

## **AFRICAN IDENTITY: THE NATURE-CULTURE PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>**

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*The paper examines the loss of African identity within the modern/ contemporary era. African identity has been a recurrent theme in all domains of African studies, serving as a major intellectual concern of many African scholars. Debates on the reality of African Philosophy are anchored on the questions surrounding African identity giving rise to thoughts and contents of that philosophy. Despite the volumes already generated on the theme, the controversial circumstances that engendered the subject of African identity makes its intellectual concern sustainable and almost inexhaustible. The question of African identity is basically an ontological question of the reality of Africa cum the being of an African. The series of infiltration and appraisals of Africa by foreign elements tend to plunge the continent into crises of identity. In addition to the various approaches to the subject, the nature-culture perspective presents the argument that if culture is ideally the product of a people's nature, African culture represents the objective manifestation of the Africanity of the continent and its organic/holistic content. Such frame of thought embellished with philosophic tools provides further locus for a more feasible and stable definition of African identity as the holistic nature and character of being African.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The crisis of African identity is a reality within the frame of African historic existential situation. This reality is one of the effects of circumstances of the slave trade and colonialism notable between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. The pre-slavery and colonial Western perception of Africa as less human, savage, brute, and uncivilized tended to foreclose the fact that the entirety of humanity is in constant evolution. When political thinkers like Thomas Hobbes (1991) and John Locke (1689) conceived of the state of nature, a precarious condition of man necessitating a transition to civil society, it is obvious they did not just have African society in mind. Their thoughts were more general. Western societies had historically their dark moments.

The entrenchment or institutionalization of supposed superior culture in place of African culture remains an aspect of the definition of colonialism. The coercive nature of

that phenomenon tended to prove stronger than possible Africa's resistance of its content. Thus, instead of the normal effects of culture interaction, the African experience is that of culture imposition dealing a fatal blow to African cultural values, orientation, disposition, and institutions. The subsequent African nationalists' struggles followed by the independence of African nations, would not achieve the reversal of Africa to its original state. Rather the incursions of Western culture are constantly deepened by imperialism and Westernization in the guise of globalization. This simply remains the story surrounding the problem of African identity. The problem is that Africans are becoming more Western placing less importance to their cultural values.

The problem of African identity is the problem mainly of the identification of the problem. Where actually lies the problem? If it is about the crisis and what sort of crisis? Is it actually the crisis of identity stability, of cultural erosion, or of loss of identity? The worries expressed in the thoughts of many African scholars and national activists relate more to the latter. But how logically feasible is African loss of identity position? Does it not entail the loss of the very nature of the African? Culture is a basic aspect of a people's identity, but then culture is the product of a people's customs and traditions ensuing from their very nature.<sup>2</sup>

## IDENTITY

The nature and essence of a thing refer to its identity, that is, what a thing is. It is about the ontological status and definition of the thing. According to the Free Online Dictionary (2010, *Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary*), "identity" is basically defined as:

1. the state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or conditions: The identity of the fingerprints on the gun with those on file provided evidence that he was the killer.
2. the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another: He doubted his own identity.
3. condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is: a case of mistaken identity.
4. the state or fact of being the same one as described.
5. the sense of self, providing sameness and continuity in personality over time and sometimes disturbed in mental illnesses, as schizophrenia.

A thing is identified by its features and characteristics. The structural identity of a thing refers to its form. Although the reality is one, the varieties of nature engender hybrid of identity. Thus various aspects of existence bear specific identities so that it is possible to talk of personal identity, cultural identity, national identity, social identity, etc. With regard to relations between entities, identity bears the character of specification. Things could bear a natural, conventional identity or both, but the theory of sameness and change strongly presents the impossibility of the change of the essence of a thing.

## AFRICAN IDENTITY

The identity of a people refers to their cultural, socio-political or national

characterization. In her reflection on the identity of the Jewish people, Irena Klepfisz (1986, 2) avers:

Yiddish acted as the cement that bound the Jewish community together on a socialist foundation. What language we spoke was critical. It reflected our identity, our loyalty, our distinctness not only from the gentile environment but from other Jews as well. The use of Yiddish was an expression not only of the love of a language but of pride in ourselves as a people; it was an acknowledgement of a historical and cultural yerushe, heritage, a link to generations of Jews who came before and to the political activists of Eastern Europe. Above all, it was the symbol of resistance to assimilation, an insistence on remaining who we were.

The identity of a people entails a self-consciousness of their ontological nature ranging from the personal, intra/interpersonal and communal individuation aided crucially by the differing factors between them and other peoples. I think this is what Ike Odimegwu means when he presents a two-fold approach to the definition of African identity to include the human and cultural identity. For him (2006):

Human identity exists at the material level but it further requires the service of consciousness for its definition. . . . This consciousness is characterized by substantiality and rationality, locatedness and relatedness, growth and development, communality and interpersonal influences and evaluations.

At the individual level, the African person is that human being whose root can be traced to the present geographical location on the African continent. His physical, psychological, rational, and spiritual constitutions must conform to the being of an African. As whiteness is the universal colour formation for the rest of humanity, blackness is the unique colour identification of the African. Henry Ford (2011,1) once said:

“You can have any colour, as long as it is black.” Similarly, native inhabitants of Africa say: “You can be an African in any color, as long as you are black.” There has been a sudden demand for an African to come in a variety of colours. During the days of slavery, when an African was a commodity, there was never a demand for him in any colour but black. There is now an attempt in the 21st century to redefine the colour scheme of an African. Now whites want to be classified as African too.

But the colour identification of the African became problematic with multi-coloured indigenes found in various nations of Africa thus generating the geographical or colouration debate of African identity. A concise account (Dlanga 2011) of the emergence of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) says:

In opposition circles, the African National Congress (ANC) only had black members, but it was part of the Congress Alliance, where the Congress of

Democrats had white members and there were Indian and Coloured Congresses, too. The ANC comprised a great variety of people with different views. Some were left and communist, some were centrist and liberal, who wanted to establish a nonracial democracy. Some were African nationalists and sometimes referred to themselves as Africanist. They objected to the influence of white communists on the ANC and broke away in the late 1950s to form the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Their aim was to liberate Africa from white rule, and for them, “African” had both colour and geographical connotations. One of their aims, inherited from the Pan African movement of the 1920s, was to create a United States of Africa. Many in the PAC rejected the Congress Alliance kind of thinking, and said that whites, coloureds, and Indians had no role to play in the liberation of South Africa; it was only for Africans... This attitude of the PAC led some to accuse them of racism, which led some in the movement to adjust their definition of “African.” It did not mean only black people, they said. It could include white, coloured and Indian people as well, provided that they identified themselves as African, and did not regard themselves as having a “home” on another continent, like Europe or Asia.

The simple submission of the account (Dlanga 2011) posits that

...the term “African” could mean various different things. It could refer to people of a particular skin colour and ethnic origin. It could refer to those whose political thinking was continent-wide, rather than confined to one country. And it could mean those who, no matter what their colour, identified themselves as African. And things haven’t changed much from 50 years ago.

If the colour argument cannot be substantially sustained, what then are the essential features of the African? The Kenyan philosopher, Joseph M. Nyasani (1989,1) aptly articulates:

One of the most distinctive features of African philosophy is the element of sociality which, in many cases, has given rise to such concepts as African personality, African identity, African solidarity, and many other virtues that attest to the humanistic character of a man and his fellow men. Virtues like patience, optimism, mutual sympathy, and empathy are eminently characteristic of the African way of life and certainly point to a peculiar mode of existence that extends the realm of the individual potentialities to embrace the life of others and their concerns. In fact, this mutual concern, the lifeblood, and backbone of the African sociality has been recognized variously by many writers on African communalism such as Edwin Smith, Senghor, Kenyatta, Sekou Toure and many others.

Edward Wilmot Blyden (1994) made a distinctive attempt at articulating the unique mentality of the African, his religious nature, and communalistic natural dispositions. The complementarity and ontological harmony between the physical and the spiritual realities

project his spiritual inclinations. The African is not only a religious being but a spiritual person. His entire existence is guided mostly by spiritual principles. The African is an ethical person. His moral dispositions are defined by spiritual principles.

Contending the denial of African rational ability, Leo Igwe (2010, 4) asserts that, “The values of science and reason constitute part of human heritage, which all human beings can lay claim to, exercise, access, express, celebrate, cultivate and nurture.”

The African as a man is a rational being with a critical mindset that aids him in an inquiry into and grasp of reality. Thus for the African, whether the being is conceived in terms of vital force within the Bantu or as that which is in the thought of the Igbo metaphysician, Emmanuel Edeh, the reality is one. Within the precolonial African setting, Africans’ efforts at the knowledge and understanding of reality informed their world view. The content of African worldview is nothing but the guiding and operational principles in all spheres of African existence. As such, it is possible to talk about African culture and thence African traditional religion, African indigenous knowledge, African indigenous Politics and economy, African philosophy, etc.

Despite the multiethnic cum multinational constitution of Africa, it is still feasible to submit that Africans are characterized by a common behavioural trait. At the generic level, man is a social animal, but African distinctive social nature remains a remarkable principle of his unique identity. According to the Afritorial (2012):

We were divided—by race, tribe, class, gender and skin colour and the poor African was at the bottom of the heap. We believed the lie that we were not good enough and forgot that we are a beautiful, hardworking, kind and loving people.

For Chukwudum B. Okolo (1987), the socio-cultural quality of the African is in the idea of “being-with,” that is, his communalistic ontology. The African striking sense of hospitality is a manifestation of his distinct social nature. His visible expressiveness is a remarkable manifestation of his psychological make-up. The African filial dispositions are made more manifest in her cultural values and institutions anchored on African communalism. The African society recognizes both the supernatural and physical beings. It is a society where the gods are recognized and accorded pride of place in human affairs. The human is in constant communion with the divine who in turn is believed to ensure a harmonious community. Africa is segmented by the diversity of tribes, each with specific custom, language, and fashion, but remarkably, all tribes are metaphysically tied by the common thread of Africanity.

The African sense of community also finds expression in the extended family system. Both his genealogy and posterity are very important. Marriage is considered an extended family affair while children are gifts not just to their parents but to the entire community. The care of children is the responsibility of all. Even in the diaspora, Africans sustain the communal “we feelings” by identifying with one another and forming a native community.

## THE PROBLEM OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

The problem of African identity consists of the reality that smacks of the existential condition of which Africans have been plunged after their experiences of the slave trade, colonialism, apartheid. It represents the situation of a people, whose culture has been infiltrated, diluted, and consequently being coerced out of their existential roots. In his *Enwisdomization and African philosophy*, Panthaleon Iroegbu (1994, 120) concisely articulated:

Africa has undergone a long historical, indeed chequered evolutionary turmoil—from its past stages in tradition and nature, through its contact with non-African peoples and cultures, to its conquest by white powers, concretized in the slave trade, colonialism, Islamism, Christianization, apartheid, followed by liberation and neo-colonialism.

Transatlantic slave trade represented a strong attempt at a total relegation and negation of the culture of those given in slavery. As regards identity and roots of the enslaved, Portcities Bristol (N.d.) says:

The experience of the transatlantic slave trade took the enslaved African away from their roots. There was a conscious effort by the slave owners to remove the identity of the slaves. Often they went on board a slave ship naked, with no belongings from their previous life. All they had to their life before slavery was carried in their heads, as the memory of customs, beliefs, the words of songs and stories, their language. The slaves on a ship would not be from one place or ethnic group, speaking one language and with one culture. They would be a mixed group, purchased from different places around the west coast of Africa and from different traders. They would be from different ethnic groups and speak different languages. They would have different beliefs and cultures.

With regard to the Western view of Africa, Igwe (2010, 2) notes:

... while holding on to beliefs and outlooks informed by superstition and primordial thinking is often glorified as African. Even in this 21st century, reason and science are still perceived as Western and not African values. I have yet to understand how we came about this mistaken idea. Hence, it is often portrayed as if the African does not reason and dare not reason or that the African does not think or cannot think critically. It seems thinking like an African means suspension of thought, logic or common sense. Thinking like an African means not thinking at all—thoughtlessness or thinking in spiritual, occult or magical ways.

African existential situation represents a situation whereby a people once characterized by a monoculture is subsequently dragged into a pool of multicultural existence. What should be expected of such a people, especially when the invading culture is powerful and

suppressive? Even in its strongest bid of resistance, such people will surely struggle with a crisis of identity.

What has come to be known as African predicament is the Africans' struggle for self-definition and reaffirmation in the face of Western coercive apparatus. The blows of the slave trade, colonialism, and apartheid are further sustained by the forces of imperialism and most recently globalization. African nationalist movements, Pan-Africanism and various other concrete struggles towards the independence of African nations all point to the reality of a peoples' quest for socio-political emancipation. The works of notable African scholars like, Blyden (1994), Olaudah Equiano (1789), Julius Nyerere (1968), Leopold Sedar Senghor (1967), Kwasi Wiredu (1996) meant as responses to wide imperial debasement of the being of the African are part of Africans' attempt at addressing the intractable problems of African identity. The problem tends to bite harder as African assimilation and obvious preferences of Western ideals and values move up the scale in geometric progression. Afritorial (2012) maintains:

During the Scramble for Africa, we endured assimilation and the "divide and rule" strategy that broke up the traditional power and community relationships throughout Africa while telling us our language, dress, culture, and customs were inferior to that of the west.

Afritorial (2012) states further:

Worse still, I believe that Africans have been historically (since colonialism) afraid of questioning authority because we've been groomed to believe that we are powerless, which has led to adopting whichever popular beliefs comes along our way without critiquing what we're assuming in the first place.

Hence, in the face of the cross currents of stricter imperialism, the contemporary Africans' wide embrace of Western culture amplifies the notion of the erosion of African values. Consequently, the solution to the lingering problem tends to be far-fetched. The nature-culture perspective is an attempt at contributing to the barrage of panacea already in place towards arresting the situation.

## THE NATURE-CULTURE DIMENSION

The nature-culture approach to the reeling arguments about African identity consists of the bid to rove into the ontological constitution of the African. If the basic property of being is substance, Baruch Spinoza's (N.d.) substantial monism postulates God or nature, Deus sive Natura, as the one substance. Every other thing exists as either attribute or mode of that substance. In other words, every other thing is extended. Without the intention to cause a philosophic rift, extensions subject to changes cannot but be synonymous with the accidents of Aristotle's metaphysics. In other words, a thing exists in both its substance (essence) and accident. Whereas its essence is immutable, its accidents are subject to change, but in conformity with the inherent provisions of the substance.

Constancy is an essential principle of change which affects material substances including humanity and its societies. Both the principle of individuation and the theory of sameness and change establish the reality of species which remains the same in their very particular nature but are affected inevitably to the certainty of change. The identity of any individual, species, race, nation, a given society is definable along the principles of such entity's essence, individuation, sameness, and change. These aspects of the entity's being are essential constituents of its very nature. It will simply be impossible for such an entity to operate outside of its nature irrespective of whatever effect. It will definitely admit accidental but not substantial changes that are in congruence with the provisions of its inherent formation. That simply is an expression of a thing's identity.

The human and geographical existence of Africa amidst other peoples, races, and nations of humanity institutes inalienable African identity. By the workings of common sense, this is the provision of nature. In this sense, the nature of the African would be meaningful. Nature in this context entails the natural holistic bequeathals of the African, that is, his inherent basic essential qualities. The inherent characteristics of both the African person and environment are the designs of nature's ingenuity. Culture remains the ontological and ontic expression of a people's identity. Kim Ann Zimmermann (2015,1) defines culture as "...the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts." Thus, African culture is the ontological, sociopolitical, and religious cum economic reflection, expression and affirmation of African identity. African culture is the institutionalization of African identity springing from the very nature and being of the African. In the face of all existential circumstances, the African can only respond within the provisions of his nature.

Undoubtedly, African experiences of the slave trade, colonialism, and neocolonialism, together with imperialism, are existential factors that contribute to the African existential situation of stunted development and aversive self-assertion. These experiences engender the possible crises of African nature-culture. However, it remains arguable that the African responds to these agents of change in the peculiarity of his Africanness. In other words, he responds to them within the provisions of his African nature in affirmation of his identity. The arguments of the possible loss of African identity based on disregard for African heritage, dilution, or erosion of African cultural values are expressions of a total negation of the ontological nature of the African. The response to such arguments is that no matter how Westernized or Europeanized an African could be, he will still be so Africanly, his identity remains.

This position does not, in essence, entail a radical non-recognition of the reality of the negative effects of imperialism, colonialism, and the Africans' adoption of Western values in place of traditional ones. Rather, subscription to the refinement of African traditional and cultural heritage in tandem with the dialectics of historical realities should constitute a meaningful affirmation of African identity. Africans will be living very inauthentic existence, who attempt to escape from their African nature. Instead, responding in an African way to the realities of modernity enhances African identity.

## CONCLUSION

As Africa continues to struggle within the pool of developmental advancement and



global self-assertion, the problem of African identity will continue to engage African scholars. Every gap to be filled will always upsurge and will be adequately attended to. The nature-culture approach remains a reaffirmation of African ontological status and maintains that the product of African nature is the African culture which is an institutional expression of African identity.

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