

THREE

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Gbirin-bìtì: The philosophical basis and relevance of indigenous solution to an existential pandemic

Abstract

A Western maxim has it that those that cannot draw from over 3000 years old wisdom are living from hand to mouth. The backward-looking approach into Centuries old traditional practices readily portend a prospect of an indigenous solution to modern challenges. This essay, therefore, casts its philosophical net into the pool of indigenous African orientation and found that the African natural vegetation and authentic ontological claims are consistent with the search for sustainable solution to a ravaging existential pandemic that has defiled all known orthodox remedies. The African metaphysics portends a spirit dominated ecosystem where everything is alive and interpenetrates. Exploiting the spiritual order wrongly creates natural disorder and crisis, but restoring equilibrium creates solution and restores order. On that basis, the ravaging coronavirus disease or COVID-19 pandemic may be symptomatic of nature gone awry. And the solution, to be sustainable, has to be drawn from nature, exploring both prophylactic and curative remedies that abound in African herbs, plants, roots, shoots and their know-how. This paper explores the method of hermeneutic analysis, with a view to showing how such indigenous solution might contribute towards pandemic free society. The conclusion is that the rich phytochemical elements in African vegetation, when refined and clinically tried using contemporary tools, should be the springboard of COVID-19 curative medicine and vaccines. That way, Africa would have contributed to healing the world from existential crisis.

Keywords: African Natural Vegetation, African Metaphysics, Coronavirus Pandemic, Spiritual Order

Gbirin-bìtì : Le fondement philosophique et la pertinence de la solution indigène à une pandémie existentielle

Résumé

Une maxime veut que ceux qui ne peuvent pas puiser dans une sagesse vieille de plus de 3000 ans vivent de la main à la bouche. L'approche rétrospective des pratiques traditionnelles vieilles de plusieurs siècles laisse volontiers présager une solution indigène aux défis modernes. Cet essai jette donc son filet philosophique dans le bassin de l'orientation indigène africaine et montre que la végétation naturelle africaine et les revendications ontologiques authentiques sont cohérentes avec la recherche d'une solution durable à une pandémie existentielle ravageuse qui a mis en mal tous les remèdes orthodoxes connus. La métaphysique africaine laisse présager un écosystème dominé par l'esprit où tout est vivant et s'interpénètre. Exploiter à tort l'ordre spirituel crée un désordre et une crise naturels, mais le rétablissement de l'équilibre crée une solution et rétablit l'ordre. Sur cette base, la maladie ravageuse à virus corona ou pandémie COVID-19 est un symptôme de la nature qui a mal tourné. Et la solution, pour être durable, doit être tirée de la nature, en explorant les remèdes à la fois prophylactiques et curatifs qui regorgent d'herbes, de plantes, de racines, de pousses et de savoir-faire africains. Cet article utilise la méthode de l'analyse herméneutique, en vue de montrer comment une telle solution indigène pourrait contribuer à une société sans maladies. La conclusion est que les riches éléments phytochimiques de la végétation africaine, lorsqu'ils sont affinés et cliniquement essayés à l'aide d'outils contemporains, devraient être le tremplin de la médecine curative et des vaccins COVID-19. De cette façon, l'Afrique aurait contribué à guérir le monde d'une crise existentielle.

Mots clés: végétation naturelle africaine, métaphysique africaine, pandémie coronavirus, ordre spirituel.

Introduction

Orúnmilà was livid. For once, he had employed the wrong guy. That the assigned task was not done is bad enough. Seeing the new employee sitting through his first day at work is worse. The last thing Orúnmilà needs are loafers or idle capacity. He swore he would kill the culprit and fire him immediately. He did neither. The employee, Osanyìn, saw what was coming. He rushed to the master with an explanation. It was convincing enough to save the day and his head too. At the end, Osanyìn became the most credible allies of Orúnmilà.

Indeed, appearance is often different from reality. Many are the eyes that look, very few see. So, it was for Osanyìn when he arrived at the plantation with cutlass and hoe to clear the damned forest that is as dense as a heap of rubbish (Gbirin-bìtì). He has to impress his employer to prove that he is the right man for the job. He exudes the virtues of diligent, courageous and intelligence. The first plant to fall presents a difficulty. It is familiar. Osanyìn knows it as ewé ajé (translated as the leaf of good fortune and wealth). He could not clear it given its enormous value. He moved to the next. It is the shoot of àìkú (translated as longevity). He shelved it too. The next is the frond that cures lùkúlùkú or extreme cold, especially when fermented with jagba and jogbo (translated as sundry leaves). The more he looked for what to fall the more he saw their medicinal and nutritional relevance lurking in leaves, roots, shoots and trunks (see, Ajikobi, 2013).

Perhaps, he had started at the wrong end of the plantation. Or could Orúnmilà, a man of great wisdom and forthrightness, in error assign the wrong farmland? He shifted base. The first tree that came handy was dógóyàrò (translated as neem) and mango trees. He knows these combine therapy to work against malaria

and typhoid bouts. They are most potent when steamed with unripe pineapple, lemon rich in Vitamin C, and ginger for its zinc mineral (cf. Odugbemi & Akinsulire et al (2007). The next turn did not solve the riddle. And on and on he continued in search of plants that may be considered useless for him to clear without success. Thus, -Gbirin-bìtì, oko tí n ó ro dà? Gbirin-bìtì (translated as: a greenery as dense as rubbish heap, where are the useless plants to fall? in this dense of rubbish heap)¶, he asked.

In his work entitled, *Ìṣègùn Ìbíle: Eja N'bakàn?* Ajikobi (2013) vividly recaptured the foregoing verse from *Ògúndá Mèjì* in Ifá literary corpus. But neither Ajikobi nor the verse tell us how long Orúnmìlà had owned the plantation or how frequently his workforce of thoroughbred professionals cleared the manor for other purposes. In contemporary terms, he could have bulldozed the rich greenery over and over just to set up a modern shopping complex, central business district, maybe an artificial park. His choice could be a pharmaceutical plant, or even an uncommon world-class modern hospital in partnership with foreign investors. Huge sums of money – beg, borrow or steal – will go into the project, whose construction and debt servicing alike may last a lifetime! They shall be the beneficiary of the world-class technology-transfer when the facility is completed. They dire not raise questions on propriety; otherwise, they will be called ingrates. But in the interim, like Orunmila who did not recognize the herbs that Osanyin saw, the contemporary visionary CEO will have to go overseas to be treated for tropical illnesses. To get away, he would say, -You know there are no prophylaxis or curative remedies locally. All we have are plain rubbish. Solutions are there overseas. If our natural endowments are of value, we would not be investing so much to borrow funds, expertise, and technology from overseas to serve our people.¶

Indeed, this narrative captures the misfortune of many African States in modern times. The leaders and Western trained professionals alike are still unable to critically interrogate or

establish modern relevance in indigenous or traditional heritage. From a philosophical standpoint, the metaphysical basis of African heritage will give credence to indigenous values and their relevance in addressing contemporary problems, especially in the age of pandemic that demands new ways of thinking and solution to devastating global health crisis.

On the African Metaphysics of Traditional Solution

The concept of African metaphysics as embedded in Ifá lies in the theory of duality, that is, all reality such as spirit and matter, mind and body, deductive and inductive, rationalism and empiricism are symbiosis and complementary. Specifically, it is where the totality of meaning of the African world-view lies. In this regard, it is imperative to make a brief sketch of the three senses of metaphysics with a view to have a clear vision of African metaphysics or to properly situate it as it were before we now delve into the metaphysical analysis that can furnish the reader with traditional solution to a ravaging existential pandemic that has defiled all known orthodox remedies.

In the first sense, metaphysics is regarded as a theory of reality or the search for the ultimate. To search for ultimate simply means a practical way of describing the world as it occurs to us in our moments of curiosity. For instance, the world can be explained in idealistic, materialistic, spiritual, religious, scientific, empirical, rational or dialectical perspective. In the light of this impression, Okoro (2011: 4) reasoned that once the world is so described, it becomes a way of life for us. And it is in this sense that we say that metaphysics deals with the study of the first principles that serves as backgrounder to all cultural outlooks. This is why philosophy (metaphysics per se) is often described as a world-view. It is also in this traditional sense that metaphysics is variously addressed as first philosophy, queen of the sciences and the ground of all human knowledge. Thus, this first sense of metaphysics is Aristotelian.

Secondly, in the tradition of the transcendental philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, the notion of metaphysics is used to capture the native rational, imaginative and the intellectual capacity of man to project beyond physical experience into the nonphysical. This act of going beyond the physical to the nonphysical is known as human transcendence. Transcendence is the voyage of the mind, the human mind, into region of nothingness. It is the exploration of the wilderness of thought by human reason. In this voyage of the mind, in this exploration of thought, there is always a movement from hither to thither, a movement from here to there (Unah, 2002: 83). In a common man's language, human transcendence is the metaphysical power to mentally transit from the given to the not-given, something to nothing. Therefore, to achieve this aim two forms of activity are involved. First, there is something which reaches out or passes over to something. Next, is that there is something which is passed over to something else (Unah, 2002: 84). However, that which reaches out, that which passes over is consciousness. Human consciousness does not recoil to itself; it does not hide itself within itself. It reaches out; it passes over all the time, Unah reflecting some scholar's works on consciousness for it is –an outward-moving vector (Heidegger, 1970: 8), it is the –centre of itself (Hegel, 1953: 23–24). Such transition should naturally lead to the formation of concepts for directing and re-directing human affairs.

The third sense of metaphysics is purely Heideggerian. Here, metaphysics is regarded as the theory of being as being. This is where being is understood to mean the ground, the foundation, the soil, the fountain which sustains all things, from which all things derive and in which all things are rooted, metaphysics is then regarded as pure ontology whose duty is to return us to the path of being called other-than-being (cf. Unah, 2002: 41–54 & Okoro, 2011:4). Once this reconciliation is attained, we come to understand the world better and deeper. Heidegger refers to this third sense of metaphysics as the overcoming of metaphysics and by this he means fundamental ontology (Heidegger, 1970: 9–10).

The fourth sense of metaphysics is strictly African that is germane to this essay. African metaphysics is regarded as an integrative system of thought. The question that readily comes to mind is: what then is integrative metaphysics? According to Okoro (2010: 8), in the ordinary sense integrative metaphysics is an African theory of being, doctrine of reality or notion of transcendence (i.e. beyond the physical) which constitutes the first principles for organizing experience. Okoro submission on African integrative metaphysics underscores a concise meaning of African perspective of reality. In fact, different study on the same reality has shown that it is the basic axioms of existence. It is the African method of –transcendental inquiry (cf. Iroegbu, 1995: 26 & Asouzu, 2004: 6). It is African account of the reciprocity between being and human being. It is African description of human transcendence and humans are able to produce theory and action for directing their affairs and for the task of societal and universal transformation.

Specifically, African metaphysics is regarded as integrative simply because it is the metaphysics of harmony, which in turn makes African philosophy as a whole. It is a metaphysical system that regards spirit, life–force, or vital force as the primordial principle which permeates all things and is responsible for unity in diversity. Here, the material has meaning and purpose only through the lenses of the spiritual (Azenabor, 2010: 4). Okoro (2011: 6) reiterates this point that it is a metaphysical system which sees spirit (i.e. mind, idea, subject and all things mental or spiritual) and matter (i.e. body, object and all things physical) as being equi–primordial, symbiosis and complementary. A renowned African philosopher Campbell S. Momoh (2000: 9) in his literature entitled, *The Substance of African Philosophy* contends that African metaphysics can be best defined as the –African doctrine on the spirituality. As part of his agenda to presents a clear understanding of African metaphysics, he tacitly reveals that for the Africans –the concept of reality encompasses the totality of everything that exists, visible, invisible, real, actual

or potentialll (Momoh, 2000: 10). On Momoh's analysis of African metaphysics, Okoro like Anyanwu observes that:

...and because this metaphysical system does not bifurcate mind from body, subject from object; because it does not separate politics from economy, economy from religion, religion from culture, culture from spirituality, spirituality from education, education from physical existence, physical existence from the totality of life; because it does not create a gap between theory and practice, action and reaction; it is referred to as an inclusive system and therefore, integrative (2011: 44–54)

Consequent upon the above analysis, it shows that African metaphysics is dualistic and pluralistic in orientation as we have also illustrated in Ifá literary corpus. In essence, African metaphysics tries to explain reality holistically, whereby associates entities and is therefore tolerant of contrary views and opinions because it is believed that nothing is infinitely good and vice versa. Thus, the exclusivity of reality of any sort is alien to the Ifá (African) metaphysical system. It is rather all inclusive in its orientation. It therefore goes to show that the aim of the Ifá (African) metaphysics is to harmonize all opposites by ways of interfusion. This fact about African metaphysics was reiterated by Onyewuenyi (1994: 27) who emphatically describes African philosophy as the philosophy of harmony. This system of metaphysics is also known as metaphysical vitalism, metaphysical symbiosis, spiritual primacism, or the principle of interpenetrability of forces (cf. Onyewuenyi, 1994: 27; Momoh, 2000: 8–10; Unah, 2002: 338–340; Asouzu, 2004: 7; Chinweizu, 2005: 138–140; Anyanwu, 1983: 31 & Okoro, 2011: 4–6).

Granted the ontological inquiry of this essay, our conception of the features of Ifá shall revolve around the human's native transcendental capacity and ability to effectively and pragmatically synchronize the objective world with the subjective understanding. This power of man is described as the imaginative visioning of the world about us imaged in symbolic forms. In

such a symbolic representation of the world things are not compartmentalized. The nature of reality as embedded in Ifá literary corpus is all inclusively interconnected and interpenetrating having the human mind as natural forces. This goes to reveal that the reason why the Yorùbá thought system operate on the tripod or what is otherwise known as the tripological symbolization and representation of the universe. Let us listen to Okoro (2017) submission on the operation of this tripod in the universe as it relates to the cosmic psychic; —man and society are considered to be of tripartite composition. The cosmic order as a living entity is replicated in the social order which in turn is replicated in the self-order and vice versa. However, the self-order in turn consists of the body, mind and spirit. The accumulated knowledge or enlightenment consists in the harmonization of this tripartite composition of man and his society, usually done in a hierarchicised order with the singular purpose of unifying the horizontal and vertical factors in man and in the society. He writes:

The tripological synergy that constitutes the essential attribute of the African cosmos is often represented with the aid of an equilateral triangle we place spirit (or idealism, capitalism, theism and so on) and to the extreme left we place matter (or materialism, socialism, atheism and so on). Harmony is accomplished by symbolically moving to the centre which should allow for a perpendicular upward thrust to the apex of the equilateral triangle to make for a balance or a unity (Okoro, 2017: 234–35).

Consequent upon the above quotation, what then is the critical question of the structure of reality that makes possible this tripological synergy or balance? No doubt, this returns us to the issue of dualism in the logical analysis of mind in African metaphysics or the principle of spirit (mind or life–force) in African philosophy manifests as the binary system. Dualism in the Yorùbá system of thought is not the same as the principle duality. Whereas dualism allows for the bifurcation of things into

compartments, duality refers to the equi–primordially (i.e. binary fusion) of the entities that comprise the nature which occur in a pair (cf. Oluwole, 2015: 95; Balogun, 2009: 12–13; Awodiran, 2012: 15 & Salami, 2012: 10). Thus for the traditional African, Being and non–Being, mind and matter are equi–primordially pre–disposed. However, of the two things that are equi–primordially pre–disposed, one has primacy over the other. Owing to this reality, the Yorùbá system of thought says; –ki a fi owo we _wo lo owo fi moll. This assertion is further justified in –Ose bi _Retell, –Ogbe Atell, –Oturupon Mejill, –Oyeku Mejill and –Osa Mejill among others.

The foregoing analysis on the nature of African metaphysics as embedded in Ifá has revealed opposite as inevitable ways of life. That is, positive and negative, black and white, light and darkness, sadness and joy, wellness and sick, fortune and misfortune, spirit and matter are equi–primordially pre–disposed, spirit as the animating and organizing principle has primacy over and above matter, thereby giving preference to spirit, thought or mind as –the creative capability of manll, the principle of order or form, the artificer and potter. Just as it is for every other Africa people, for the Yorùbá system of thought the primacy placed on spirit does not imply the denial of the existence of matter, it implies that every material thing is endowed with spirit force which can be likened to soul, mind, psyche, vital-force or life– force. To buttress this assertion further Okoro quoting Momoh declared that:

The African conception is one of spiritual primacy, not exclusivity nor dualism. For any physical thing, active or inert, dead or alive, the African conception is that it is primarily spirit or spiritual, not that it is absolutely and exclusively spirit or spiritual. The doctrine of spiritual primacy makes allowance for matter or the physical.... In other words, the African is more interested in the spirit, mind, soul or vital and psychic force in a tuber of yam, a tree or a flower (2000: 8).

Again, perhaps in a bid to take home his message Okoro quoting Idoniboye who succinctly states that: –The ontology of any distinctively African world–view is replete with spirit; spirit is the animating, sustaining creative life force of the universe. Spirit is real. It is as real as matter. Its reality is primordial and it is if not superior at least as primitive as that of matter. In its pure state it is unembodied‖ (1973: 83).

Taking the above analysis into consideration, one can safely submit that it is clear that the nature of African metaphysics as embedded in Ifá does not imply the denial of the physical or material world it shows that Ifá (African) thought system operates on the simultaneity of spiritual transcendentalism and spiritual realism. Nevertheless, insofar as spirit, mind or life–force is primary and paramount to matter and if this requires the acknowledgement of the permeating and pervading strength of life–force, it follows that the African cosmos is one of plenum of forces.

Based on the above analysis, one can safely posit that in the universe of forces, for African, things magically transform and transmute through the symbolic interaction of elements. And simply because it is mind that necessitates the elemental symbolic interaction and alteration of things, it follows that spirit (mind) has the power to interpenetrate and interconnect all things. It is in this light that the operating principle of Ifá (African) metaphysics is variously known as –spiritual primacism‖ or the principle of the –interpenetrability of soul‖, which we henceforward label the metaphysics of interfusion as it is apparently clear in Ifá.

Critique

There is no gainsaying that the modern age faces an existential crisis with the coronavirus pandemic. It is an unusual problem that would require unusual solution to save humanity from collateral damage, if not extinction. Though a medical health emergency that has shattered all orthodox care systems, it ravages

global economies and social settings the more. Recall that this new strain of coronavirus, otherwise called COVID-19, began in Wuhan Province of China at the closing stages of 2019. By the middle of 2020, it has gone viral with over 15 million people infected and 600,000 deaths globally. Yet, the virus is multiplying rapidly. In the United States that erstwhile had one of the best health care systems in the world, it took the country 90 days to arrive at its first one million positive cases, another 30 days to reach two million and now 15 days to climb to three million cases of coronavirus. In all these, all scientifically based remedies at viral control and cure have been foiled, while traditional remedies are showing better prospects.

Given the enormity of the problem and potential solution, it is unfortunate that African States still overlook traditional heritage and alternative medicine. Suffice to note that we cannot charge Akéréfinúşogbõn, as Orúnmìlà was also known in Yorùbá legends, for such foolery of abandoning traditional heritage and its metaphysical basis – calling them rubbish at a time like this. Indeed, Orúnmìlà knows that real wisdom is not to know everything; but to acknowledge that knowledge has no end. The point is that everybody knows something – they only differ in subject areas. Socrates in Classical Western similarly says he is wise that knows that he knows nothing. Such uncommon realization, though a paradox, is the most fundamental and the entry point of wisdom itself. So, it could not have been difficult for Orúnmìlà to see the treasure trove and acres of diamond from the prism of Osanyìn's native intelligence. It became a classic case of what one is vigorously searching en route Sokoto (a State in northern Nigeria) has all along been nestling in the pocket of the Sokoto (trousers).

Osanyìn too did not only mouth the embedded value in Orúnmìlà's plantation. He practically demonstrated the healing properties through herbal combinations – some for drinking and eating, others for bathing or incision. Then, he had made

Orúnmilà to see the indigenous solutions – by art of description and science of practical evidence. Osanyìn's experiments were controlled. The assumption was if domestic animals could eat a leaf, then its tree must be edible for man. But where dogs, cats or birds all avoid a crop, then it must be toxic and not fit for human consumption. That was before the writing culture and formal school setting. Yet, the same model subsists in clinical trials to date. It is not difficult to see why Osanyìn became the most valuable asset in the around Orúnmilà. However, his ascendancy has nothing to do with his network of connections or degrees acquired, be it higher or advanced, local or foreign, recent or yesteryears. A native intelligence that proffers the most sought solution is the king.

Ifá here teaches a model in sustainable development. It is hinged on the complementarity of indigenous knowledge, socio-cultural heritage and its pragmatic use to solve human problems. It underscores the fact that real development is native, organic and homegrown. A number of researches in pharmacology are lending credence to the importance of looking inwards for solutions (see, Odugbemi & Akinsulire, 2006; Anyaehie, 2009 & Mahomoodally, 2013). Sadly, and as Ajikobi reminisced in his cursory review of the gross imbalance in traditional and orthodox medicine, modern Nigeria has still not come to the wisdom of cultural heritage; of using what we have to get what we need.

It is therefore saddening that Osanyìn's conclusion could still be aptly preached in contemporary Nigeria and attendant coronavirus pandemic-era. The pioneering trado-medical practitioner would have still found the elusive solution lurking in plain sight, several thousands of years after. A lot has changed since then, but not for the primacy of indigenous solutions and their documentation because the commonsense approach of looking inwards is still lost on us. It is unfortunate that to date, the problem in the health sector is myriad, yet Africa is still looking for foreign solution and as dictated by the textbook. But we must not forget that no

nation or country attains self-sufficiency through handouts and beggarly mindset. A nursery rhyme back in the days says: *__tírógó á yó, aṣo ni k'ò ní rà'* (translated as: a smart beggar may eat and be full, but will not have enough to buy clothes). Examples in Asian and few African countries readily show the imperative of organic solution and homemade development. Other African States like Nigeria cannot afford to be different.

Conclusion

This essay explored the intrinsic value of the pool of indigenous African natural vegetation and authentic ontological claims that are logically consistent with the search for sustainable solution to a ravaging existential pandemic. Owing to this, the study unfurled the values of traditional Yorùbá heritage and potential that abound in native medicine, the need to delve deeper into its resource, subject them to modern scrutiny and embrace the valuables solely on the basis of contemporary relevance. There is no doubt that the native plantation is still as green as Osanyìn first discovered it. More so, there are many Osanyìn descendants still among us today. So, in Orúnmìlà's wisdom of humility and selflessness, we only need to give them a chance, tap into their wealth of native intelligence on its own merit, to save the day and humanity from the grip of ravaging pandemic. As the Yorùbá often say, *__Tí ọ̀lọ̀gbọ̀n bá bí'ni, t'ọ̀lọ̀gbọ̀n kọ'ni, tí a ò mú ọ̀gbọ̀n náà lẹ̀, eni tí ò gbọ̀n tó baba eni, ni yóò máa mú__ni tú je bíi ị̀ṣu; tún mú__ni sìn bíi eran'* (translated as: if one is fathered and nurtured by the wise, but fails to explore their wisdom, one will be at the mercy and servitude of those that are not as wise as one's forebears). The choice is still ours as a people.

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