war, hatred and the like are not in keeping with the value of human nature.

Human worth, dignity and goal of existence have been greatly neglected in varied manners and at diverse levels in Africa. This enormous negligence continues to cause untold crises that meddle gravely with the quality of people's life and existence. Unless man accurately perceives his goal of existence, internalizes it in his bone marrows and act accordingly, he may be acting against his nature (*contra natura*) and creating disorder both in himself and in the society in which he lives. This disorder can be interpreted as conflicts of various sorts, shapes, sizes and degrees that lead to many crises which question human worth and dignity in general.

Poor Governance

Poor leadership has contributed massively to African quandary especially with regard to insecurity. African leaders seem to extensively buttress the view of the English philosopher, Hobbes who submitted that man is a selfish, egoistic and wicked being; a wolf to his fellow man. Poor leadership in Africa today characterized by selfishness, greed and exploitation has stifled her resources causing hardships and untold sufferings to her members. More often than not, African leaders demonstrate their incapability in the use of political authority for the management of their nations' affairs. Falaiye (2012 pp.30-31) commented that "bad leadership is neither in our genes nor in our stars, but in our lack of understanding of the deep philosophical questions in politics."

Individualism and Selfishness

The complexity of life's phenomena has lured many Africans into selfish individualism that gradually disorganizes the relational structure of the traditional

African society which recognizes interdependence as basic tenet of existence. Effectively, this disintegrates the so esteemed African communal life of "we-existence" that Mbiti (1981 p.108) beautifully expresses as "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." By implication, the moral consciousness of the people is greatly lost. Unfortunately, the security and peaceful co-existence of the people among other values are threatened. Yoruba adage holds that "lack of unity in a community makes it susceptible to danger." As Kwame (1996 p.38) avers, "the values of collective action, mutual aid, cooperation and interdependence are necessary conditions not only for individual well-being but also for successful achievement of even the most difficult undertakings." Surely, individualism is a fertile ground for insecurity and conflictual co-existence through poor communications that might sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

Attitude of Violence and Loss of Sense of Order

The psychological and behavioural consequences of individualism and moral decadence manifest so obviously in the attitude of many Africans especially in that of the younger generation, marked greatly with violence and lack of sense of order. Attitude of violence has been identified as a key factor in the acceleration of insecurity and vicious life. This involves physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, sexual, and even cultural violence in relation to dispositions of religious beliefs, political ambitions, social desirable status, cultural practices, educational cravings, economic needs and other radical demands with regard to rights of others. Cases of kidnapping, boko haram, robbery, thuggery, rape, farmer-herder conflicts, various intimidations, coercions, ethnic-religious strife and all forms of attacks are on the increase due to violent attitudes. In general, these continue to escalate the insecurity situation and non-peaceful co-habitation in Africa causing serious damages to lives and properties. Major grounds for violence may be attributed to peer influence, lack of respect for human person, low self-esteem, ignorance, access to weapons, being victims of violence, etc. The prominent groups that are identified with violent acts are the youths and early adults. As such, proper education of the mind already from the early stage of life is simply unavoidable.

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Socio-Economic Status

As the saying goes, one evil begets another. The above social ills form a vicious circle. Poor governance in Africa fosters attitude of violence and loss of sense of order that adversely affect the socio-economic status which affects the quality of people's livelihood. As a matter of fact, lack of employment, poverty, poor accessibility of the common mass to basic resources that sustain life among other hardships encourage the spirit of violence and breach of laws especially among the younger generation. As they struggle to make ends meet, they grip on anything that fetches them daily livelihood in order to survive. Today, any available means justifies the end. To worsen it, moral judgments are so impoverished and considered less important. As Marx upholds, man must meet his physiological needs before he is able to reason rightly. Poor flow of finance causes frustration and other chains of conflictual actions and reactions in the family, neighbourhood, villages, towns, states and the nation as a whole as members relate with one another.

Ethnic Diversity and Prejudice

Ethnic diversity brings about ethnic prejudice that influences individuals' psychological and emotional health and security which manifest in their behaviour and interfere in their daily functioning as they hinder effective co-existence and national integration of citizens. In the past, Africa prides herself of her rich ethnic diversity that adds colours to her life and existence and often expressed as "unity in diversity", despite the inherent challenges. Today, the reverse is the case. Her ethnic differences become her swords, causes of separation, marginalization, conflicts, hatred, etc. that constantly bring about insecurity which militates against peaceful co-existence of the people. Ethnic differences trigger biases and ethnic prejudices that cause negative feelings in particular group of people towards another due to their belongingness to that group. According to Iwe (1991), "ethnic prejudice is a derogatory stereotype, often very resistant to change which is cherished by one ethnic group against the other." Prejudicial attitude has behavioural, psychological and emotional

implications. The high prevalence of ethnic conflicts is attributed to ethnic prejudice. In a given study, Agbakwuru and Opara (2013 pp. 86-93) established that,

> Ethnic prejudice is one of the major impediments to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria… passed from one generation to the other through the process of socialization…compounded by the country's multi-ethnic and multi-language diversity…creates a type of social interaction and relationship that is unhealthy among them…further made worse by the high rate of illiteracy in the country.

Unfortunately, each day breeds new forms of ethnic fracas that heightens insecurity crisis by which members gradually loose emotional intelligence and sensitivity to the needs and well-being of others. Major causes of ethnic conflicts include ineffective administration and putting one's own group above others in decision making, sharing of resources, political and socio-economic participations, employment opportunities, religious expressions, etc. The perceived marginalization, inequality, neglect, discrimination and limited access to resources and freedom for self-expressions by others generate grievances, emotional, physical and psychological insecurity that lead to various hostile acts such as political, religious, economic and all sorts of ethnic conflicts. Consequently, these bring about lack of peace.

The Relevance of Philosophy as it interrogates Insecurity and Lack of Peaceful Co-existence in Africa Today

Over the years, the cultural, religious, political, ethnic and language fissures widen significantly and create tensions and misunderstanding among the people. Presently, the greatest and disturbing challenges that African nations face are insecurity and threat to unity due to those cleavages of religion, ethnicity, culture, politics, etc. that impede integration and cause violence. It becomes obvious then that, such pluralistic cultural continent with divergent ideas requires adequate philosophical attention to create basis for reconciling conflicts and find a common way of doing things to ensure peace and security.

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Philosophy is the life wire of civilization. It is a guiding principle for behaviours and a key for positive and sustainable development. It emphasises value education that entails education of character, sound conscience and good moral values through which viable humane society encapsulated in respect and responsibility will be attained and sustained. It (Egbekpalu, 2018) primarily interrogates the basic assumptions and realities of life with regard to culture, politics, religion, economy, etc.

> The philosophical roles are quite sublime and valuable in our complex society and they are utterly appropriate for all times as they are made anew each time for any circumstances. It bears the codes with which rational knowledge could be practically translated into actions as it lays down precepts that conduct man to rightful actions and good life. It is an instrument with which poor human conditions that demote human dignity can be combated in order to give more meaning to human existence. By responding to the nagging quandary of our nation, philosophy exercises distinct sacred normative and analytic tasks of evaluating realities.

The factors that Challenge the African 'we-existence' in recent times can be remedied through rational application of philosophical wisdom. As stated (Egbekpalu, 2018),

> Investigating into African current problems, it becomes somewhat clear that there is a fundamental and general need for a new direction of thought and action towards the building a new society of freedom, equality, sustainable development, peace and unity which is the major work of philosophy. The possible transformation of people and the society through viable changes in thought pattern will help to re-enact the nations' beliefs, values and principles in order to re-construct priorities appropriately.

Every philosophical theory is in part a product of the time, place, culture and even experience where it is developed. As Hegel rightly hinted, each philosopher is a child of his age and circumstances. In his words (Gallagher, 1997 p.149),

> Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosopher can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes.

Russell (1946 p.7) stated that, "Philosophers are both effects and causes; effects of the social circumstances and the politics and social institutions of their time; causes…of the beliefs, which mould the politics and institutions of later age." As a veritable tool for positive changes, philosophy imparts rational knowledge which Socrates acknowledged to be virtuous; 'knowledge is virtue.' The book of life (Hosea, 4:6) states that "my people perish for lack of knowledge." Falaiye (2012 pp.30-31) established that Africans "perish for lack of philosophy." Umezurike (1989) highlighted that "Poverty of the mind and barrenness of intellect are the most tragic disease that a country can slip into at any time in its history." Yes, knowledge is power (*scientia est potentia*) but I believe instead that our people perish for lack of proper application of proper knowledge in conquering existential barriers and promote authentic existence.

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Philosophy studies, understands, analyzes and critically evaluates the activities of the people as it criticizes in general the principles of all cultures, while interpreting values and developing better ideas that override cultural differences. In all these, it offers a rational outlook to life; perceive problems, identify them, suggests practical guides and create means to solve them through critical interactions for secure, healthy and harmonious living.

Recommendations

It was Carl Marx (1997 p.125) who declared that "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however is to change it." Before

this paper draws to its close, it will not fail to proffer antidotes to violent acts and the implicit insecurity crisis as well as the dwindling peaceful co-existence of the members that clog the wheel of communal, peaceful and harmonious living in Africa. It therefore passionately recommends:

- Genuine development of citizens: Through dynamic processes of education of the mind, integral formation and approach will avail creative and critical thinking as the ultimate value of education is the realization of famous Latin quotation- *"Mens sana in corpore sano* often translated as 'a sound mind in a healthy body',
- Inculcation of moral consciousness: Education without good morals is more dangerous and suicidal. In other words, the true end and goal of education is the harmony of intelligence and good character. Otherwise it will result to what Lewis, C.S considered as "Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil."
- Skilful Training of Leaders: Since leaders are made not born, African philosophy and philosophers should endeavour to committedly assist to skilfully raise and groom servant leaders who have sincere love for African society.
- Enlightenment on national values: Constant re-enactment of national values will surely enhance communal living, good human and humane relationships where good moral conduct is cherished and evil shunned.
- Stronger African Union: Finally, let there be a stronger African Union (AU) that effectively implements good and humane decisions of her member states and resiliently engage herself in silencing conflicts towards the achievement of its united aim which will greatly foster political stability and economic growth that in turn ensures maximum security at all spheres of life, while it gradually leads to the extinction of venomous activities.

Conclusion

Africans conceive man as a being in relation to others whose personal endowments are developed and nurtured for a more meaningful and happier existence through his life in the community. From the above discussions, one realizes that the major challenges to security and peaceful co-existence in Africa

can be properly addressed through dynamic education of the mind, inculcation of moral rectitude, creative and critical thoughts, skilful training of servant leaders, enhancement of communal living and stronger African Union.

Author's Biography

Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu is a bonafide member of the Sisters of Jesus the Saviour, Nigeria. She is a Senior Lecturer in the department of Philosophy in Madonna University, Nigeria and an adjunct staff in Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu in Nigeria. She holds her PhD in Philosophy and MSc in Psychology. Her passion to understand the meaning of life made her to venture into existential philosophy and developmental psychology. These vested interests in philosophy and human development motivate her always anew to search for and highlight the concrete meaning of human existence. These too prove her strong quest for logotherapy and engagement in concrete existential issues of life that led to her authorship of *The Reality of Human Existence: Coping with Existential Conditions, Sufferings and Pains of Life*, *Meaningful Living: Echoes from Existentialism and logotherapy*, *The Concept of Self in the Thoughts of Soeren Kierkegaard*, *Happiness: The Golden Lustre of Life*, *Authentic Existence: Igbo-African Perspective.* She has also contributed to many book chapters, proceedings and has many journal articles to her name. She has attended and presented various local and international conferences and has as well-organized workshops and seminars at various levels and edited some works. She belongs to professional bodies of Association of Professional Philosophers of Nigeria (APPON), International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD), International Society of Research on Edeh's Philosophy and Theology (ISREPAT), Edeh's Philosophy of Thought and Action (EPTAISM), Kierkegaardian Scholars of Nigeria (SKIASON). She is a polyglot and has received many awards from various bodies especially for academic diligence and service to the community.

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