Philosophy as a Way of Life in African Philosophy

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In this talk, I focus on, and give a brief overview of, four key dispositions or modes of being that can be extracted from African philosophy, particularly hermeneutic, ubuntu, and conversational philosophy. These key dispositions are (i) the indigenisation and appropriation of philosophical ideas and concepts emerging from non-African lifeworlds – a significant problem in the literature of African philosophy; (ii) the archival-archaeological inventory process of sifting, sieving, filtrating, and fertilising indigenous knowledges by "returning to the source"; (iii) creative struggles that follow the encounter with the other in their radical otherness/alterity; and (iv) the arumarustic relationship (conversational dialectics) that emphasise reciprocity, and mutual constitutive acts of humanness (ubuntu).

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The direct link between (the history) of African philosophy and philosophy as a way of life (PWL) is a recent development in the discourse of both these fields. Scholars such as Richard Sivil (2024), Oludamini Ogunnaike (2017; 2020), and Michael Mburu (2018) are three of the most recent scholars to explicitly make this connection between African philosophy and leading a philosophical life, that is putting theory into practice and allowing practice to influence theory. Although African philosophical practices, such as ubuntu as interpreted by Mogobe Ramose (2005),[1] have long aligned with PWL principles, it is only recently that these two discourses have been explicitly read together, exemplified by the mentioned authors. Sivil, for example, reads and interprets ubuntu philosophy through his own PWL schema, while Ogunnaike applies a stricter Hadotian lens to Sufism and Ifa systems. Mburu examines the life of Henry Oruka, showing how this key African philosopher embodied his own concept of philosophical sagacity,

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[1] See especially Sivil (2024:134) who makes this claim.

fundamentally altering and transforming his way of being and living. These intersections thus offer a significant opportunity: both African philosophy and PWL literature might be positively expanded through this fruitful encounter.

In this talk, I wish to focus on how reading African philosophy, particularly African hermeneutics, conversational, and ubuntu philosophy, through a PWL lens might lead to interesting ideas and the creation of novel concepts that might affect how we live and think.

I will focus on, and give a brief overview of, four key dispositions or modes of being that can be extracted from these philosophical schools of thought. What I mean with disposition in this case simply refers to the practiced way of being, encompassing both thought and action, practice and theory. These key dispositions are (i) the indigenisation and appropriation of philosophical ideas and concepts emerging from non-African lifeworlds – a significant problem in the literature of African philosophy; (ii) the archival-archaeological inventory process of sifting, sieving, filtrating, and fertilising indigenous knowledges by "returning to the source"; (iii) creative struggles that follow the encounter with the other in their radical otherness/alterity; and (iv) the *arumarustic* relationship (conversational dialectics) that emphasise reciprocity, and mutual constitutive acts of humanness (*ubuntu*).

I begin with what I call the search for relevance, an organic appropriation and indigenisation.

1. In search of relevance: Organic appropriation and indigenisation

In the beginning sections of African hermeneutic philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan's most important work, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, the African philosopher is proposed or tasked to be actively engaged in a process of *organic appropriation and indigenisation*. Serequeberhan (1994:2) focuses particularly on organically appropriating and indigenising Heidegger's existentially aware position. It is in this marginal passage that this important disposition is formed, setting off the process of shaping and moulding one's philosophy, always in search of its relevance to a particular place or lifeworld, and placed on a path toward continual self-transformation.

In the confrontation of the post-colonial present, or what Serequeberhan calls the neo-colonial situation, the African philosopher is tasked with finding, problematising, and resisting colonial residues, or the influence of western modernity, that continue to exert influence over African modes of being. But this is not just a process of identification and then discarding in toto what the African philosopher finds. Instead, through this process of organic appropriation and indigenisation, the African philosopher engages in a highly transformative praxis where philosophical activities and concepts/ideas originating from other lifeworlds are critically unpacked, opened up, reconfigured, and rendered relevant to the African philosopher's highly situated, and contextual realities.

I briefly lay out two simple analogies, interspersed with some examples from the literature, that might help with understanding this process.

In the first, which I call the *digestion analogy*, philosophy is likened to the consumption of food that will get digested by the consumer. Here, one might point to the processes of *dismantling*, *extraction*, and *modification*. Dismantling, in the sense of deconstructing or taking apart. Throughout Serequeberhan's oeuvre, he deconstructs various works of canonical philosophical figures, so as to expose the often racist innerworkings of these texts.[2] Extraction, in the sense of taking what is needed and discarding what is not needed. Inherent to Serequeberhan's call to appropriate and indigenise is the acquisition of what one might call alien ideas – this is exemplified through his dealings and encounters with especially Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Lastly, modification, in the sense that these alien ideas are adapted to the specific situation in which they are employed. Through this "active digestion", a philosophy can become meaningful and applicable to a specific context, lifeworld, or what one might deem philosophical place. All three these processes are also mentioned by the African conversational philosopher Jonathan Chimakonam (2019:183, 185), who aligns closely with the hermeneutic approach taken by Serequeberhan. Chimakonam talks about a type of "merging" that includes the re-shaping and restructuring of "borrowed foreign content" which can "forge" new "epistemic visions".

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[2] The most prominent examples of such a practice are in his 1997 text in which he dismantles the philosopher Immanuel Kant. See Serequeberhan (1997).

The second analogy, which I call the *clay analogy*, illustrates the seemingly infinite malleability of ideas and concepts. By changing hands, these concepts and ideas take new forms, they are employed in different ways, functionally shaped and moulded by philosophers according to their specific contexts and situations. Serequeberhan's usage of canonical western figures, such as Heidegger and Gadamer, is thus illustrative of this disposition. He does not uncritically use and apply these philosophers, that is keep the western frameworks and terminology in place, and thus not acknowledging the colonial residue embedded in them. Instead, through active digestion and moulding, he re-shapes them in intricate ways to better understand the contemporary situation in which he finds himself – that is, the confrontation with neo-colonialism – in and on his own terms. This is why, in some sense, Serequeberhan (2009) calls this understanding of African philosophy a form or practice of *active resistance*.

This approach has some affinity with the PWL literature, especially the transformative nature of philosophising or leading a philosophical life. The philosopher, adopting a particular school of thought's way of living, was expected to adopt unique practices that shape and radically change their mode of being. Various identified ailments were proposed to be rectified with the philosophical life; the goal or outcome of adopting these ways of life usually ending in a sort of tranquillity or unperturbedness (*ataraxia*). In short, these lives were actively shaped by their chosen philosophical principles, likening it with the discussed notion of searching for a type of relevance, to digest and mould ideas and concepts unique to their perspective or life.

2. *Archival and Inventory project: A cultural filtration and fertilisation*

Linked to the previous disposition, the archival or inventory project is crucial to shaping both a philosophical way of living and in the process of what Serequeberhan (2009:50) refers to as reclaiming, reinserting, and enunciating of one's "generic human identity". This is marked by what Serequeberhan continually refers to as a *cultural filtration and fertilisation* or a *sifting and sieving* process. In contrast to the previous disposition in which the African philosopher confronts so-called alien ideas and concepts, in this disposition the African philosopher encounters her own history, tradition, culture, or heritage. This is an active and critical engagement which goes beyond simply accepting a tradition as it is.

The archival project is also intimately linked to the idea of a "return to the source", a notion that Serequeberhan gains from the liberation philosopher Amílcar Cabral. Here, the African philosopher is not returning to a stagnant and unchanged *archē* hidden in the past – a pre-colonial idea of what African philosophy as a way of life would have looked like. Instead, the *returning* process is linked to the very archival or inventory project, one that contains a process of filtering, sieving, sifting of the past, heritage, history, so that the present and future might be fertilised. The source to which the African philosopher returns, in this case, is the revival of a liveliness of African existence, one that is free from what Serequeberhan has called colonial residue, or when African modes of being was sought to be covered, destroyed, or erased. Specifically, for Serequeberhan (1994:105) the notion of the "return", involves a "cultural and political recovery of the suppressed historic possibilities in the existence of the colonised." The source to which the African philosopher thus returns in the present represents the "vigor, vitality (life), and ebullience of African existence" which liberation fighters displayed when formal colonialism was eradicated (Serequeberhan, 1994:126). Serequeberhan (2009:47) continues by emphasising that "African philosophy has to engage in the systematic and critical study of indigenous forms of knowledge and 'know-how' both practical and theoretic". This disposition allows for a willingness "to learn from and critically study the concrete practices of various African liberation movements and struggles" (Serequeberhan, 2009:47). This is especially set out by Serequeberhan as an invitation, one of a cross-fertilisation between the products of the organic appropriation and indigenisation and sifting and sieving process.

African philosophers thus embody the returning moment by critically revering their past. They extract necessary elements from it to construct a better future or establish new ways of relating to and understanding the present situation, and in Serequeberhan's case, to de-link itself from western modernity or colonial ways of being. Such a disposition resonates with Hadot's (1995:81-82) concept of spiritual exercises. Growth, self-transformation, and cultivation of alternative thinking patterns and ways of living are continually practiced through selective adoption and adaptation of ideas from one's own history and culture. By exercising critical discernment while (re-)constructing the inventory and archive, African philosophers sift, sieve, and filter through their *living* past and culture – a process resembling PWL in many regards. Ultimately, these philosophers illustrate a

practical disposition of thoughtful and respectful selection and application of philosophical insights within their situated contexts so that they might cultivate a better present and future.

3. From ubuntu to conversationalism: Creative struggles, arumarustics, and radical reciprocity

In the final section, I want to conclude with another analogy. I call this the *conversational dance analogy*. Through this analogy, the key disposition or ways of living philosophically proposed by especially conversational and ubuntu philosophy can be highlighted. This is by no means a conventional reading of ubuntu philosophy. In fact, it might be called a conversational reading of ubuntu. But first, let me discuss the dance analogy.

In this analogy, two dancers are conceptualised, freely dancing over a dance floor. They are constantly adapting their movements to the ever-changing music. In conversational philosophy, especially as envisioned by Chimakonam (2017:15), these two dancers represent two philosophers, one instantiating as the proponent and the other as the opponent. Like a dance, philosophy is understood as an ongoing, fluid, and ever-evolving practice. The dancing couple, mirroring the philosophising duo, are challenged and engaged in many ways. Creative struggles emerge as one partner briefly leads while the other follows, paralleling Chimakonam's assertion that such struggles are essential for philosophising. The encounter, or what one might call the confrontation, between two philosophers yield novel and new concepts through this constant re-shuffling process.

Crucially, though, the dance should not cease its movements. Its cessation would signify what Chimakonam refers to a *creative surrender*, or what one might refer to, in an oversimplified manner, as a synthesis. Through the dancing analogy, the separate dancers can be visualised as collapsing into one. This illustrates the distinction between a synthesis position, where opponent and proponent merge, and the conversational dialectic, where such synthesis is perpetually deferred, put on hold, and keeping the dance, i.e., the conversation, alive.

The concept of relationship, or what Chimakonam (2019) terms *nmeko*, plays an integral role in the philosophical life. This understanding of relationship differs slightly from

conventional usage, serving a co-constitutive and critical function in African philosophising. Co-constitution manifests as the individual is defined through the community, while simultaneously, the community is formed through individuals (Chimakonam, 2019:161). This mirrors the dance analogy: the dance exists only through the continuous movement of two dancers across the floor, yet the dance floor gains purpose through the dancers' performance. Just as the dancers and the dance mutually define each other, so too do individuals and community in the context of *nmeko*.

The critical aspect of *nmeko* emerges from the embedded creative struggle, where the encounter with the other in their otherness serves as a crucial missing link. This concept resonates with the African philosopher Innocent Asouzu's complementary ontology, where every being constitutes a missing link in reality. Even a perspective reprehensible to oneself forms a required missing link in the philosophical process, emphasising the radical reciprocity and the necessity of the other in constituting one's own humanness and position. Thus, philosophising through conversationalism and ubuntu cannot happen without the other, as one's own humanness cannot be fully realised without engaging with perspectives that might significantly differ from one's own. Thus, conversational philosophising necessitates the presence of the other. This framework of *nmeko* naturally leads to this idea of radical reciprocity.

Through an ongoing and open-ended conversation, new concepts may emerge organically, and novel ways of living can be co-cultivated. The conversational disposition therefore encompasses, among other elements, *creative struggles*, *arumaristics* (or the conversational dialectic), and *radical reciprocity*. In this way, the dance of conversational philosophy continues, with partners constantly engaging, challenging, and reshaping each other's ideas, much like the fluid movements of dancers responding to changing rhythms and each other's steps. The conversational dialectic, marked by creative struggles and radical reciprocity, demands that the leading dancing partner construct and create new movements, while at the same time demanding that the partner who follows assumes a critical and questioning role. This dynamic demands continual responses from the leading partner, or the proponent of a position. Importantly, these positions are not fixed; the leading partner can swiftly become the follower, roles infinitely interchangeable and continually swapped, always in response to the ever-changing situation unfolding on the philosophical dance floor.

At this stage, the affinity with Hadot's (1995:90-92) emphasis on dialogue and philosophical community can be mentioned. The philosophical life is not led alone; rather, their philosophical pursuit is within a community, illustrated by the philosopher adopting a school's way of living. This entails communal activity and involvement, emphasised by the spiritual exercise of authentic encounter with the other and the self (Hadot, 1995:91). For example, in the journey to learn how to dialogue, we are told that more often than not, it was not the goal or solution that mattered, but the journey or road that the philosopher used that led to the personal transformation. This mirrors the ongoing dance of conversational philosophy, where the process itself is transformative – albeit a *self*-transformation through the community, and communitarian benefit through various self-transformations. Reciprocal conversation and ubuntu philosophy emphasise this intersubjective nature of philosophical growth and understanding, but also the confrontational attitude as found in both Hadot and Chimakonam's conversational philosophy. The confrontational aspect of philosophising aligns with creative struggles and critical questioning, inherent in the conversational dance and thus conversationalism.

It is crucial to note that African philosophy, especially ubuntu, read through a conversational lens, places significant emphasis on the dependence of one's existence on recognition by the other. This recognition of and by the other – particularly in their alterity – is vital for one's own *humanness* (*ubuntu*). Engagement with diverse perspectives, through reciprocal and mutual critique, is not merely encouraged but an ontological necessity and a methodological requirement. Jabu Sindane (as quoted in Letseka, 2000:183), for example, notes that "[u]buntu inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own."

Moreover, the other is embraced even when it might bring about tension, friction, or creative struggles. Some proponents of ubuntu philosophy explicitly hold that "[t]he individual whom I find as most reprehensible still constitute part of my humanity" (Eze, 2023:290). This principle is equally important in conversational philosophy: the individual qua conversational partner whom I find most reprehensible necessarily constitutes part of my ability to reason, philosophise, and live philosophically. For Chimakonam (2017:15), this form of relationship represents a "wilful, creative and critical epistemic experience which two agents […] share with the intention to create new concepts and open up new vistas for thought." It is through the action or practice of

bringing these seemingly opposing perspectives together, via the logic of arumaristics or conversational dialectic, that a greater whole exists, or a deeper understanding is achieved in the state of complementation (Chimakonam, 2019:117-118).

Underlying these ideas is the recognition that human life is fundamentally incomplete, in flux, and always adapting to the ever-changing world. Akin to the infinitely malleable clay analogy sketched earlier, one can never truly achieve a final, unchanging, and rigid form. That is, one's life is always in the making, a continual work of art co-cultivated with and co-dependent on the other. Ubuntu philosopher Ramose (2005:35-37) indicates this with his notion of ubu-ntu as be-ing becoming, highlighting the ever-unfolding nature of our human life. Chimakonam (2019:104), for example, also promotes the Igbo maxim *uwa eze oke*, literally meaning that, "nothing is complete or comprehensive."

These concepts align closely with the PWL understanding of philosophy as an ongoing practice rather than a fixed set of doctrines. Our being-in-the-world is not a finite state to be achieved; rather, it is an always ongoing and unfolding process of becoming, or following Ramose, *be-ing becoming*. Importantly, it is through the continual engagement with others, challenging one's own being in the world, constituting a radical otherness, one that cannot be subsumed into my own understanding, and being open to the encounter with this radical otherness that might challenge the fundamental structures of my being in the world, that genuine philosophical conversation can help with co-cultivating alternative ways of being.

Interestingly though, conversational philosophers incorporate this insight into the method of conversationalism. This method necessitates a perpetual conversation characterised by its critical and questioning disposition, fostering an environment where continually unresolved creative tensions are maintained (Chimakonam, 2015:17, 2019:124). There is thus a search for continual disagreement, or the stifling of a synthesis or agreement, whereby the conversation itself – or keeping the conversation alive – becomes a spiritual exercise.

This exercise, underpinned by ubuntu or the radical reciprocity, points to yet another interesting insight. By immersing oneself into a web of interconnectedness, this exercise approaches the practice of radical self-transformation in a unique way. This web involves a deep sense of connectivity to one's own community – or what I will refer to as

philosophical villages below – but also to others who will perpetually cause discomfort and challenge one's own assumptions.

African philosophy, understood as ubuntu and conversational philosophy, adds to the notion of spiritual exercises that aim to see the world from above or removed from one's everyday dealings. It is through immersion in everyday life, interconnected with others, that philosophising becomes a worthwhile way of living. By engaging deeply with diverse perspectives and constantly challenging one's assumptions, one might gain a broader understanding – the view from above is paradoxically achieved from within. This approach suggests that philosophical insight comes not only from detachment, but also from deep, critical engagement with the multiplicity of human experience, especially in a community with likeminded others. The conversational method thus offers an alternative path to philosophical insight. It aims to consider new ways of thinking, even if they challenge us, drawing on perspectives from not just one school of thought or one philosopher, but from the multiplicity of human experience and interaction.

In the closing remarks, I want to very briefly consider what the potential of Chimakonam's *philosophical villages* through what he calls the *villagisation of knowledge* entails. The inherent bidirectionality to the process of co-cultivating alternative ways of living is highlighted, and in some way suggesting that the very practice of philosophy, or leading a philosophical life, itself can constitute a form of resistance against leading an unreflective life.

Chimakonam proposes a space where there is a promotion of radical epistemic plurality, or what he calls the *recognition of contextualisation of reason*. These spaces are characteristically co-creative, co-constitutive, that leads to reciprocal interchange of knowledges and co-cultivation of alternative ways of living and thinking. The recognition of plurality and alternatives on a horizontal plane is what Chimakonam (2019:85-87) calls the villagisation of knowledge. As a result, philosophical villages become open-ended, decentralised, and non-hierarchical spaces imbued with a sense of mutual respect toward divers knowledge systems. Here, various perspectives can coexist and continually cross-pollinate through sustained conversational engagement (Chimakonam, 2019:18). It also represents a highly-practical and continually-practiced decolonial pluriversality, an agora, or a marketplace, where philosophers, or what Chimakonam calls *ichie* of different

schools of thought dynamically, conversationally, and reciprocally re-shape each other's perspectives, horizons, or ways of thinking. *Ichie* are philosophers who are skilled in conversational philosophy, i.e., the philosopher adopting conversational philosophy as a way of life, who engage with others through these open-ended and co-constituting conversations (Chimakonam, 2019:87).

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