

AFRICA'S ETHICS OF ELEGANCE

Prof. Mahmoud Masaeli, Ph.D.

St. Paul University, Ottawa, Canada

A person is a sage in a philosophic sense only to the extent that he (she) is consistently concerned with the fundamental ethical and empirical issues and questions relevant to society and his ability to offer insightful solution(s) to some of those issues.

- Henry Odera Orika, *Sage Philosophy*, p. xviii

The issue

In October of 1990, I arrived at Conakry airport of Guinea, accompanied by my wife and three little daughters. It was terribly dark outside, crowded, and disorganized. Dim and scattered lights by candles and kerosene lamps lit up space to some extent. We were surrounded by countless taxi drivers who wanted to serve us. We randomly selected two taxi drivers and they carried us to Novotel located in the coastal part of Conakry. It was the only good hotel in Conakry at that time, i.e., thirty years ago. The next day, I could quickly rent an apartment in a neighborhood surrounded by slums, purchased some basic furniture and other necessary equipment, and started my own work as attaché in the embassy of Iran. This was the beginning of my acquaintance with Africa - a stage of discomfort.

Shortly, my (false) perception of Africa as a backward and unsafe continent drowned in chaos, poverty and civil wars became worsened than before. As a stranger to the continent, this wrong perception, learned from the educational institution and the media, had convinced me that the continent was in need of the saviour to help them get rid of the miserable life. During almost the first two months of living in Conakry, this misunderstanding pervaded my mind. The situation was so difficult for us that we were not able to grasp the truth of Africa's beautiful cultural identity hidden behind the colonial legacy. The

worst was our colonized mind, which was unable to unveil the veils of ignorance and find the truth in African identity and culture. But, it did not take so long for us to slowly get to know Africa, with an open mind and heart. Traveling to the interior of the country, especially Labe and Pita, and then trips to countries in the region from Sierra Leone up to Nigeria, and from Niger and Burkina Faso to the Republic of Mali, changed profoundly my mind. The real Africa was not the distorted social construct we were imagining. Africa was a land of natural beauty, community life, human spirituality, and the land of sages. This was my original and proper acquaintance with Africa; I call it Africa's philosophic elegance.

Is Africa an example of backwardness and underdevelopment in the world? Is this lack of development due to Africa's internal structures, local traditions and cultural identity? Is Africa responsible for the problems it is struggling with? Should promising change for a desirable life be achieved on this continent with the help of international aid programmes and foreign investments?¹ Or should Africa first rediscover itself, rely on the cultural context of its rich identity, and then pave the way for overcoming problems through a constructive dialogue with the outside world? Basically, how can the conditions of despair and hopelessness be surmounted in favour of a bright constructive path for the future? Who are the forces and forerunners of this clever move? How can its mechanisms be provided? This short article presents the stages of a constructive

¹ Paul Collier in *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done about It*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2008, in response to the question why is Africa stuck, argues the condition of underdevelopment in the continent caused by domestic factors. He fully ignores the structural causes by colonial, and the post-colonial systems. Similarly Jeffrey Sachs in *The End of Poverty*, published by Penguin Books in 2005, favors a similar perspective, and hence, finds the role of foreign investors as the key in the development of the continent.

journey from the condition of discomfort caused by underdevelopment toward a philosophic elegance, using Africa's sagacity.²

The condition of discomfort

The conception of discomfort connotes a situation of suffering in both physical and psychological dimensions of the pain. This situation relates to a condition in which people's daily efforts to reach their goals are impeded often by structural causes beyond their ability to control. In the physical sense of the term, discomfort refers to the damage to the community of mankind caused by the modernization model of capitalist development. Basically, the people of developing countries that have paid for the advancement of the capitalist societies during the colonial role are the victims of this damage. As Peter Berger puts it, this damage needs a calculus of pain and suffering that has blatantly affected the living condition of billions in the world³. This damage is so profound that it would be very hard, if not impossible, to rectify and cure in the current structure of the world. Indeed, the condition of structural underdevelopment is a social construction imposed on developing countries. Andre Gunder Frank, the Marxist scholar of dependency theory, once said that we cannot hope to formulate adequate development theory and policy for the majority of the world's population who suffer from underdevelopment without first learning how their past economic and social history gave rise to their present underdevelopment. Therefore, the physical suffering caused by the condition of underdevelopment is not original or traditional. It is a situation imposed on people. Frank further argues that yet, most historians study only the developed metropolitan

² Kenyan Philosopher, Henry Odera Oruka, in *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, published by Brill in 1990, encourages Africa's genius philosophy as the point of departure from the condition of underdevelopment toward development.

³ Peter Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change*, Penguin Books, 1975

countries and pay scant attention to the colonial and underdeveloped lands.⁴

This historical and structural process of suffering is far deeper and more terrifying than we can imagine. In fact, what has happened is deadly and exhausting devastation deep within the meaning of life. The people of underdeveloped or developing countries are not only suffering from poverty and especially inequality, but most importantly, they are in a state of hopelessness and lack the capacity to cope with and rectify those historical sufferings. Berger relates this feature of suffering to the calculation of identity damage. For him, the calculus of meaning must be considered by the victims themselves as to how to overcome the condition of discomfort driven from hopelessness. In fact, the process of modernization, having been concentrated too much on economic progress, tended to fracture the bonds of community, and to deprive life of meaning. This has caused powerlessness, hopelessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, alienation, self-imposed stigmatization, and internal divisions within underdeveloped societies.⁵

As a result of the depression in the physical essence of life and distortion of its meaning, any hope for a desirable life now and in the future turns to a condition of despair and discomfort. Discomfort distorts people's intellect as well as their spirit to decide how they, in terms of their authentic identity, want to be and sets them to a living condition, which is empty of any sense of deep reflection on their worth and dignity. The end state of this cultural, intellectual and

⁴ Andre Gunder Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment," *Monthly Review*, [Vol. 18, No. 4: September 1966](#).

⁵ Denis Goulet, *The Cruel Choice: A New Concept in the Theory of Development*, University Press of America, 1985. And, Mahmoud Masaeli, "International Development: An Overview of Definitions, Historical Evolution, and Debates", in *Canada and Challenges of International Development and Globalization*. Ottawa University Press, 2018.

psychological situation would be a distorted picture of life, losing hope for the future, and finally pessimism. As a response to this devastating living condition, people should first think about themselves and their undeniable worth and dignity, so that they can recognize the beauties of their humanity and capabilities to form their own appropriate model of life. Then, relying on a determined will, they must question the hegemonic social and economic conditions that govern their society.⁶ This determination will combine the two basic dimensions of life, i.e. the aesthetics for self-realization and criticizing the structures of domination in society, to create a new meaningful space for autonomous human reflection. This urges people to say no to the myth of modernization growth and free themselves from the false perception of life.

It is worth mentioning that discomfort breeds anxiety, and anxiety, in turn, generates passivity and negativity. In this condition, depreciation replaces the appreciation of life. People may say there is no hope. Life is not worthy of living. Life is nothing but a process of suffering; there is no moral judgment; “justice is non-sense, etc. The condition of discomfort, then, constrains the brain, hampers the growth of spirit, and sets people in a disturbance zone with no hope, and consequently, no determined will to change their course of life. In this condition, people become either passive and take refuge in isolation and indifference toward their destiny, or turn to aggressive behaviour, destroying the lives of others as a remedy for their own discomfort. The former adapts itself to any situation and blindly obeys the leadership of the latter. The end state of this discomfort situation would be the collapse of the communal life, the demise of social virtues, and a condition of fragility endangering the life of all. Another view of discomfort must also be explained. As a result of science and technological progress, the human condition has been

⁶ The best classical analysis of the hegemonic structure has been provided by Gramsci. See: Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, Columbia University Press, 1992.

improved drastically. It has often been accepted that modern science and technology have the power to end all patterns of human suffering. Demagnification of human understanding, i.e. rationalization, transparency, and certainty in the knowledge of oneself and society, and progress in social sciences, render all obstacles against human prosperity and flourishing into the dustbin of history. Modernization, empowered by rationalization, brings hope for a better life and invests in man's hand its destiny. The history of the last three-centuries is a clear evidence of the demise of the hierarchical social systems, and consequently people's enjoyment of their freedom, all conducive to a profitable life of happiness and equality. However, this optimistic view of history and evolution of people's living conditions has been discredited by the emergence of colonialism of the lands and minds of people, inequality and suppression. The myth of supremacy and arrogance of Western scientific rationality signs undermined the entire promise of human freedom and prosperity, and instead paved the way for a rampant capitalist system generating many malaises for the world.

Africa is a clear evidence of the aggressive capitalism depleting natural resources of the continent at the service of the privileged classes and groups in Western societies. The post-colonial era could not free the continent from unbridled systemic capitalism. The mind of the people remained captured, let us say colonized. Frantz Fanon criticized the false self-perception of the black people who lost their origin, culture and identity while creating in their mindset a complex sense of inferiority. The black came to find only one destiny; to become like the white and intimate the culture of the former colonizers. The negation of the African soul is not just material or social activities, he said. It is an act of depersonalization that can be reversed through cleansing revolutionary violence. The colonial condition came to be a process of dehumanization and otherness making - an arrogant and unscrupulous racial discrimination. The end state is so trembling for the human soul. Physical pain, diseases, slavery, social hierarchies, and all patterns of traditional suffering

have been reduced to the minimum level. But, inequality, the invisible patterns of discrimination, and the demise of the communal life, on one hand, and losing the meaning of life, on the other, have exhausted the continent. While many are suffering from a miserable life trapped in exploitation, internal conflicts, corruption, massive displacement, and other social malaises, a minority consumes a lot, enjoys the luxurious world of fashion, fade and beauty. The process of modernization and nationalization in the post-colonial era created the seeds of destruction in itself. People may have a sense of emptiness; being abstracted from their real needs. A ceaseless race for materialist satisfaction has drowned many into a vortex of discomfort. Akin to many other parts of the developing world, Africa is suffering from both physical pain and the loss of traditional meaningful life.

Africa's philosophic elegance

In the African intellectual movement, in spite of diverse orientations and perhaps contradictions, genius thinkers are striving to revive their original cultural traditions as a genuine response to the condition of discomfort. It is a philosophical movement that is not known to the Western observers, just as African tradition remains unknown to the non-Africans. In fact, the rooted nature of African philosophical thought, which determines the way of life and the standard of behaviour for its people, is less likely to interact with the abstract Western philosophical concepts. Thus, in Africa, philosophical thought expresses its historical identity. This philosophy is essentially tracing the roots of the current malaises back to the colonial transforming condition through which the continent lost its original view of life, hence is trying to revive and restore it as a definite remedy for the process of suffering. This movement must be called a philosophic elegance, intertwined with Africa's meaning of life, necessarily because it is all invented in the communal fabrication of personhood. In Igbo tradition, the person, who is the centre of the communal life and its philosophizing, is called *Mmadu*, that means the person as the symbol of the beauty of life in the pure sense of the

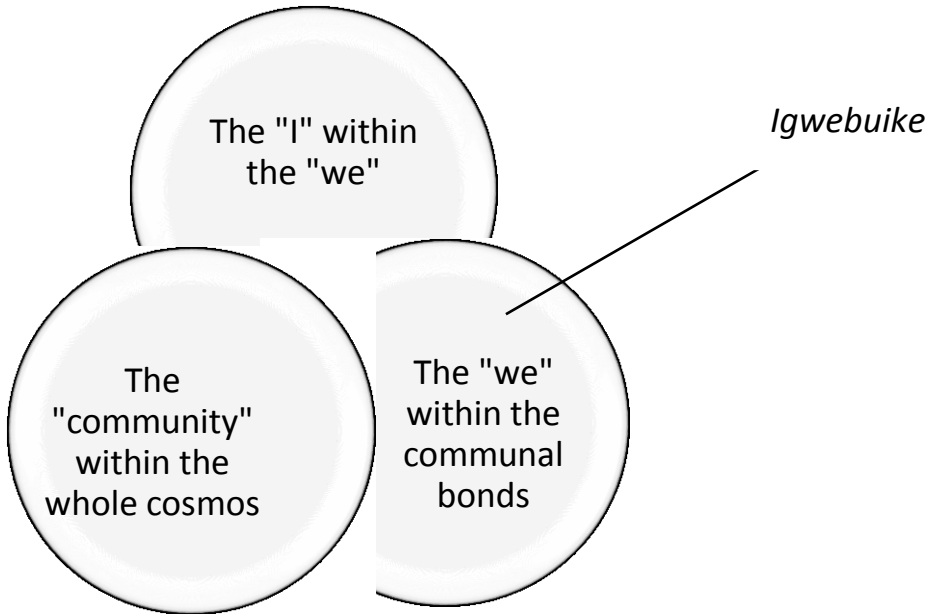
term. The person is the representative of the beautiful life, hence is not restricted to any specific racial or ethnic group of people; it is the member of the community of mankind. This means that everything in nature and even in the celestial world exists for him. The person is not the same as the Western individual, who is disengaged from the communal roots and the beauty of nature. It is a full human being, whose personhood is extended in harmony with nature, the communal life, and the beauty of being together.

I owe this understanding of Africa's identity as the source of philosophical reflection to my Nigerian friends. The harmony between human beings and nature is the essential soul of African philosophy. Anthony Kanu emphasizes harmony, but goes further to see a human being as a creature completing nature. This holist view of humanity gives the person the sense of who (s)he is, as opposed to the Western view of humanity in the abstract meaning of individualism. The person is fabricated in the community, nature and the creature. For him, the Igbo term "Igwebuike" best reflects this view of the human being. "When human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force".⁷ This reflects the idea that in African thought, the meaning of life is summed up in communal relations and solidarity with the whole creature. For Kanu, communal life is defined even beyond the harmony between the person and nature. It is, indeed, his complementary role that signifies strength. "Igwebuike posits that no task is beyond the collective capability of a group".⁸ This communal understanding of personhood eliminates any inconvenience. Therefore, one must return to the original roots of the term "human being" and its communal essence. This is the idea I want to call Africa's philosophic elegance.

⁷ Anthony Kanu, "New Africanism: Igwebuike as a Philosophical Attribute of Africa in Portraying the Image of Life" in *African Perspectives on Global Development*, edited by Mahmoud Masaeli and Sanni Yaya, Cambridge Scholars, 2018, p. 94.

⁸ Ibid.

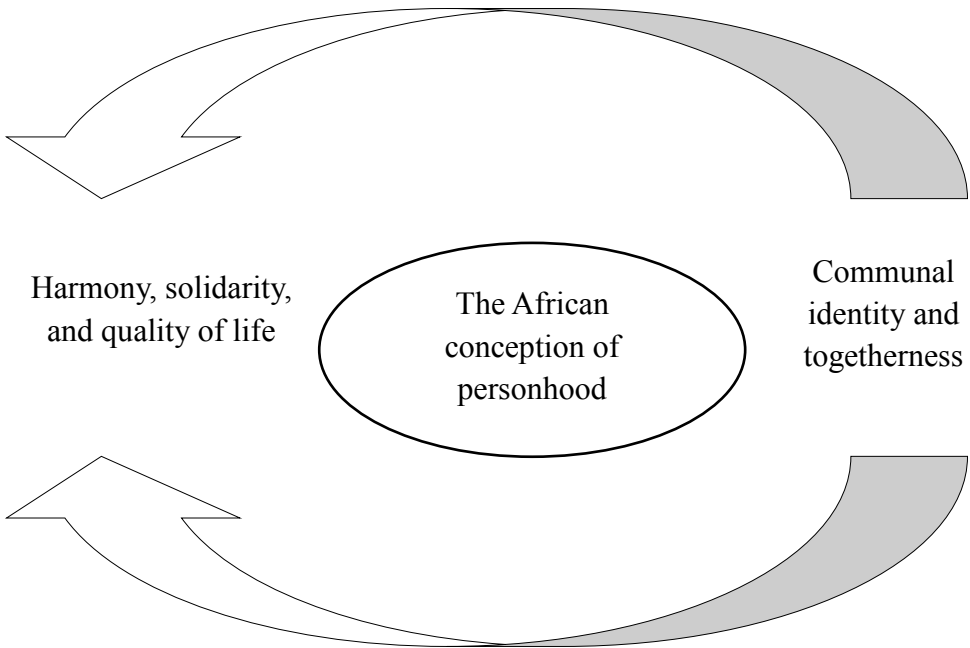
In this perspective, the unit of analysis to tackle the causes of discomfort is not the disengaged self, the individual, abstracted from both the constructed world of the community or the natural world of



the creation. Rather, it is the person, whose sense of being is attained in accordance with the very Igbo term “Igwebuike”. Therefore, life has an essential participatory element. “Life is a life of sharedness; one in which another is a part thereof”.⁹ This participatory process ignores the calculation of personal outcomes. Instead, it takes life as an active participatory and meaningful space with the full opportunity to live together and extend the sense of personhood together. This life is identified with insights, symbols, proverbs, belief systems, belongingness, and witticisms.

⁹ Ibid, p. 95.

This perspective of life and the person takes its root in all dimensions of the creation and human status as crystallized in its communal and cultural fabrication. As a result, the human capacity to understand which has been distorted by turning into an instrumental capacity gives its place a pearl of philosophical wisdom that justifies the very *Igwebuike*. This thought-provoking wisdom identifies communal belongingness and frees the concept of culture from its rootless understanding. *Igwebuike* urges a dialogical understanding of the complementarity of personhood to open up a process of mutual understanding, learning together, responding to communal needs, and drawing the picture of the “we” in the whole existence. This exalted meaning of person within the “we” considers life as the highest good necessarily because no creature is excluded from this sustainable view of life. “Because of the prime place that life occupies in African philosophy, everything that the African does is geared towards the preservation of life”. This philosophic reflection on the meaning of the person and the communal life has the potential to overcome the condition of discomfort. Helping each other in time of crisis, the extended family, respecting the elderly, empathy with the oppressed, generosity and chivalry, and social responsibility and accountability strengthens the harmony, togetherness, and deeply rooted solidarity, and give meaning to the person and the personhood.



Conclusion: Toward an ethics of elegance

How to move from the condition of discomfort to hope and action.

The first insight is to surmount the limitations of the modern (ized) view of life which rendered us into a situation of discomfort emptiness. This requires a twofold process of questioning our view of life and drawing doubt on the social relations and norms in order to be capable of reflecting on the sense of togetherness. This means a critical understanding of the meaning of life within the communal boundaries. "That existence is not only meaningful but also possible only in a community". Togetherness as a sense of belonging to the community provides the opportunity to enhance our awareness about the complex issues, problems confronting the community, concerns, expectations, and solutions related to the common destiny. A very significant openness provided immediately is to learn how to respect

the alternative perspectives of life, and avoid generalizations, hasty judgments and decisions.

The second insight is to understand and agree that deficiencies are always present in the thoughts and attitudes of oneself and others. This acknowledgment makes it easier to deal with conditions of discomfort, to embrace discomfort instead of trying to avoid it. This enables us to be more careful about the causes of discomfort and to realize that our behavioural habits cannot cure problems and pave the way for the future. This insight teaches us to consider changing our attitudes and assumptions about the meaning of life. It teaches that we must return to the roots of our identity to define our position in the face of discomfort and work responsibly to promote communal life.

The third insight instructs to go with the case-to-case analysis of the cases and problems deriving from the condition of discomfort. It teaches us to extend beyond the restrictions of the dichotomous views to be capable of removing communicative barriers. The path toward the ethics of elegance inspires hope with a plan of action.