

**A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE QUESTION OF AFRICAN
IDENTITY AND THE WAY FORWARD IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA
BY**

KELECHI ONYEKA EZEANI
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ko.ezeani@unizik.edu.ng
+2348034276391

&

OGOCHUKWU OKPOKWASILI
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ao.okpokwasili@unizik.edu.ng
+2348138693791

ABSTRACT

The question of identity in contemporary Africa has been an age long issue bothering the Africans, and recently with the upsurge of the issue of xenophobic attack in South Africa, it contradicts the effort of most Africans clamouring for African identity which has denied Africans the 'authentic existence' after their encounter with colonization. Africans and their leaders in the twenty-first century has not learnt anything from their past mistakes, the African continent as a whole has no particular country that can be said to be among the first-world country despite their natural resources, almost if not all the countries in Africa is still underdeveloped or among the third world countries. Most scholars still blame the Europeans as part of the problems that has engulfed Africans on this note the research tries to clear the wrong notion that Europeans are responsible for our attendant woe, which most African leaders blames the western world. For Africa to be rigged of all these problems befalling the continent, African leaders need urgent attention to identity crises in Africa and immediate reformation needs to be executed and their copy cat mentality of western system should be focused on the interest and benefit of all not for the benefit of the ruling class without having the interest of their citizens. The researcher concludes that before the issue of African identity can be handled, Africans needs to solve the problem of leadership, which is the only viable option to prevent further upsurge of xenophobic attack in other African countries.

Keywords: Philosophical Investigation, African Identity, Contemporary Africa, Identity Crises, Way Forward.

Introduction

For A. C. Obiwulu (2009:9) “many countries in Africa from the effects of bad governance and leadership; from lack of interest in learning, corruption, to full blown wars that devastate lives and properties.” The question that is at the forefront of this discourse is who is an African man? Are we Africans based on the colours of our skin or based on our race or is there really something distinct that separates the African man from other man really qualifies him to be called “African Man”. According to G.O Ozumba and E. A. Ikegbu (2012:5) states that “the nature of humans is such that their existence can only be complete when they complement one another. It is germane to add that in the process of wanting to exist in the universe or wanting to undergo the process of complementing the other, there may be noticeable friction, or disagreements between these separate entities.” Many studies has been done to describe Africa while very little effort or attempt is made to really study the African man himself so as to find out those unique qualities that makes him really what he was, who he is and who he is yet to become. There is anxiety by the outside world traveller’s to gather as much information as possible about the African so as to find new and diverse ways to explore them little or no such anxiety or desire is placed on the man himself. When we talk about the outside world that has the tenacious desire to explore the Africa without building man, we are bitter to referring to the European man, Our colonial master’s crept in subtly with or no knowledge of what really is unique about this man and subtly stole everything from him including this identity, including that uniqueness that really makes him African. He stole everything from him and turned him into his own personal share thus earning them the acronym “slave Masters” the black man was seen in his plantations tiling the ground, planting and harvesting for the European. In this very condition, he was deprived of the ability to think or reason. All had to do day in day out was to take orders from his master. In the bid for survival Africans became enablers of each other, selling each other for a mere morsel of bread to throw at them. The problem of Africa started from our disastrous colonial history; it was here that we lost it all. It was at this era that we lost that uniqueness that made us Africans; it was here that we lost our identity. If there is any hope for us in the future, there is every need that we confront our past so as to be able to readdress our future this work will delve into our past because there is no way you will understand how the present situation of the African man came into being without a clear cut understanding of our past. Our understanding of the past will give a clear cut road map on how the future will work like, but Africans cannot keep blaming the westerners for long for their misfortune, Africans are now in charge of their affairs for years but almost if not all African countries is still underdeveloped, which for the researcher is the problem of leadership and Africans are responsible for that, and no African should blame the westerners for their mistake in contemporary Africa. Africans copy-cat mentality is to their detriment in the sense that Africans copy and forgets their indigenous culture to be added. What we suffer in Africa now is the making of Africans for example the issue of xenophobic attack which South Africans left the whites in their country, and wants Africans in their country to go back to their indigenous countries, which in retaliation some African countries has made stringent policies against South African’s company and citizens, while some has to close down their embassies. All these issues were as a result of bad leadership which the leaders could have averted earlier before it blows out of proportion. This study will examine the cause of the problem of identity and proffer solution using leadership to solve the problem of identity.

Philosophical Foundations

The problem of the question of identity is one of the major topics of African Philosophy, which was as a result of western infiltration into Africa that forces the African culture into depression, and the depression is as a result of African trio experience of racial discrimination, slavery and colonialism. E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu, (1981:168), "it is all this, the racialism, the slavery and the oppression of colonialism, the ambiguities of attitudes on the part of both whites and blacks which gave rise to the psychological and cultural alienation to the loss of collective identity of the Africans". According to Masolo (1994:1).

"When Aime Cesaire published "the cashier d" un retour au pays natal" (in English translation, translation rendered as return to my nature land) in 1939, he introduced in and through it two new concepts which would later turn out to be key to the disclose on African identity and determinate of a new course in the francophone production and representations of knowledge about black Africa and its diasporas. The two concepts that he introduces are 'Negritude' this is conceptualised as the dignity, the personhood or humanity of black people."

The second concept is 'The Return' which is the title of those poems itself and which is subject to manipulations of history on power relations. For Masolo (1994:2) "These two concepts signifies a loss of something great and a clarion call to return back or get back what one has lost which is conceptualized in his Return." It is a clarion call for the black man to return back from bondage or slavery and once again reclaim his identity as a distinct race. For Masolo (1994:3) "For many black people, slavery and slave trade has provided the context for the need for a social and racial solidarity among themselves. Solidarity was their strength and a weapon which to counter western and their egocentric culture." The white man has not only enslaved us, they have as well corrupted our land with their Egocentric culture. The symbol of brotherhood of which the African man's strength lies on is slowly going into extinct. The black man's culture has been relegated to the background and is at the verge of utter destruction as a result of the infiltration caused by the white man and his culture. The Western culture crept in subtly, firstly in the form of trade mainly conceptualized as trade by barter and gradually, it gets to doom point when our brothers now sell each other to the white men as slaves. They in turn were given meaningless compensations like tobacco boxes, whiskey or hot drink, walking sticks, caps etc. these will show you how far we have degraded for a mere morsel of bread.

In a celebrated paragraph from a poem written by Longston Hughes in the journal of the nation of 23 June 1926 and extracted by D.O Masolo (1994:4) in his book "African Philosophy in search of identity", it has this to say.

"We the creations of the new black generations want to express our black personality without slave or without fear if this will please the whites, much a better if not, it does not matter we know ourselves to be beautiful and also

ugly. The drums cry the drums laugh if this will please the whites much the better if not, it does not matter It is for tomorrow that we are building our temples Solid temples as we will ourselves knowhow to construct straight on top of the maintains free in ourselves."

The significance of this poem is that it was a response to the specific ideological attitude-the Western attitude-that intended to annihilate black culture and black civilization. We owe them no apologies for making us look so inferior and them so superior. The impact of the inferiority complex which they have subtly embedded in us today, a black man will produce goods in his country, and put a white man's label on it so that his product will be considered as being the best. There is every need for a return, for an awareness or consciousness that will makes us shake off the shackles of white man's chain on us and be completely free. They have done us more harm than good. Africa's story can be likened to that of a troubled child whose childhood was stolen from him or her. Stolen childhood can be as a result of so many factors most likely one is "Rape". What the white man did to us can be likened to rape. They raped us and took away what we held so sacred which is our culture. A stolen culture equals to a stolen identity. The deed has been done, what Africans needs now is the way forward out of this ugly situation, which this study sets out to do, which takes the path of development, F. O. Ndubuisi (2013:229) notes that "development is a natural process because everywhere and in every nation, man is faced with the task of survival to meet up with the fundamental material and spiritual needs. Development must be people oriented which is in line with African ontology. It must be pro-life, that it must enhance life, promote life, protect life and increase life. It must be a corporate task to be inculcated through constant reorientations of the youth, leaders of thought, politicians and administrators".

Africa's Present Situation

The present situation of Africa is not something that is entirely to be blamed on the westerners because Africans contributed to their present misfortune. According to Oguejiofor (2001:28) "it would be wrong to discuss the trans-Atlantic slave trade in such a way as to suggest that it was a misfortune perpetrated on the African continent wholly by outsiders" and Oguejiofor (2001:32) further notes that "much of the political structure that today operates in almost all of the African continent originates from its colonial past" There is a heavy burden behind the concept or theme of this article writing, this burden if it is still not present today will not posit a subject of discussion. It is the question of identity, the question of the possible way forward in contemporary African situation. Emmanuel Ome (2006:57) in his article titled 'Philosophy, Democracy and African Development: the Relevance of Nyerere's Political Philosophy. In his words:

"We are besieged daily on all side by apparently unstoppable degradation and it has almost become nauseating to recount Africa's problems, political instability, ethnic conflicts, bloody war's, permanent economic depression worsened by corruption, greed and the debt crisis added to these are natural disasters, flooding, famine and desecration our health, educational

and social institutions are in dismay and no one apparently knows which way to turn for a palliative nor to talk of a solution.”

This serves as an apt statement describing the African situation. Things have indeed fallen apart and people are no longer at ease (Chinua Achebe’s Novel). Africa has long ago forgotten the foundation on which it was built which brotherhood, ubuntu and conscientism etc. and has instead joined the enemy in destroying all that is left of his brother. The case of the recent xenophobic attack on Nigeria by South Africans is a clear indication that nothing is remaining again. The African man has successfully erased all that could have been his pride and has decided to dance naked for all to see. There is chaos everywhere, war etc. this is the present day situation of Africa’s loss of identity. Today we rely more and more on foreign goods in order to survive and even when the black man wants to produce the goods, he will look for an easier way out so as to deceive his brothers. Our leaders in Nigeria make the situation worst by patronising western project instead of our home base company for example the issue of buying cars for government officials, the legislative arm of government budgeted five billion for cars, not Nigerian made cars but western made cars and the money budgeted for cars alone can be used for another sensible project for the development of the country. For construction of roads Nigerian leaders make use of Chinese, Lebanese and German companies for major road constructions without making use of our sound and indigenous construction companies in Nigeria. What we suffer in Africa today is no longer the western making but the making of Africans. We need to look inward to solve the problem of Africa.

Preserving African Identity in a Contemporary Society

We have carefully noted in our introduction that one of the greatest tragedies that befall our personality which hitherto robbed us off our identity is colonialism, slavery and racial discrimination. It is an injury which decades and decades of treatments cannot heal in a flash. It has been a great thorn on the African man’s chest which cannot be easily removed without damaging the African man himself. The bad effects of colonialism on the Africa man’s culture can be seen in the forms of (a) Identity crisis. (b) Inferiority complex. (c) Xenophobic attacks e.t.c. If the African man’s identity can be preserved, there is need for a total overhauling of all that is not African in nature; a call for a total rejection of everything negative that is of European nature, and leaving it to stand on our own. There is every need for mental liberation. According to Anshi Martin Wang and Jando Francisca (2008:57).

“The preservation of African identity in the new global agenda would go a long way in constructing a spirit of critical acceptance or rejection of ideas that are imported wholesale from European and American. As a matter of fact those ideas do not fit into africaness and mnegutar (worldview) but are accepted only on the blind supposition that everything European or American is better.”

In preserving African identity in contemporary African, there are some elements of culture which the Africans need not forget which is for J. Mugumbate, and A. Nyanguru, the

Philosophy of Ubuntu, which can best be described as an African philosophy that places emphasis on 'being self through others'. It is a form of humanism which can be expressed in the phrases 'I am because of who we all are' and *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in Zulu language. For J. Mugumbate, and A. Nyanguru (2013:82-85)

"Ubuntu relates to bonding with others. This is in line with what the word expresses in most African languages: being self because of others. This is also in line with the popular Zulu saying: *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. Such sayings as I am because we are and I am human because I belong, express this tenet. This means that in African philosophy, an individual is human if he or she says I participate, therefore I am, and Ubuntu echoes the African thought of acceptable ideas and deeds. Ubuntu can best be described as humanism from the African perspective as proposed by the former head of the Zambian government, Dr. Kenneth Kaunda. It is Africa's worldview of societal relations. It is a social and humanistic ethic."

Africans has what it takes to be great again, if the leaders will be open to welcome criticisms. Most Europeans envy African for their rich minerals, diverse cultural heritage and fertile land for Agriculture. What we need in African are leaders that are willing to serve and not to be served. Most Africans see politics as a lucrative business, which is the reason why politics is a do or die affair. Most politicians in African has no genuine business before moving into politics and for them if you make money illegal and you are in power the money becomes legal. Before Africans will start getting it right, African politics should first and foremost be less lucrative, and the issue of corruption looked into with utmost discipline, because the issue of corruption is the bane of underdevelopment in Africa.

Concluding Reflection

This study has carefully x-rayed and noted that our loss of identity was as a result Africans trio experience of slavery, colonialism and racial discrimination this trio experience is still disturbing the African mentality, that nothing good can come out of African, which in that regard the study tries to disprove those unwarranted assumptions and free the African mind from the bondages of our colonial masters (which in recent time is termed globalisation). For Paul Ogugua (2014:79) "globalization is not new, it has been throughout history orchestrated by the Europeans and given different names in times. It purports to be what it is not; of course it presents its wish image." The study has shown that the infiltration of our culture by the westerns has done us more harm than good. Africa is endowed with tremendous heritages often categorized as values and cultural legacies, some of these values have made remarkable impacts on African stability and social integration especially at all levels. In recovering past traditions is good, but westerns has succeeded in dislocating our person, Africans are scared of their shadows and desist from trading blames on westerners, and what Africans need now is the solution and way out of this ugly predicament. The first step is to tackle the issue of leadership which can be achieve primarily by making politics less lucrative and attractive so that the Africans will start harnessing those innate potentials in them and those in corridors

of power should manage our resources and issue of allowances looked into and reduced drastically, politics and leadership in Africa should be a call to serve and not to be served. The research concludes that before the issue of African identity can be handled in contemporary Africa, Africans needs to solve the problem of leadership, which is the only viable option to curb the menace of bad leadership, terrorism, kidnapping and prevention of further upsurge of any form of xenophobic attack in other African countries.

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