

Understanding African philosophy and African spirituality: challenges and prospects

Phemelo Olifile Marumo & Mompoti Vincent Chakale
Department of Philosophy
North West University, Mafikeng
South Africa

Abstract

African believe that there need to communicate with those who have left this world and went to the spiritual realm. This communication serves as a relationship even after death. The contention of African philosophy is that people leave the human stage to the spiritual stage wherein they can be approached in times of joy and calamities. The spiritual world serves to allay the fears and to offer protection at all times. To understand this phenomenon, one has to be able to understand why are this spiritual phenomenon exists in an African philosophy. In bringing forth a better understanding, the paper will expound on African spirituality and the understanding thereof from an African perspective. Then highlights how can African spirituality be understood from an African philosophy. That premise will take the paper to the challenges and prospects of the understanding. The paper will close in indicating why is African spirituality understanding is supreme in African society and its contribution in assisting the postmodern world in relating to Africanism.

Keywords; *African philosophy; African Spirituality; Afrocentric studies*

Introduction

This paper explores and discusses African philosophy and African spirituality reflecting the nature and characteristics, perspective on the challenges and prospects based on African spirituality and philosophy. In the discussion of this paper, one has to take a cognisant fact that Africa is a vast continent, incorporating a wide variety of cultures and ethnic groups, Northern Africa differs totally from Southern Africa, and that the term Africa does not denote one homogenous group but one complex unit based on one philosophy and one spirituality convictions and conceptions.

The bases of the convictions and conceptions are the worldviews. These worldview gives assumptions, direction and serves as a compass to all despite ontological origin (Van Der Walt 2001:66). In most case, the worldview is the prime source wherein the conception and convictions are drawn. The implication thereof embraces the African philosophy and African spirituality. According to Mbiti (1991), African spirituality and philosophy have shaped African's cultural, social, political lives and economic activities. It is from this understanding, knowledge, and wisdom that Africans are in a relationship which is called communalism, in a relationship with the environment hence calling the earth Mother Earth, in a relationship with their ancestors who are seen as providers of safety and can be called in times of calamity. In order to live in harmony or in a mutual relationship, Africans believe that your philosophy and spirituality should be tuned to that condition.

Drawing from Mbiti's thinking, the paper argues that African philosophy and African spirituality are intertwined and one cannot understand the other without the other. Obviously, it would not be rational to try to reject everything of a colonial ancestry. Conceivably, a thought or a mode of inquiry spearheaded by erstwhile colonizers may be valid or in some way beneficial to humankind.

According to Graness (2015), the study of European philosophy history has a long tradition beginning with Plato's description of the teaching of various thinkers in his dialogues. Graness (2015), added that for centuries Africans' ability to philosophise has been entirely denied, and African thought was not seen as a part of world philosophy, the characterization of Africa's pre-colonial cultures and societies as a historical and primitive was one of the main obstacles for unprejudiced. Since black Africans were regarded as incapable of intellectual reflection as it was generally assumed that there was no philosophical thinking in Africa.

Whereas according to Shahadah (2016), the African philosophy and spirituality history has been there since time immemorial and it has been the centre of humanity in the African worldview. There is an argument that it is unrecorded and undocumented, therefore it cannot be traced and that implies there no history. Thence, Mubangizi (2016) maintains that many experiences a great challenge in understanding African spirituality and philosophy, due to the fact that they maintained that that African spirituality and philosophy are the same. This notion is supported by the misconception that African thought is transmitted orally, though proverbs and folktales.

Understanding of African philosophy

Janz (2009) state that, much of African philosophy has been concerned with defining the ethnophilosophical parameters of African philosophy and identifying what differentiates it from other philosophical traditions, which one of its implicit assumptions state that specific culture can have a philosophy that is not applicable and accessible to all peoples and cultures in the world, however, this concept is disputed by traditional philosophers. Gade argues that the ethnophilosophical approach to African philosophy as a static group property is highly problematic.

According to Oyeshile (2008), philosophy can be regarded as the most self-conscious of disciplines. The process of constant self-reflection, inherent in the nature and practice of philosophy bears not only upon its purposes, objectives and methods, but upon its relation to the world and to human experience in its multiple expressions, upon its status among other disciplines and forms of intellectual pursuit and discourse, but also, most radically upon its very nature as an activity and as an enterprise. Philosophy is viewed as the critical activity which function embrace an interrogation of its nature and meaning. African philosophy bears a direct relation to history and culture which reflect African intelligentsia upon total historical being representing a significant moment in the intellectual response of Africa.

Philosophy involves the critical examination of an idea which men live with., such as the idea of justice, morality, and political, even the idea of god. Within this critical examination or investigation, the philosopher engages in conceptual analyses, logic, criticism, and synthesis of issues that are of paramount importance to the African needs and ways of life. Gordon (2008) add that, Africana philosophy involves theoretical questions raised by critical engagements with ideas in Africana cultures and their hybrid, mixed, or creolized forms worldwide.

Mbiti (1969:108) states that to understand African philosophy, one needs to take into cognisant fact the settings of African people and the mode of teaching and learning. Africa philosophy deals with metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, as well as with the problems and opportunities of intercultural philosophizing, and does so in ways that cover the gamut of the analytic/continental divide in Western philosophy. These sources for African philosophy are to be found primarily in products of language such as parables, proverbs, poetry, songs, myth and oral literature generally.

Mbiti (1969:108) added that African societies are characterised by communal interdependence and this setting facilitates the transformation, the delivering (of) and the creation of knowledge. According to Letseka (2013), African philosophy is associated with the principles of Ubuntu, communalism and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). Ubuntu is neatly captured by the expression *umuntungumuntungabantu* (in Nguni languages of Southern Africa), or *motho ke motho ka batho* (in Sotho languages). The English translation of this expression is a person is a person by association with other persons. Ubuntu is a way of life or a worldview which sustains the wellbeing of a people in a community or society (Hennig 2011).

The understanding of African Spirituality

Spirituality is always culturally formed and informed. The formation of spirituality is always cultural-contextual. African spirituality involves deeper human values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices, based on various African worldviews. According to Adofo (2016), “in the African worldview the nature of being does not comprise solely of what we can perceive with our visual sense, that is, our eyes. There are two aspects to the created universe; the physical and spiritual. The spiritual realm is also stratified into various spaces or abodes those of departed ancestors, spirits (deities) and that of the penultimate source of Creation of all things in existence.”

Adofo (2016) further adds that these two realms are in constant interchange with each other and what happens in one realm can have an impact on the other, in doing so keeps order and harmony in the cosmos and on earth. African spirituality is a fascinating tapestry of philosophy. it's such a brilliant thing to observe because it's about connecting one's self to one's higher self. One's a higher self is the level of consciousness and awareness one can

attain within this visible body because the more conscious and aware you are of something, the more foresight you have to something.

African spirituality is defined as breath that which animates you, is drawn from the ancient ancestors and the Kemites from Egypt who called spirit *ka* that which lived before you.

Spirituality on the other side of things is your nature, is what your essence is, It's what makes you alive. Spiritual is closer to your nature than Anything else because it's about you having an experience rather than living vicariously by a concept (Nofra-Uaa 2015).

In African spirituality according to Adofo (2016), there are six components which one need to take into consideration, which includes nature of existence, order, and balance, the interconnectedness of things, Social and Spiritual Hierarchy, Cyclical Existence and Spirit of being. According to this paper, these six components hold true in understanding African spirituality and cosmology.

African believe that all things have an impact on each other and this interconnectedness and interplay is universal. There exist a cause and effect relationship to be found in all experience as well as acts and thoughts, which will inform our thinking and relation. According to Danquah (1968: 189) likewise, it is also evident in the Bantu concept of Ubuntu; that each member in a community has a bearing on others within it, and the wellbeing or otherwise of the whole is not separate from that of the individual or their immediate environment. The order and balance of the universe are based on the opposing forces that are complementary to each other. Because order and balance is a necessity for harmony between the realms of existence. The understanding of this forces in the order and balance is that, if force is bad it will come with lessons to be learned, as does the good forces and overlook reasons for being in our lives which will cause disharmony and disorder.

In African spirituality, Divination and Ritual are the tools used to address imbalances and to maintain ideal states of being. On the bases of cyclical existence, African believe in reincarnation, but the African idea is not based on a written text; it is based on the belief that human beings live in a cycle, that things go around and come around. African reincarnation is based on the religion of ancient Egypt, Where the priests said that we shall come back millions and millions of times (Asante & Mazama, 2009).

African believe that all things in creation have the quintessential essence (spirit) of the creator contained within it. Whether animate or inanimate which is an essence within a human vessel given to humans by the supreme being, which is an aforementioned notion of the interconnectedness of things and a belief that a human body is just a vessel that holds the spirit and consciousness of the creator. Adofo (2016) further add that our ultimate aim for our individualised consciousness is to reunite with source and this is achieved by living an exemplary life that affords one the status of an ancestor upon death.

African belief that there is Supreme Being, who is able to do the thing that human being cannot do. The Creator is also envisioned as a formless, self-conscious and intelligent entity, believe that the creator is beyond form and containment and can transmute into all forms, thus the various forms manifested across this earth. It is held that this Essence, or Spirit, of the Creator, is what is present within all things both animate and inanimate and gives form and life. In African Spiritual, there are many different expressions of the Creator/God and an unlimited number of the forms it can take, hence why it is common to have Africans paying homage to a range of naturally occurring forms with no mental conflict as to its divine nature. It is the basis of reverence for spirit because they are understood to reflect a particular aspect of Supreme being (Essien 2013; Karamaga 2014).

In African spirituality, the proselyting is absent because they believe and understand that we are all from God, so one doesn't have to be converted back to God simply by way of adhering to a set of dogma (Danquah 1968; Adofo 2016). According to Masango (2006), African spirituality is holistic and it impacts on the whole of life. It is not considered as an individual affair, because it is expressed in all levels of society, socially, economically, politically as well as among people, hence it contributes in the building of a nation.

Kourie and Kretzschmar (2000:3) identify it in the following way, "African spirituality is identified as reflecting the wholeness of life and is important in harmonizing life in all its fullness. African spirituality has to do with the concept of nation-building and the integrity of creation. In that life, everyone is involved in rebuilding, spirituality in the lives of others ancestors are also involved in this process." Masango (2006) and Kappen (1994:33) state that, "contemporary spirituality impacts on the totality of life, it is non-dualistic, it does not posit a bifurcation between the secular and the sacred. It encompasses the entire life of faith, which includes body, mind, and soul as well as the social and political dimensions."

Challenges of understanding African spirituality and philosophy

The dialectic in African philosophy is brought by what Zulumathabo (2018), state that, western philosophy has the superset of knowledge systems premised upon three disciplines namely (1) epistemology; (2) metaphysics and (3) ethics as confirmed in the scholarly tradition of a PhD degree program that underscores the ontological primacy of philosophy as the superset of knowledge systems. This is the reason why the western scholars always expect that the African philosophy must have such components that for them to be able to call it a philosophy. Zulumathabo added that the knowledge and the wisdom of the African were drawn from the cosmology, that is why they uniquely conceptualise philosophy as a subcase of cosmology, making philosophy a derivative of cosmic knowledge.

According to Asiegbu (2016), another challenge in African philosophy is deconstructive which means that African philosophy is literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words; and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own

meanings and reconstructive which relating to the rebuilding of something after it has been damaged or destroyed.

Challenges in African spirituality is the understanding, interpretation and defining of spirituality and religion. According to Hufford (2005), spirituality is defined as the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community whereas Religion is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed, to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality) and to foster an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others living together in a community. It is from this definition where we can draw an understanding that spirituality and religion are not the same things and there is a need to clear the air for use to have a better understanding. It is still a challenge because we cannot divorce spirituality from religion and religion from spirituality.

The paper sees the interpretation and understanding of the Bible problematic aspect of getting the context of African spirituality and African philosophy. From an African philosophy, humanity is in a relationship with environment, culture, and tradition. This means humanity's relationship does not end. The relationship is of a consanguinity nature which is relationship by blood. Therefore from that point, the relationship among Africans does not die even after death the relationship is there. This notion brings forth that African relationship with ancestors is forever and is both spiritual and philosophical. Philosophical in a sense that even after death the ancestors are still parents and given the due respect. The Bible, on the other hand, highlights the respect of parents as the deed of humanity but the results thereof is the prolonged life as stated in Exodus 20 (Ten Commandments), some churches have taken advantage of that sentence and discarded or influenced people to stop respecting the dead because they are dead and that is against African philosophy and African spirituality.

Prospects of understanding African spirituality and philosophy

African spirituality and philosophy are culturally based, which is linked to how people live they live. The philosophy which focuses mostly on the African knowledge and wisdom, and spirituality which focus keep the world in harmony. African philosophy and spirituality are the roots or the source of African beliefs and culture. It anchors of what to be an African is, and it focuses on a joint well-being of the community. Furthermore, it enables on to inquire about the importance of tradition and the value they equip an individual with is a technique to adjust one's life which focused on the western way of existence (Higgs and Smith, 2013).

For the understanding of African spirituality to be a reality especially in a postmodern point of entry is the education sector. The schools need to be involve in teaching the ethos of African animal. Because if that is overlooked there is a run that African spirituality can be

misconstrued as witchcraft or a thing for non-civilised people and be seen as a hundred to development.

According to Meko (2018:1720), Afrocentric education that the necessary orientation will require a commitment by many Africanists to unlearn the existing modes by which they can understand African spirituality and thereby relate that to the postmodern teaching and learning sphere. That re-education exercise will have to be premised on the understanding that Africa is not merely a lifeless object which one can dictate to or that is remotely controlled. In this understanding, the likes of African worldview and African religion has to be understood from the context that Africans are not religious illiterate but that they have some norms that bring value to their lives.

The other thing that needs to be addressed is the relationship between Africans and Westerners from a pretext of equality, identity and the restoration of dignity. This will mean coming with a reconciliatory acceptance that eradicates dependency syndrome from both Africans and Westerners. African should be free to interpret their worldview and free to practice it. It must not be seen as a sin/curse of abuse if one sacrifice for the ancestors in a way of slaughtering a goat or cow. It must be accepted that African spirituality is based on the flow of blood and that flow of means the entering of the spiritual realm in an African tradition.

Those norms and value are what makes African a unique creature on earth. Afrocentrism education should allow a re[resentation that expound and explicitly outline Africanism especially its spiritual side.

Conclusion

African philosophy can be formally defined as a critical thinking by Africans on their experiences of reality. It is a philosophy 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. It is a critical reflection on African leadership in the administration of their duties towards their citizens; the moral blameworthiness or praiseworthiness of it. It provides possible solutions to the problems experienced in African governance. African philosophy includes philosophical ideas, arguments, and theories of particular concern to people of African descent. Whereas African spirituality is about having harmony and peace, with intention of protecting the environment for survival.

This paper has called for a paradigm-shifting in analyzing, exploring and evaluation of African spirituality and philosophy. This shift will clearly allow the researcher to re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity. This means one cannot compare incomparable things e.g. equally correct in number but in context and understanding, they differ therefore those things are incomparable. Worldview plays an important role in bringing understanding, interpretation and in-depth analytical thinking when coming to issues of spirituality and philosophy. Spirituality is an inborn character which is done out of the heart

as an individual. Whereas philosophy is a norm which might turn into an ideology which is practiced because people in that vicinity believes it can assist them. Those two discourses should be taken into consideration because they are the pillars of African thought.

References

- Adofo, D.K.Y., 2016, Ancestral voices: spirit is eternal, www.ancestralvoices.co.uk Date of Access 5/10/2018
- Asante, M.K & Mazama, A (2009), *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, United States of America
- Asiegbu, M.F., 2016, Contemporary African philosophy: emergent issues and challenges, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v12i1.1> Accessed date 5/10/2018
- Danquah, J.B (1968), *The Akan Doctrine of God*; Second Edition. England
- Essien, D., 2013, 'Notions of healing and transcendence in the trajectory of African traditional religion; paradigm and strategies', *International Review of Mission* 102(397), 236-248.
- Gordon, L.R., 2008, *An Introduction for Africana Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press
- Graness, A., 2015, 'Questions of canon formation in philosophy: the history of philosophy in Africa', *The South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities (SASGPH)*, 16 (2): 78-96.
- Hennig, W., 2011, Even the Spirits need a Menu as the Zulu Goddess, viewed in www.cuisinenoirmag.com/.../even-the-spirits-need-a-menu-as-a-zulu-gi
- Hufford, J.D., 2005, *An Analysis of the Field of Spirituality, Religion, and Health*, <https://www.metanexus.net/analysis-field-spirituality-religion-and-health-davidjhufford/> Date of Access 5/10/2018
- Higgs, P., & Smith, J., 2013, *Rethinking our World*, Cape Town: Juta.
- Janz, B.B., 2009, *Philosophy in an African Place*, Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, <https://books.google.com/books?isbn=0739136682> Accessed date 5/10/2018
- Kappen S., 1994, *Spirituality in The New Age of Colonialism*, London Duquce, and Gutierrez and the Institutional Crisis Publications.
- Karamaga, A., 2014, 'Hope and Dignity for Africa; Ecumenical theological challenges', *The Ecumenical Review* 66, 93-103.
- Kourie, C., and Kretzschmar L, 2000, *Christian Spirituality in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications.
- Letseka, M., 2011, Educating for Ubuntu: *Open Journal of Philosophy*[online]available at www.scirp.org/journal/PaperDownload.aspx?paperID=32164, Accessed date 5/10/2018
- Masango, M.J.S., 2006, African spirituality that shapes the concept of Ubuntu, *Verbum et Ecclesia Journal*, 27(3): 930-943
- Mbiti, J.S., 1991, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd. Ed, Nairobi: EAEP.
- Mbiti, J.S. 1969, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann.

- Mubangizi, O. 2016, An African philosophy of history for African unity, viewed in <https://www.pambazuka.org/pan-africanism/african-philosophy-history-african-unity>
- Mekoa, I., 2018, 'Re-inventing an African University to Promote Development in Africa' in I.
- Mekoa (ed), *The Battle for the Soul of South African Universities; Institutional cultures, Racism, and Ideologies*, 137-174.
- Nofra-Uaa, P., 2015, Listen to Your Gods, viewed in, <https://kemeticallyspeaking.weebly.com/blog/category/spirituality>
- Oyeshile, O.A., 2008, 'On Defining African Philosophy: History, Challenges, and Perspectives', *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal* 3 (1), 57-64. Zulumathabo, Z., 2018, African Origin of Philosophy, <https://zulumathabo.com/2018/04/19/african-origin-of-philosophy/> Date of Access 5/10/2018
- Shahadah, A., 2016, African Spirituality, viewed in africanholocaust.net/african-spirituality/
- Van Der Walt, B.J., *Transformed by the renewing of your mind; shaping a Biblical worldview and a Christian perspective on scholarship*, Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa (ICCA).