

## African Traditional Religious Philosophy and Life's Problems (Use of Proverbs, Idioms, Wise Saying and Folklores/myths)

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**Abstract:** In the midst of life; man is faced with vagaries of problems of spiritual, health, moral and material magnitudes. These problems which had been as old as man had always been addressed with African Philosophical apparatus. As it were, in Africa philosophical impartations were orally communicated in myths, legends, proverbs, idioms, folklores, songs, riddles and wise sayings. It was further communicated in practical ways through works of arts and crafts, rituals, dances, symbols, sacred places like shrines, sacred objects. So the understanding of the philosophical foundation of African Traditional Religion, calls for knowing what philosophy entails. The starting points of all philosophical speculations in mysteries of existence and the wonders of nature that calls for explanations. Life itself is mysterious and only the Ultimate Being and Creator have mastery over life and nature. Certain African names depict this phenomenon like Chikwe, Chinwendu, Nduka, Ndukwe, Ndubuisi, Uwadiogwu and so. The inferences in this paper were derived from synthesized related literatures, oral traditions and participatory interview from which the research discovered that Western tradition had eroded on this African value thereby reducing its effects on modern African man. It was also discovered the modern African is now totally dependent on solutions outside his local environment like modern technology. The negative effects of some of these alien technological and some Western philosophical provisions call for a return to African philosophical approach to spiritual, moral, health and material problems, as this paper so recommends.

**Key words:** African Philosophy • Proverbs • Idioms • Folklores/Myths and African Traditional Religion

### INTRODUCTION

When the African is challenged by natural and unnatural occurrences, he or she takes solace in the wisdom of the fathers which are coded in language and religious beliefs. These codes in soft spoken words serve as the balm of Africa that soothes the heart. When challenged with the need to find the truth in a matter, Africa reclines to home grown means that insists on strait forward presentation of claim(s) which leaves no doubts in the mind of arbiters (*Ezi okwu bu ?nwa ad?gh? enyo ya enyo*). In the case of *? d? n'ala*, event must have repeated itself severally becoming part of the people's way of life. Conclusion here must be derived from observations, tests and proved to be regular and time related. The African does not hastily jump into conclusion without the application of the apparatus of scientific justifications. *?k?k? jugbue O luo. Eri ka ad? mb? eri*

*af? adaj??*. The African must be sure of what to eat in life before he/she swallows, otherwise there will be stomach upset. In Africa ordinary food does not appeal just because it is called food but because it had been tested and proved healthy and friendly before they are eaten. Wisdom in Africa did not come into Africa with western education. African morality is found in relationship with family system which is the bed-rock of every society. Each family micro or macro has means of passing to posterity the realities of life. This period includes festivals and family meetings. African communal way of life plays out in the *onye a ghala nwanneya* axiomatic expression.

African traditional religion and philosophical values are essentially based on oral traditions as it has no sacred scriptures or written literature. They orally were handed down from generation to generation.

*Surveys of the beliefs of hundreds of African peoples have shown that their religion is inseparable from their daily lives and cultural traditions. God is generally regarded as one Supreme Being, often at the top of a hierarchy of lesser divinities and spiritual beings. The African concept of time is not linear and focuses on the immediate present and the past; the future is not considered to exist because future events have not yet taken place. African religions do not include the concept of a future salvation or a restoration to a higher state. The afterlife is considered to be a continuation of earthly life and death as a departure into a new stage of existence [1].*

The beliefs were expressed orally in myths, legends, proverbs, idioms, folklores, songs, riddles and wise sayings. It was further communicated in practical ways through works of arts and crafts, rituals, dances, symbols, sacred places like shrines, sacred objects. All these vehicles of oral tradition embody the means of preservation, communication and transmission of the knowledge and wisdom of the people. In other words, they reveal that African philosophy is evident in the African traditional cosmology.

**Definition for African Philosophy:** The definition of philosophy in general has remained a perennial philosophical problem and there is little agreement as to what it is or it is not [2].

It remains expedient to start with the definition of the word philosophy in order to get to debated African philosophy. Okoro trying to define philosophy cited Plato's description of who a philosopher is "a man whose passion is to seek the truth, a man whose heart is fixed on reality" he concurred with Aristotle who said philosophy is called knowledge of truth [3]. Viewing Okoro's former submission one can say that philosophy is the discipline of life that seeks after the establishment of truth and reality.

The same is also true about African philosophy, which is "a disputed term, used in different ways by different philosophers...complicated by the fact that approximately three thousand different tribal groups exist in Sub-Saharan Africa, each with its own language, religious and cultural traditions [1]. A philosopher of note and Father of African Philosophy, Prof. Uzodinma Nwala, indeed says there was nothing called African Philosophy as a course of study in any University during his years of studentship. "All...students were taught Western

philosophy. Nothing like African philosophy existed anywhere". Of course, many years after the introduction of the course, there still remain arguments among experts, whether there was really African Philosophy" [1]. However this paper opines that it is not correct to admit that there is no African philosophy. Because to say so means that they had never been a people called Africans until the advent of Westerners into the continent of Africa, whereas African cosmology proves abundance of African philosophies of life that is summed in her religion and Culture. Belief in the Supreme God as the integral part her is not optional, hence *onye buru Chi ya ?z? ogbagbue onwe ya ?s?*. (God is first or one labours in vain).

*It is true that there are as many definitions of philosophy but it is possible ... to say that it is the critical examination of the ideas which men live by. In the same vein, it is a difficult...to give an accurate or faultless definition to African philosophy. However, be that as it may, we can recognize some essential ingredients about what philosophy is. For anything to be philosophical it has to do with the reflection on the experience of a society, group or an individual. This reflection has been necessitated by wonders about some compelling problems of life and existence. Another essential ingredient is that such reflection must be critical and logical. As long as anybody or group meets these requirements such a person or group can be said to engage in what is called philosophy. To that extent, for anything to qualify as African philosophy, it must meet the requirements stipulated above. Hence, one submit that what African philosophy is, involves the application of the above categories of conceptual analysis, logic, criticism and synthesis to the reflections on issues that are of paramount importance to the African needs and ways of life. African in this context is not based exclusively on geographical congruity, but also on certain shared values among Africans" [2].*

Furthermore African Philosophy could be defined as a critical thinking by Africans on their experiences of reality. A Nigerian born Philosopher Anyanwu, K. C. (Sic) quips, it is "that which concerns itself with the way in which African people of the past and present make sense of their destiny and of the world in which they live. Furthermore African philosophy is the philosophy produced by Africans, which presents African

worldviews, or philosophy. Although African philosophers are found in the various academic branches of philosophy, such as metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy and political philosophy, much of the modern African philosophy has been concerned with defining the ethnophilosophical parameters of African philosophy and identifying what differentiates it from other philosophical traditions [4].

*The Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka distinguishes what he calls four trends in African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalistic-ideological philosophy and professional philosophy. In fact it would be more realistic to call them candidates for the position of African philosophy, with the understanding that more than one of them might fit the bill.*

In attributing philosophical ideas to philosophers of African origin, a distinction must be made between Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, which was the home of Egyptian culture and of prominent Christian, Jewish and Islamic philosophers such as Augustine of Hippo, Ibn Sab'in, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ibn Bajjah. Sub-Saharan Africa had no written language or sacred writings, so it is necessary to examine the religious beliefs and oral traditions of African peoples in order to understand their thought [1].

African philosophy exists as apart African value is the African mindset that pursuing the discovery of truth and reality. The African philosopher like other world philosophers are the same, as far as human needs are the same all over Africa is not in exception. If there be originality of philosophy anywhere and it had worked for the owners in times of seeking for truth and reality; it had and is working for Africa. This is true when one examines the word “*ezi okwu b? nd?*”. This coinage was not the product of the West. It is of African origin. There are millions of such life philosophies which are indigenous with Africans and had worked for her before the advent of the Western education.

Alluding to this, [5], holds that; “Despite the shortcomings of oral traditions, there is no doubt that the basic and relevant message of African Traditional Religion has been passed on unhampered from generation to generation by words of mouth” that were deeply immersed in life philosophy.

To understand the ways that Africans in their religion addressed life problems, expressed proverbs, idioms and wise sayings, one may consider briefly the relevance of philosophy to African traditional religion.

### **Philosophy at the Service of African Traditional Religion:**

The understanding of the philosophical foundation of African Traditional Religion, calls for knowing what philosophy entails. The starting point of all philosophical speculations is in wonder. The mysteries of existence and the wonders of nature call for explanation. Life itself and nature are mysterious and only God as the creator has mastery over them. Certain African names like *Chikwe*, *Chinwend?*, *Nd?ka*, *Nd?kwe*, *Ndubuisi*, *Uwadiogwu*, etc depict this phenomenon. All these names depict man's littleness and limitation in the face of nature which challenges him with wonders that proves only God has absolute control over life and the entire universe. It was this sense of wonder that provoked the early Greek philosophers to seek to discover the stuff with which the world was made, the issues about life and death, good and evil, the ideas of God, etc. So as a questioning enterprise, philosophy seeks to examine the nature and problems of existence, giving answers to human problems or life problems. Citing Kwasi Wiredu, [6], affirms that “*the function of philosophy everywhere is to examine the intellectual functions of our life...*”

Philosophy therefore is the articulation of a life experience, an attempt to give meaning to reality as a whole in a speculative way. In this sense, philosophy becomes relevant and at the service of the African Traditional Religion as it analyzes the religious concepts and making them intelligible.

### **Traditional Philosophy in Religion Life Problems Solving Through**

**Proverbs, Idioms, Wise Sayings, Folklores:** The inter-connection between philosophy and religion is evident in the fact that while religion preoccupies itself with faith and belief in one's object of worship, philosophy subjects such issues to rationalization, inquiry and reasoning to make such religious claims understandable. For instance, the issue of the existence of God, the efficacy of prayer, rituals, sacrifice, etc are critically analysed to see the basis of such belief and practice. When philosophy leads man to know better the things of the world and his object of worship, man is better equipped with deeper faith and zealous worship.

The religiosity of the Africans makes the notion of African Traditional Religion very peculiar. Acknowledging this fact, [7], expresses the fact that “Africans are notoriously religious”. Lending credence to this issue, [8], argues that;

*The religion of these natives (Africans) is their existence and their existence is their religion. It supplies the principle on which their law is dispensed and morality adjudicated. The entire organisation of their common life is so interwoven with it that they cannot get away from it. Like the Hindus they eat religiously, drink religiously and sing religiously.*

Since the traditional religion permeates all the departments of life, there seem to be no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular. The material and the spiritual areas of life are in mutual interaction and constitute the community heritage, displaying the reasoning or thoughts of the Africans. So to understand African philosophy, wisdom, or their thought patterns, interaction with super-sensible world, life experience, etc concerning the notions of the world, problems of life, one considers the ideas of the proverbs, idioms, folklores, wise sayings. Although this system of philosophy has been described as folk-philosophy or Ethno-philosophy, it is well-embellished and rich in wisdom. Iroegbu, (1994), [9], asserts that;

*...the so-called folk-philosophy has in its internals, some basic logic and rationality...The difference between it and the so-called scientific philosophy appears to be a matter of degree, not fact of rationality, systematicity and method. After all, rational or scientific philosophy is in itself also a culture philosophy, be it a literary and rationalistic one. And folk-philosophy is a rational thought of some person(s) appropriated by the community.*

According to [10], the proverbs, songs, wise sayings, idioms, etc are employed in liturgies, worship, in naming ceremony, in wedding, in funeral, in wrestling, during festivals, in working, etc. There are used to express sentiments like joy, sorrow, hopes, fears, etc. They offer immense materials on the people's philosophy and religion. Some oral traditions can be found in 'arts and crafts, symbols, shrines and sacred places'.

This shows that the study of African Traditional Religion entails the study of the totality of the people's way of life. As such the philosophy of African Traditional Religion cannot be found in a well articulated body of knowledge as it is in the western philosophy but it is interwoven in the religion and culture of the people.

**Proverbs:** Proverbs according to Merriam Dictionary and Theraus are brief popular epigrams or maxims. In Africa, proverbs are seen as embellishments of speech and symbols of communication. For the Igbo, proverb is a palm oil with which words are eaten - '*Ilu b? mman? ndi Igbo ji esuli okwu*'. Proverbs possess different levels of meaning like contextual, literal, sensory and symbolic meaning. To decipher the meaning intended by the philosopher or the sagacious that utters a proverb, one needs to be reasonable and at home with the symbolic message portrayed. It then follows that "for anyone who is proficient in the wisdom or proverbs, they are fundamentally symbols of cosmic truth" [11]. The entire world view of the people is encompassed in proverbs. Proverbs may inspire further reflection, serve as a warning in areas of human activities, may disclose how to treat or relate with people, may criticize, praise, advice or teach. They are rich sources of African wisdom and philosophy. Examples:

- The catch phrase 'live and let live' expressed in Igbo philosophy thus '*Egbe bere ugo bere nke s? ibe ya ebela nku kwap? ya*'. (Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too, whichever denies the other it's perching right, let its wing break off).
- To express the view that nothing happens by chance on earth: "*Awo anagh? agba ?s? ehie n'efu*" (The toad does not run in the day time in vain, it is either something is pursuing it or it is pursuing something).

To understand the wisdom communicated by proverbs and how proverbs can be used to express or address life problems or crises, one considers the following typical speech in Arrow of God expressing the crises in Umuaro as postulated by Achebe, (1975):

*"...when a handshake passes the elbow it becomes another thing. The sleep that lasts from one market day to another has become death. The man who likes meat of the funeral ram, why does he recover when sickness visits him? The mighty tree falls and the birds scatter in the bush... The little bird which hops off the ground and lands on an anthill may not know it but it is still on the ground... A common snake which a man sees all alone may become a python in his eyes... The very thing which kills Mother Rat is always there to make sure that its young ones never open their eyes... The boy who persists in asking what happened to his father*

*before he has enough strength to avenge him is asking for his father's fate...The man who belittles the sickness which Monkey has suffered should ask to see the eyes which his nurse got from blowing the sick fire...When death wants to take a little dog it prevents it from smelling even the excrement".*

These proverbs carry deeper meanings more than the simple human can understand or interpret easily. It takes philosophical reflections or meditations, considerations and conscious efforts to decipher their weight and inner values. The different phrases encapsulate wider life moral, legal and religious values.

**Wise Sayings:** Wise sayings refer to all those statements or expressions that teach or communicate wisdom to people. They have direct usage and are easily understood. Wise sayings may be in form of aphorism, proverbs, maxims, adage, etc. Examples: According to the Akan people of Ghana; "If you want to speak to Onyame (God), speak to the winds". This suggests or means that God just like the wind is invisible but everywhere. The Lozi wise is saying that expresses African sense of community: "Go the way that many people go; if you go alone you will have reason to lament" [12].

Some of the wise sayings in Igbo land include the following:

- "Mberede nyiri dike, ma mberede k'oji ama dike" (A sudden happening can overpower a brave person, yet, sudden happening is what determines the person who qualifies to be a brave person).
- "Nwanyị olu ụma, di adighi ajiri ya nri" (A soft spoken woman is never refused meal by her husband).
- "Onye ma ihe na-eji ndahie ndi iza amata ihe" (A wise person learns from the mistakes of others).
- "Ọ buri chi kele Chi" (One who sees a new day should thank God).

These wise sayings communicate various levels of life philosophical ingredients which are typical of Africa and of course not borrowed through external cultural infiltrations.

**Idioms:** Idiom could mean among other things; a) the language peculiar to a people or to a district, community, or class, b) the syntactical, grammatical, or structural form peculiar to a language - an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either grammatically (as *no, it wasn't me*) or in having a meaning that cannot

be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (as *Monday week* for "the Monday a week after next Monday") and c) a style or form of artistic expression that is characteristic of an individual, a period or movement, or a medium or instrument. Idioms are expressions in form of phrases or clauses that do not have direct meaning. They are uttered in coded languages. They further reveal the wisdom and richness of African philosophy and religion. Like proverbs, they are used to address or express life problems or Africans worldview. They communicate and teach in veiled language which calls for serious reasoning to know what they portray, Examples:

- "Itinye af? mad? na nri". This may literally be wrongly translated to mean to put somebody's stomach in food. But this is not what the idiom means. Rather it demands that one's share of food should be included in the preparation of food to be served.
- "Onye ire ab?". This may literally be wrongly translated as a person who has two tongues. Rather this idiom simply means a liar.
- "Onye af? tara mini". This may literally be wrongly translated as a person whose stomach is dried of water. Rather it simply means a wicked person.
- "Onye aka ab?". This may literally be wrongly translated as a person who has two hands. Rather it simply means a thief.

**Myths/folklores:** In Madu's words, "Myths are stories about man, gods, nature and the heavens,...they have meaning, message, the truth of which does not depend on whether or not they are historically true"[13], or provable, whereas

*Folklore is the traditional art, literature, knowledge and practice that are disseminated largely through oral communication. It consists of the things that a given set of people traditionally believe, do, know and say; their worldview and outlook to life, handed over to them from generation to generation orally. Myth is an important element of folklore that accounts for the origin of things and events and try to answer the very important why questions on how several events and phenomenon came into being. This is important in helping a homogeneous set of people accept the realities of their lives; condition and express their perception and outlook to life as well as project those intricate elements that mark and distinguish them from other group of communities [14].*

Myths are employed to explain certain facts about the people and their perception of reality and entire worldview. They disclose how things came into being, the issues of supernatural beings, people's origin and their religion. They are the products of man with which to explain fact of nature and "to answer the questions that have troubled his mind since the origin of time" [14]. Furthermore maintains that; "African myths and folklores are full of symbols and images drawn from the natural and supernatural worlds. They are living chronicles in the mind of Africans....In the myth, the African metaphysics are created and in the folklores too, they are given a doctrinaire definition and thus, a traditional stamp" [14].

Myths can relate to issues bordering on creation, the world, life crises, agriculture, extraordinary individuals (heroes), supernatural beings, rituals, people's culture, etc.

They may serve to explain, entertain and to educate. Folklores are similar to myths and they relate to stories involving extraordinary events and beings. They entertain and convey moral lessons. Myths and folklores are another source of African philosophy and wisdom. There are various myths and folklores relating to different issues. However, one may narrate two of such myths / folklores here. One concerns the myth on human destiny regarding the origin of death. Death has remained the greatest problem and threat to life.

This story as recounted by [13], holds that when death first sneaked into the world, men sent a dog as a messenger to Chukwu (God) asking him to restore the dead to life. Instead of the dog going straight, it lingered on the way to eat excrement and later fell asleep after the meal. When it woke up, it quickly resumed his journey. But the tortoise that overheard the message and wishing to punish mankind had overtaken the dog and reached God first. The Tortoise claimed narrated that men sent it to express their desire not to be restored to life when they die. Chukwu affirmed that he would respect men's wish. Later the dog arrived to deliver the correct message but Chukwu affirmed that he had accepted the first message and would not change his earlier decision. The myth then concludes that although man may be born again, he cannot return with the same body and the same personality. Iloanusi, A. (1984), [15], relates that in some versions of this myth, the toad is said to have been the animal that delivered the "false" message.

The vagary is quite understandable because world over myths do not always follow the same structural frame of narration. The second myths revolve round two goats. One loved and the other hated [16]. The hated goat was used to destroying people's yam farms by digging the

yams up and eating them. The other goat was a novice of the value of yams and so could not even enter into any farm and so was very friendly with the people. But by keeping company with the hated goat it learnt to eat yams which proved delicious and appetizing to it. After visiting the bad goat it decided to follow the bad goat to where it used to steal yams. Just for once the loved goat was killed while the expert bad goat escaped unhurt. In this myth are philosophies of life that are deducible; 1) bad company corrupting good moral and 2) stealing can lead to death even though it may just be one attempt.

## CONCLUSION

So far, this paper proves that the religiosity of the Africans is incontestable. Being a member of the community, one invariably embraces the traditional religion which permeates all the departments of the people's life. All life activities have religious undertones. Moments of childbirth, naming ceremony, puberty rites, circumcision, times of sickness, farming, marriage, death, etc call for religious rituals, prayers and sacrifice. And in all these moments of religious life activities, Africans express their wisdom and philosophy as portrayed in their proverbs, idioms, wise sayings, folklores and myths which they convey in those religious moments to address their life problems and express African worldviews.

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