

**A REVIEW OF IKECHUKWU ANTHONY KANU'S AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY:  
AN ONTOLOGICO-EXISTENTIAL HERMENEUTIC APPROACH TO  
CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES**

**BY**

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**Introduction**

This well-articulated resource book in African Philosophy of 21 chapters and 416 pages, was written by an erudite Augustinian Priest, Rev. Fr. Dr. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, O.S.A., and published in 2015 in Jos by Augustinian Publications. The book, faithful to its name, is a critical exposition of classical and contemporary issues in African philosophy. The method of dialoguing between philosophy and culture through hermeneutics was adopted to accomplish the difficult task. *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues* is a book anyone interested in African philosophy would like to read because of its rich content and novelty of its method which give flavor and dynamism to the study of African philosophy. The book is cast in a simple and flowing philosophical language, and to make itself a distinctively unique African philosophical resource material, the book is embellished with several concepts from the native African tongue. The author's approach and method of analysis are particularly interesting for they became the very platform on which a book of this sort can truly be called 'African Philosophy' - faithful to both the 'African' and the 'Philosophy.'

## **Discussion of the Chapters**

The first Chapter dwells on the problem of defining African Philosophy. Quoting Gyekye (1987) the author ascribes the persistency of this problem in the question of African Philosophy to two reasons viz., the problem of literacy and that of intellectual dilemma of the African Philosophers. For, on the one hand, there was absence of writing tradition in indigenous African cultures, and on the other hand, the African philosophers who are involved in the contemporary discuss of the subject are largely trained by Western minds. These notwithstanding, philosophy, for the African Philosopher, can never consist in reducing the African reality to Western Systems according to the declarations of the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, 1959 (cf. pp.3-4).

Kanu noted that the term ‘philosophy’ could be viewed from a variety of perspectives. African Philosophy is not immune from this pattern. Nevertheless, Africa itself understood in its geographical context remains the privileged place of African Philosophy. He observes, however, with Njoku (2002) that no single characteristics can adequately settle the question of who or what is an African. But why, actually, has African Philosophy received wide attention? According to Kanu, the issues of ideological race classification, slave trade, and colonialism are the basic factors that gave rise to the debate on African Philosophy. The Eurocentrists had developed some ontological hierarchy of human beings in which the Africans are placed at the bottom since, for them, the Negro is backward, inhuman, primitive, illogical etc. There was no qualm then in exploiting the Africans to the benefits of the west through slave trade; and, to redeem this situation (and place the African in the same pedestal with the rest of humanity) such a people need to be colonized.

The idea of African Philosophy is thus a response to European derogation of the African race, an affirmation of the self, and a reaffirmation of African cultural heritage. The nature of the discipline according to Gbadegesin (cited in pp. 15-16) reveals four perspectives: African Philosophy as philosophy indigenous to Africans, African Philosophy as philosophical reflections on African realities, African Philosophy as a reflection on African worldviews, and African Philosophy as a collection of philosophical texts produced by Africans and described as such by their authors. Kanu, however, contends that none of these perspectives adequately captures the meaning of African philosophy. For him, African Philosophy is a philosophy that employs a method that is distinctively African while presenting the African worldview, and keeping in view the universality of philosophy as its basis. The universality of philosophy is

understood in terms of the propensity of philosophy (in every culture) to raise questions relating to the fundamental principle underlying human experience, and not in terms of the uniformity of doctrinal positions (Kyekye, 1995, cited in p.19). The Chapter finally looked into the problem of 'Africanness and 'philosophiness' of African Philosophy. While the former refers to the locale within which the philosophy is done, namely Africa, Africans, and non-Africans living in and sharing in the life of the Africans; the later speaks of the content of the philosophy, namely African problems and situations. No doubt then that there is certainly an African Philosophy, which, for Kanu, tries to explain reality from an African perspective.

In the second Chapter, the author argues that African Philosophy is an ontologico-existential hermeneutics (p.30). Conceiving African philosophy as essentially having to do with abstraction of philosophy from African cultures, Kanu adopts the ontologico-existential hermeneutical method of inquiry (in African Philosophy) by which he thinks the African philosophy will be able to deal with non-philosophical baggage of cultural background by making explicit what is implicit. By putting into consideration the philosophiness and the Africanness of the subject matter, this method fulfills an ontological role and an existential role. For, while philosophy concerns itself with universal problem, the human person who engages in philosophy must speak from a cultural environment. For him, African Philosophy must then be a hermeneutical interpretation of one's cultural heritage. But how does hermeneutics of culture escape the criticisms of sage philosophy? Can we say that interpretation is the same as analysis? The above questions call for critical answers.

The third Chapter focuses on the trends in African Philosophy which the author identifies as follows: universalist/professional trend (with emphasis on method, criticality and analysis), ethnophilosophy or particularist trend (with emphasis on African worldviews), eclectic trend (which involves the reflection of professional philosophy on ethnophilosophy), national-ideological trend (with emphasis on African political ideologies), sage philosophy (emphasizing that there are individuals in traditional African societies who were philosophers) and literary/artistic philosophy (which focuses on African thinkers who through their literary or artistic works made reflections that are basically philosophical). Having posited the above enumeration, Kanu moved on to identify some sources of African Philosophy in the fourth Chapter which includes works of professional philosophers, African proverbs: folk tales, myths, names, artifacts, languages, symbols, songs, historical experience, and traditional prayers.

The fifth Chapter titled *The Dimensions of African Cosmology* is a discourse on the way Africans perceive, conceive and contemplate their universe. The term cosmology is etymologically the science of the universe. Hence, Kanu refers to African cosmology as the lens through which the African sees reality. He observes that the African universe with its corresponding worldview has the physical and the spiritual dimensions both of which are dominated by God and the humans respectively. The reality of God in the African universe is best understood from his names and attributes (pp. 85-6). Man, however, is at the center of the African universe, while deities in this universe serve as the intermediary through which the Supreme Being is reached. Their function is to ensure that God is not bordered by petty problems from the earth. They include *Anyanwu, Amadioha, Ahiajioku, Ala*. They are categorized into primordial divinities (those dwelling in heaven with the Supreme Being from all eternity), deified ancestors (mortals made divine after their death), and personified natural forces and phenomena (mountains, hills, rivers, caves, trees, etc personified and revered because spirits are resident in them). The author later discussed the rational proofs for the existence of God for the Africans in the sixth Chapter of this book. Not minding the fact that, unlike the westerners, Africans do not actually depend on proofs in order to believe in the existence of God, he meticulously identified six African traditional proofs for the existence of God: based on existence of contingent beings; the eternity of God, African names, African prayers, proverbs, and myths. His arguments point to the existence of a supremely influential Being in Africa, namely God.

The seventh chapter of the work consigns itself with a historiography of African Philosophy. Kanu noted that the possibility of the history of African Philosophy is strongly linked to the problem of methodology, precisely those of orature and collective thought – this poses some problem on the periodization of the discipline. This notwithstanding, Kanu took a bold step in classifying African Philosophy into four periods, namely (1) ancient period (covering the North African Egyptian civilizations and mystery systems – 3000 to 300 B.C), (2) medieval period (covering the North African history of Christian philosophy and the period of Islamic activities – 2nd to 15th A.D), (3) modern period (covering the period between 15th and early 20th centuries – including the works of Mbiti, Tempels, Kagame, Marcel Griaule etc), and (4) contemporary period (21st century till date). The classification of African Philosophy (3) was largely based on the methodologies that were employed by their proponents. This problem of methodology gains attention in Chapter eight of this work. Prominent among the methodological problems are the problem of oral tradition and that of collective

philosophy which is its consequence, for, oral tradition has the habit of transmitting only the consensus ideologies. The issue of language was also identified as problem in African Philosophy. So because of the relevance of this problem in African Philosophy, the author dedicated the entire chapter nine to it. But contrary to the status quo, Kanu maintains that the problem of language in African Philosophy is not about the multiplicity of language but about the consideration of the impact of colonialism on African language and the need for a cultural renaissance so as to better express African Philosophy in a language that profoundly mirrors African realities (p. 157). It is also his view that absence of writing did no harm to philosophy in traditional African society – meaning that literacy is not a necessary prerequisite for philosophy.

Chapter ten of this work is titled *African Ethics: Foundation, Community and Religion*. Ethics is that field of study which deals with the morality of human actions or the norms of human behavior. Ethics in Africa is however founded upon African ontology. Thus, Kanu observes that when an action is ontologically good such action is considered ontologically good. But the question is: how do we judge an action to be ontologically right or wrong? Kanu seems to pay no attention to this fundamental question in this regard. But he well observes that African ontology in its hierarchy [of being] is governed by harmony. It follows then that any brake or distortion of this harmony is evil and attracts some recompense. Action in line with this ontological harmony is a morally good action otherwise it would be morally wrong. And as the author observes, the recompense essential to an evil act may extend from the individual to the kinship and to the entire community. Since also it is almost impossible to separate the life of the African from his or her personal inclination to the divine. The African ethics has equally a religious basis. This awareness of the presence of the Supreme Being and its influence in African ontology logically led to a discussion of the problem of freedom and determinism in Chapter eleven of this book. Quoting Mbiti's maxim 'I am because we are and since we are, therefore, I am', Kanu highlights the African concept of the community and individual freedom. The African person is a being-with and a being-for others. When a man descends from heaven, he descends into a community (p.183) and he is constantly influenced by the community. However, one will doubt if Kanu has succeeded in showing that the community does not kill, suppress or take the place of the individual and his freedom in the society. One easily understands from his (the author) reflection that the community gives definition and bounds to the freedom of the individual. Yet Kanu avers that the individual freedom is nevertheless subsumed in that of the community – reason being that the

individual has right to obey or not to obey the community. The same problem one encounters with regard to the community and the individual freedom is not avoidable when one looks at the relationship between God and the individual in African society. The nature of African universe for Kanu is such that we can recognize three different worlds namely *Uwa* (the earth), *Ani Mmuo* (the land of the spirits), and *Igwe* (the sky) which only God inhabits and from where he controls the universe. Now, with God, the deities and spirits exerting their influence on human beings, are they really free? The author answers in affirmation to this question – based simply on possibility. For, according to him, God's unlimited powers do not exclude the possibility of him creating human beings who can cause free activities (p. 184). This influence of God on his creatures in addition to human experience also provides the setting for the belief in human destiny. The reality of destiny notwithstanding, Kanu maintains that the African person is free and responsible inasmuch as he is able to estimate the relative worth of alternatives open to him and acting accordingly (p.187).

Furthermore, Kanu examined the very concept of life in African anthropology. This was what occupied his attention in chapter twelve. According to him, life (and the desire for its preservation) is conceived of as the highest good in African anthropology, and this is made manifest in several Igbo names like Ndubisi, Nduka etc. Again, life for Kanu, is active and never passive. Life is an active and dynamic existence in which other things follow. Of course it is a gift from God and conceived of as belongingness. The community, in his view, is the necessary and sufficient condition for the life of the individual person. He also conceives of life as a stage as well as everlastingness. By stage, Kanu means that life is circular and not linear and by everlastingness, he means that life extends into eternity – from *uwa*(earth) to *ala mmuo*(spirit world) and so on. In his discourse on the provenance (origin) of human life, Kanu avers that life begins from the conception of the child in the womb. The author provides sufficient evidence for African belief in this assertion but not for the rationality of the belief itself. In the Yoruba concept of person, he observes that the soul precedes the body (p.21). But at what point precisely does the soul of the person begin to live? This is a fundamental question calling for answer.

The next Chapter titled *Towards an African Theodicy* looks critically at the African concept of the problem of evil and suffering. In the first place, the author traced the origin of suffering in the thinking of Igbo people as an act of disrespect to God demonstrated by a woman when she spat on God's face resulting in God withdrawing into the sky. From this perspective, suffering expressed in the word

*ahuhu* is thought of as being retributive and proportionate to the offence committed. Kanu then identified three approaches to this problem: the cosmological optimistic perspective is the approach that understands suffering as a recompense; the humanistic destiny perspective views suffering as a person's lot; while for the eclectic perspective, suffering is a result of negation of the ontological order by a human person as approved *a priori* by his/her *Chi*. Kanu, however, thinks it necessary to add a fourth perspective which he calls 'the mystery perspective' which derives its meaning from the very nature of God who is a mystery: human suffering could be viewed as a mystery (p. 212). The issue of globalization caught the attention of the author in Chapter fourteen of this book. Globalization simply put means the interconnectivity of nations of the world. But from the look of things in the contemporary world, there is a problem understanding globalization as either a process or a product - the popular opinion in this book being a conceptualization of globalization as a product exported [from Europe] to Africa with sinister motives. The author, in any case, regrets that Africa has played a rather passive role in the issue of globalization, allowing herself to be globalized rather than contributing to globalization at the same time. It thus behooves on African philosophy to reverse this negative mentality.

African metaphysics is the focus of Chapter fifteen. Metaphysics, as we know, is the branch of philosophy that is concerned about the study of the nature and structure of being. This chapter, therefore, is on Being and its various categories. Going along the line of historical development of this concept in Africa, Kanu identified several views. Prominent among the African philosophers who labored in this field include Tempels who for the Africans identified Being as *Force*. For Kagame being for the African is identified as *Ntu*. Ede calls it *Ife/Ife-idi*. For Iroegbu, it is *Belongingness*; while in Njoku's view Being is nothing other than *Chi* because everything in Igbo has a *chi*. However, Kanu dismisses all these notions of Being in African philosophy as inappropriate. For him, the appropriate concept for Being in Igbo-African metaphysics is *Idi* (to be), categories of which are identified *asmuo, mmadu, anu, ife, ebe, oge, and uzo* (manner). A thorough examination, it seems, will however, reveal that the terms *di, idi, ife-idi* etc are more of just a translation of the western term 'to be.' This, I suppose, is the much Africans can do if we have to philosophize in terms of concepts alien to traditional Africa. The Igbo in employing those terms did not intend them to stand for being as being (being without qualifications).

Kanu moved on to examine the problem of reincarnation and the question of identity. We find this in the sixteenth Chapter of this book. Reincarnation in Anameze's view (cited in Kanu, p. 255) is the belief in a cyclic process of death and rebirth. Very significant to this phenomenon, however, is the kind of death that a person dies. Basically, only those that die a natural or good death can reincarnate, all things being equal. The seventeenth Chapter is on the idea of time in African ontology and the issue of development. This Chapter is basically a study of African concept of time as given by J.S. Mbiti who sees time basically as an event (p.269). But Kanu tries to distinguish event from time when he says that activity controls time and not the reverse (p.272). It then becomes difficult to articulate what time is when the *definens* also features in the *definendum*. He says, for instance, that "time is always a time for doing something..." (p.269). It is, meanwhile, the opinion of the author that developing a positive mentality about time would help the development of Africa.

A particularly interesting theme in this work is the problem of causation in traditional African metaphysics treated in Chapter eighteen. The world for the African, according to Aja (cited in Kanu, p. 280) is an ordered universe in which all events are caused and potentially explicable. This is a fact not recognized by the western minds such as Hume who speaks of things happening by chance – a view which Ozumba (cited in Kanu, p. 281) considers a manifestation of their ignorance of the series of actions and reactions that have given rise to a given event. For Kanu, therefore, things with causal power in the African experience of reality include God, divinities, spirits, human beings, words, witches – and these experiences cannot easily be reduced to illusion. The next chapter, Chapter nineteen is a historical and philosophical investigation of the ancient Africa in the areas of science and technology. Kanu noted that in this regard, Africa has contributed to ancient civilization in the areas of mathematics, medicine, astronomy, metallurgy etc. And this is contrary to the popular opinions of the Eurocentric minds who claim that Africans are not capable of reason. Hume for instance, noted that, unlike even the most barbaric white, no black individual has ever been known to specialize in anything; no ingenious manufacturer among them; no science no art. And Hegel (cited in Kanu, p. 308) reduces the African to the level of animals when he purports that the Negro is yet to go beyond his instinctual behavior to identify a being outside of himself. Now, if Africans were really able to achieve the level of scientific and technological height as Kanu posited, it follows that the Eurocentric opinions were ill based. It is, however, the author's opinion that unlike her progenitors, the present African society is really backward with little or nothing to contribute to civilization. For him, the African

seems contented glorying in a past that is hardly related to the present. But what concrete thing does he recommend as a solution to the present African predicament? We can hardly come out of this quagmire except we are first decolonized: mentally, politically, culturally and otherwise.

Chapter twenty of this book is a reflection on African traditional democracy with particular interest in Yoruba and Igbo traditional political organizations who had some sort of participatory democracy, or if you like, a balance of autocratic dictatorship and popular democracy which, as it were, was later undermined and devastated by the colonial political infrastructure. This takes us to the last Chapter titled *African Philosophy and the Problem of Development*. The term 'development' is understood as a long term improvement in the standard of living, as felt and judged to be by most of the people in the country (Onwuliri, 2008, cited in Kanu p. 331). With this definition in mind, the author proceeded to the quest for development in Nigeria. He identified corruption as the greatest challenge and obstacle standing on the way of development in all its forms in Nigeria. He believes, however, that African philosophy through its tools of constructive criticism and reconstructive-ness can contribute positively to the liberation, not only of Nigerians, but of the entire African people.

### **Concluding Remarks**

From what follows, one observes that it does not require much reflection for anyone to realize the fact that this extraordinary research, from an African genius, *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues* is awash with new ideas relevant to philosophy in general and to African Philosophy in particular. But at the end of a book like this, one may ask: 'but what is the central idea?' Permit me to say that the central idea is African Philosophy. In his introduction to this work, the author made it clear that it is a collection of the lectures delivered to his students of philosophy in addition to other papers presented in academic conferences and published in academic Journals. So, the question of central idea needs not arrive. More importantly, the author tried to sieve out Philosophy that is distinctively African, from some non-philosophical baggage (p. xviii) through hermeneutical interpretation of cultural ingredients. In this way, he provides some useful insights into much of the problems seeking philosophical investigation in Africa. These problems are collected round about metaphysics, religion, aesthetics, science, politics, ethics etc. In fact, Kanu, as exemplified in this work, actually did African Philosophy rather than being apologetic with the usually verbal exchange on the mere question of existence and definition of African Philosophy.

The conclusions, however, reached in much of the questions raised are worrisome, one must observe. More worrisome is the fact that Kanu frequently juxtaposes other people's numerous ideas that one finds it difficult in most cases to pinpoint or identify his own view on the subject. This, notwithstanding, the central message that one can easily deduce from this book is that African philosophy is alive and active.