Existentialism and the African Challenge

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ABSTRACT
The Paper, “Existentialism and the African Challenge,” underscores the role existentialism can play in addressing the African challenge, that is, the incommensurate development of Africa with reference to her human and natural potentials. The paper focuses on five themes of existentialism, namely: 1) Concreteness of human existence; 2) Freedom; 3) Choice and responsibility; 4) Authentic life and 5) The possibilities of man. Each of the themes is brought to bear on the African challenge. The goal is to promote the actualization of Africa’s potentiality and facilitate the realization of Africa’s greatness. This would result in a more conducive atmosphere in Africa, and greater peace and prosperity of Africa. It would also help Africa to occupy her rightful position in the comity of nations in the world and bring about the restoration of the glory of Africa.

Keywords: Existentialism, Africa, Challenge, Human existence, Freedom, Authentic life, Possibility and greatness.

INTRODUCTION
In its practical dimension, philosophy is concerned with practical issues of people and societies, the improvement of lives and the transformation of societies. This is one way philosophy can be of great benefit for Africa, which is, using philosophy to address problems confronting Africa and Africans. Several scholars have written on this function of philosophy. For instance, Segun Ogungbemi submitted on the nature of philosophy thus:

Philosophy by its dynamic nature- as a critical examination of beliefs and practices- is revolutionary. By this I mean that philosophy provokes minds, creates doubts or skepticisms and challenges dogmatism, traditions, cultural values, scientific, social, political and moral beliefs and practices…. It is the primary objective of philosophy to influence and transform individuals and society positively or to enhance the quality of life.¹

In a similar vein, with reference to the criticism of ethnophilosophy, Maurice M. Makumba affirmed that “unless African philosophy has the African man and woman and the African situation for its object, such a philosophy is of no use and it only serves to alienate the black people more and more from themselves² Reflecting the significance of the socio-cultural context of the philosopher, Enrique Dussel opined: ”The philosopher or subject of philosophical thinking is not an ‘absolute I’ as Fichte claimed, but a finite subject, conditioned relatively determined by a historical subject, to a social class, to a people, to a subject of basic practices.”³ Also Olusegun Oladipo argued that the focus of the problem surrounding the idea of African philosophy “is that of finding ways in which African philosophers can make their works relevant to human interests in their societies.”⁴ He advanced a practical mission for African philosophy in the contemporary world and gave the reason for the position thus:
My recommendation of a practical mission for African philosophy is not an arbitrary one. Rather, it is suggested by the socio-political context within which the African philosopher is called upon to fulfill his scholarly obligations. This is the context of underdevelopment and pervading human misery and the varied attempts to overcome these problems. In this situation, a commitment to knowledge for its own sake or to culture as an end in itself or, even, to ideology would be nothing other than intellectual insensitivity, the consequences of which can be as pernicious as those of the political insensitivity of African political leaders.5

These quotations underscore the fact that, divorced of its contextual realities, philosophy cannot be of benefit to the people. Indeed, it would become irrelevant. The above stated function of philosophy is the rationale for the paper, “Existentialism and the African Challenge.” The goal is to contribute to the ongoing discussions on development in Africa which is a major issue in contemporary Africa.

**Existentialism and the African Challenge**

The African challenge refers to the disproportionate share of Africa in the world harvest, the failure of Africa to have commensurate global contributions with reference to her population and abundant resources. It relates to the paradox of the African continent. Whereas God has endowed Africa with abundant human and natural resources, she is backward and one of the poorest continents in the world. Whereas Africa has produced great men and women in virtually all fields of human life and endeavors, things are not working well in Africa. Using Nigeria as an example, some analysts now describe Nigeria as a failing state or even as a failed state. This usage is with reference to the near total collapse of most of the public institutions and systems in the nation.

In other words, the African challenge is the disconnection between Africa’s potentiality and actuality, and emphasizes the need for Africa to change her rating and occupy her rightful position in the world. Due to such factors as wars, crises, inept leadership, bribery and corruption, selfishness, wickedness, ritual killings, assassinations, political instability and economic recession, the quality of life and life expectancy in Africa are comparatively low. In many African nations, life is characterized by poverty, conflicts, diseases, illiteracy, injustice, insecurity, cheating and marginalization. As a graphic reflection of the Nigerian state, for example, the theme of the 2017 University of Ibadan Faculty of Arts biennial International Conference was: "Policy Debacle and the Burden of Being in Africa." The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines debacle thus: "An event or a situation that is a complete failure and causes embarrassments."6 Not only has Africa continued to have a low rating in the world, the magnitude of corruption in Africa, the near collapse of infrastructure, the ineffectiveness of many institutions, the desperation of African youth to leave Africa, the crisis of identity and the quantum of daily wastages of lives and resources, all combine to underscore policy debacle in Africa, which has made life and living very burdensome in Africa and has brought continental embarrassments of great proportions. Ogungbemi also reflected on the African challenge when he wrote:

> It is generally believed by scholars and intellectuals that Africa is richly endowed naturally and humanly. Considering African human resources … it is self-evident the world over that Africa from its historical past to the present had produced and is still producing capable intellectuals, scholars and generally elite of different potentials…. In spite of this apparent truth, African countries are ranked among the developing nations of the world.7

Implicit in Ogungbemi’s observation is the manifestation of the ranking is contrary to expectations. Of course, there are identified factors for the contrary expectations. The essence of the paper, Existentialism and the African Challenge, is: "How can existentialism help Africa in her challenge? What can Africa glean from existentialism that can help her to overcome her challenge, to translate her potentiality to actuality?" Existentialism is one of the popular philosophies in the contemporary times and it has great potentials for African development. This assertion is the background to the paper. Basically the fundamental teachings and concepts of existentialism will be brought to bear on the African challenge. Five fundamental themes / teachings of existentialism which shall form the basis of existentialism helping to address the African challenge are:
1. The Concreteness of Human Existence
2. Freedom
3. Choice and Responsibility
4. Authentic Life
5. The Possibilities of Man.

1. The Concreteness of Human Existence and the African Challenge
Existentialism underscores the concreteness of human existence. According to Coplestone, “Man, therefore, as considered by the existentialists, is the concrete human person, not an abstract epistemological subject.” John M. Frame also wrote on Kierkegaard thus: “For him, human existence is a kind of pure particularity that cannot be incorporated under general concepts.” The emphasis on the concreteness, individuality and historicity of human existence challenges Africans to have greater value for life and to promote life. Life expectancy is relatively shorter in Africa and the African society is becoming increasingly unsafe. Africa must show greater concern for her people and do more to preserve life and improve its quality. Also, African leaders should enhance the quality of human existence in Africa. Human life should be made more meaningful in the historical, concrete contexts individuals live and operate. The oppressive, anti-human policies and measures of governments should be discarded for life-affirming, human-faced political ideologies and socio-economic policies.
Existentialism challenges Africa to focus on individuals, responding to their yearnings and aspirations, meeting their needs and addressing their problems. African countries must have people-oriented policies and embark more on projects that will empower the people, improve the quality of life and the standard of living, Governments should show greater commitment in addressing such problems as child labor, unemployment, poor infrastructure political instability illiteracy, poverty and insecurity. The human existence index in Africa is very worrisome and practical steps should be taken to address the abnormality. The emphasis on enhancing the quality of human existence is in tandem with the intrinsic value of humanity from the perspective of existentialism. Quoting J. Macquюrrie Festus A. Akintola noted in this regard thus:

Existentialism, as Satre defines it, is an ethical theory. It is a form of humanism, which means it takes humanity as the central ethical value. But it is distinguished from other forms of humanism in the way it understands humanity. What is valuable is not simply the empirical fact of human existence; our ethical aims should not be to increase our numbers, lengthen our lives, satisfy our desires, or improve our achievements. What is intrinsically valuable is the nature or structure of our existence, the kind of things we are. Existentialism, therefore, seeks the flourishing of the human individual, where this is understood as the unfettered realization of our most fundamental nature.

On the part of individuals, more concerted efforts should be made to live a meaningful life. The existentialist bent of existence preceding essence is relevant here. Under God, each African's life is in his/her hand. Consequently, each one should be his/her best and make the most of the present situation the continent has plunged. Accentuating the spiritual undertones of the present historical reality of Africa, each African should renew his/her relationship with God and resolve to be better, not bitter, through the present dispensation of African history.

2. Freedom and the African Challenge
Existentialists place a great premium on freedom to the point of seeing it as integral to being human. They see it as the supreme value among human beings and as a condition for authentic human existence. In other words, a human being lives an authentic life when he/she is free to choose what he/she will become or do. Freedom is so imperative to human existence because it is a distinguishing feature between man and other creatures and it enables man to express himself most fully as a being created in God's image and to live most authentically to optimally realize his potentials. Elucidating on man as a free, self-creating and self-transcending subject, Copleston affirmed: “Man creates himself in the sense that what he becomes depends on his freedom, his choices. And man transcends himself in the sense that, as long as he
lives, he cannot be identified with his past. Through the exercise of freedom he transcends the past, the already-made.” Madsen Pirie also wrote that Heidegger “thought that although people lived in a world they had been ‘thrown into’ and could be absorbed by, they were free to choose and direct themselves. Only at death did these possibilities cease.”

There are three levels the concept of freedom may be applied to the African challenge. One, Africa must assert her emancipation from limiting forces and hindering factors that have held her captive for so long. Africa must break loose from the colonial yoke of her past, determine her unique identity and chart her own course out of the wilderness where she has stayed for too long. Ultimately, it is Africans who can solve African problems and Africa must accept this reality and re-determine her destiny in the world.

Two, African states should show a greater commitment to freedom for their citizens. The human rights profile of many African states is very poor and this should change. Violence, political thuggery, terrorism, official high handedness, and so on daily rob many of their rights and privileges in Africa. It is significant to note that the gauging of freedom and the problem of social injustice have direct bearing on the low quality of life and the intolerable context of human existence in Africa.

Three, Africans must grow in understanding and appropriating their freedom. Generally, leaders have taken undue advantage of the willingness of Africans to concede their rights and freedom to the state. While revolutions should be eschewed, Africans should hold their governments accountable to them. There is need for a more politically conscious civil society and a more prophetic church which would be part of the necessary checks and balances in many African countries, be the voice of the voiceless, and speak for the marginalized and the oppressed in African nations. A very good example is the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) movement in the 1990s in Nigeria which provided a very strong, active opposition to General Sanni Abacha, then Head of State, who caused so much havoc in the nation, before his sudden death. It is significant to note that the movement succeeded as a result of the pains and sacrifices of many of its leaders. This is the way forward for the greater emancipation of Africans.

3. Choice and Responsibility and the African Challenge

It is significant to affirm that choice is one of the most cardinal principles in the world and it is underscored strongly in the Bible. With reference to the emphasis of choice in existentialism, Copleston said:

(Existentialists) try to illumine human freedom and its implications with a view to promoting authentic choice. Kierkegaard drew attention to what it means to be an existing individual, above all to what it means to be a Christian. And he did so in order to illuminate and facilitate choice. Whether a man drifts the crowd and hardly merits to be called an existing individual or whether he becomes by free affirmation what he is, a finite individual related to God, is a question which can be answered only existentially, that is, by free choice; and no amount of theorizing or of purely intellectual dialectics can take the place of choice.

Reflecting on the thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre, Frame said, “We are never forced then by our past to choose a certain way. At every moment, we choose to be what we are. There are limits of course. But those limits themselves are chosen.” Also, Frame wrote on Kierkegaard: “For Kierkegaard, human existence consists of free choices, of decisions. Each choice is unique, and so none of them can be described by a general term.” Similarly, Joseph Omoregbe expanded on existence from Kierkegaard’s perspective thus: “Existence for Kierkegaard has a peculiar meaning when it is used to refer to human existence. To ‘exist’ is to be an actor and not simply a spectator in the drama of life. It involves personal choice and self-commitment to a certain way of life. It is by consciously and deliberately making such personal choices about his own life that a person really comes to ‘exist.’” Omoregbe also noted that personal choice, freedom, commitment, personal responsibility, getting involved, and so on are significant concepts in Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

The concept of choice and responsibility is one of the greatest helps existentialism can offer to Africa. We must stop finding scapegoats for our problems and accept the fact that we are where we are today because of our choices, the colonial hangover of our past notwithstanding. Sometimes, there is undue emphasis on
Africa’s colonial past as a factor for her continued state of underdevelopment. We need a paradigm shift in our thinking in this regard. Subsequently, knowing that tomorrow starts today, that is, today is integrally linked with tomorrow, we must make new choices today that would change our situations tomorrow for the better. This is why the challenge of good and effective leadership is very critical for Africa. In *The Role of Leadership on National Rebirth and Church Growth*, the writer affirmed the significance of leadership thus:

Leadership is a very significant concept. Certainly leadership makes a great difference in every organization or group. It can be affirmed that the success and achievements of a group to a large extent will be proportional to the quality of its leadership. Good leadership is one of the greatest needs of all times. This is even more so now when the chaotic state of the world is taken into consideration. Never has the world been in dire need of leadership as now. And with reference to the Church, the writer proposed this philosophy of leadership: "As we stand on the threshold of a new century, the Church in Africa needs leaders who will prepare her for the great century; leaders who will serve Christ and follow His model of servant leadership; leaders who will combine academic excellence with spiritual maturity; leaders who will have vision, be in tune with the Holy Spirit and leave good legacy for future generations."

This is one of the most critical periods in the history of Africa and the Church in Africa and Africa as a whole need a new breed of leaders who will respond most appropriately to the challenges of the hour, lead Africa to address and overcome her multifaceted problems and facilitate actualizing the potentiality of Africa as a great continent, peaceful, rich and prosperous. Existentialism brings the compelling power of decision on Africans. Africans must take their destiny in their hands and take practical steps to come out of the present state of affairs in Africa. They should have a new orientation, decide to change, do things differently from the way they have done them and create a more conducive atmosphere in the continent. There cannot be a great future for Africa without changes in the mentality, attitudes and orientations of Africans. This paradigm shift would complement the changes governments make to take Africa to the Promised Land.

Existentialism challenges Africa to look inward in addressing the African challenge. Africa must overcome the tendency to externalize the causes of the challenge and looking towards outsiders for solutions to her problems. While Africa should be open to the help she may get from outsiders, Africans are the ones who can solve their problems. With reference to Africans, individuals should rediscover the power of decision, know that essentially their lives are the cumulative effects of their choices and live the responsible life. We must eschew wrong attitudes and orientations especially to work and nation building. Individuals should refrain from negative, immature and dangerous reactions to the critical period like suicide, corruption, unfaithfulness to God and the family/abandoning one's family but rather make positive, godly and life affirming choices like godliness, faithfulness, commitment, honesty, patriotism and having a good name. This re-orientation is necessary to produce a new Africa.

4. The Concept of Authentic Life and the African Challenge

The concept of authentic life applies more directly to individuals but, as we have noted above, change in the lives of individual Africans would impact the continent. Africans must maintain a healthy balance between living one's life as an individual most optimally and living as a member of the society. While Africans should affirm our communal living which has many advantages, when the sense of communalism impedes optimal realization of the individual, it should be reassessed. Consequently, Africans should take the concepts of self-realization and self-actualization more seriously than they have done. They must renounce life-inhibiting, oppressive and subjugating elements of our culture and re-interpret their traditions in the light of the progressive, dynamic and globalized age. More specifically, they must jettison the fatalistic interpretation of destiny and overemphasis on spiritual forces of darkness with the concomitant cycle of spiritual bondage, economic hardship and social schizophrenia they endanger.
Existentialism calls Africans to an active engagement with life. Africans must demonstrate willingness to confront life and tackle its challenges. They must resolve to live with a great sense of meaning and purpose in spite of their problems and challenges. They should embrace life in all its dimensions, live fully and victoriously, making utmost contributions in spite of their existential conditions. Existentialism challenges Africans to rise above the myriads of problems confronting her. Though complex, Africa’s problems are surmountable because they are mainly human problems. This is more so in the light of the fact that some other parts of the world have overcome similar problems in the past. Thus we can learn from them solutions to our present problems. This implies that there must be more concerted efforts on the part of governments and it is significant to note the in the 1960s Malaysia came to collect palm kernels from Nigeria. Today, Malaysia is a prosperous nation while Nigeria is rated as one of the poorest nations in the world. This outcome is a great irony which should be of great concern to Nigerians.

On the part of the governments, their role is to promote a more conducive atmosphere for living the authentic life. In view of the fact that most of the factors inhibiting the authentic life have structural dimensions, governments should enhance the quality of life and create/sustain institutions and policies that would provide education, create jobs for the teeming jobless population, ensure prompt payment of workers’ salaries, and encourage merit, probity, good governance and accountability. Using Nigeria as a case study, the four critical problems of insecurity, power generation and corruption and infrastructural enhancement should be addressed with seriousness.

5. The Possibilities of Man and the African Challenge
The last existentialist theme for our consideration is the possibilities of man. The theme underscores the great potentials and capabilities of man to realize himself, live fully, overcome hindrances and limitations, and do great and extraordinary things. The theme further speaks to the liberating of Africa and the empowerment of Africans. Existentialism calls the attention of Africans to the multitudinous possibilities they have. Africa is a continent of great potentials. A continent that is characterized by multi-dimensional poverty needs to appropriate the message of possibility. Africa must know that she can overcome her challenges. She only needs to cast herself upon the great resources and potentials the Lord Almighty has given her, learn from how others overcame their challenges and demonstrate greater sincerity, commitment and seriousness in freeing herself from her shackles, march more purposefully toward her greatness and occupy her rightful position in the comity of nations in the world.

Similarly, the peoples of Africa must embrace the message of possibility. As history has shown us abundantly, Africans are capable of any feat performed in any other part of the world as Africans have contributed and are contributing significantly to the workings of most of the great societies in the world. Africa can be figuratively described as a sleeping giant. Africans must wake up from slumber and know that they are neither cursed by God nor destined to be poor, wretched and backward. They should harness their potentials to translate the continent into a great and prosperous continent. There should be a sense of urgency in addressing the problems of Africa.

CONCLUSION
The paper has focused on existentialism and the African challenge. It has examined the African challenge and brought five existential themes to bear on the African challenge. Africa must accept responsibility for her development and take practical steps in overcoming her challenge. African leaders should show greater commitment towards the emancipation of the continent and create a more conducive environment for the development of Africa. Similarly, Africans need reorientation. They should be prepared to shed attitudes and behaviors militating against development, and make sacrifices for the birthing of a new Africa.
ENDNOTES
5. Oladipo, 115.
7. Ogungbemi, Philosophy & Development, 27.
15. Frame.
17. Omoregbe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY