

A Comparative Analysis of Kierkegaardian and African Existentialism

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Abstract: Existentialism is a philosophical trend that concerns itself with concrete experience of man. This paper comparatively studies Kierkegaard's and African existentialism. It discovers that Western existentialism springs mainly from the notion of nothingness of human existence and man's limiting existential conditions. Kierkegaard himself emphasizes subjective existence through the challenging experiences of life as the sure way to authentic existence. On the other hand, while positioning itself in direct opposition to this pessimistic understanding of man's existence, African existentialism spices itself with optimism grounded in the understanding that man is the beauty and apex of God's creation. The paper also establishes various notions of Kierkegaard's existentialism that are comparable to that of Africans. It therefore concludes that both existential perspectives strive to understand man in his lived experiences in order to direct him towards authentic existence but from diverse points of subjective and communal life's experiences. It concludes that African existentialism offers a more balanced attitude to life through the interplay of personal and community existence.

Key Words: Kierkegaard, Africa, existentialism, man, comparative analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is derived from the word existence and it serves as a philosophical trend that enquires into the concrete experience of human life for better understanding of man and the world around him. Discourses on which serves best for man's authentic living have been very lively in philosophical enquiries. Kierkegaard was the major proponent and one of the key forerunners of Western existentialism. The quest for an authentic and meaningful existence remains the central teachings of both Kierkegaard's and African existentialism. The question of what it means to exist occupies eminent positions in their thoughts, life and works. At the bases of both existentialist positions is self-knowledge. In comparative analytical sense however, the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard addresses vital existential issues through subjective existence, while African existentialism confronts authenticity of life through both subjective and communal existence. Although, it accentuates the primacy of community over the individuals. Ugwu, Ozoemena & Ngwoke (2022, p. 75) rightly observe:

African worldview has always been perceived in terms of the 'other'. Existence is existence-in-and-among-and-with-others-in-and-within-communities. No being is existentially conceived in isolation from the other; and drawing from that, existential *quiddity* is enshrined in the 'community' where every member-being lives and fulfils

its destiny and aspirations. Thus, the value and essence of 'community' places a high influence on the African experience; hence the position that communality best describes the African personality. This 'communality-phenomenon' has been designated with some terms by some African scholars like Senghor and his 'Negritude', Nyerere and his 'Ujamaa', Nkrumah and his 'Consciencism', Azikiwe and his 'Eclecticism', Mbiti and his 'I-and-We Existential mantra', Okolo and his 'Being-with', Asouzu and his 'Ibuanidanda-Complimentarity', Ozumba and Chimakonam and their 'Njikoka-Amaka Integrative-Humanism', Nze and his 'Communalistic-Brotherhood', Edeh and his 'EPTAISM of Mma-di-in-Closeness-not-Closedness.

African communitarian stance seems to corroborate Aristotelian position. Thus, "one who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god" (Aristotle, 1998, pp. 1253a2-30). Critically evaluating Kierkegaard's subjective position and African communitarianism, Oguji (2016, pp. 37-38) argues for a middle balance between subjectivity and communalism. So, he states:

If we will survive the present challenges of our contemporary world, subjective existence should be allowed in the sense of personal initiative. People should not be imprisoned in the traditional systems because traditional solutions are no longer enough to tackle the contemporary challenges... To base existential options in the hands of the individual alone or the society will backfire for it is impossible to clap with one hand.

Attracting a comparative study of Kierkegaardian and African existentialism, therefore, this paper critically analyzes Kierkegaard's existentialism in comparison with that of Africa as it seeks to understand who man is, his ultimate origin, his very nature, his purpose and goal of existence and what accounts for his authentic existence, above all. It tries to fill the gap that subjective and communal existence in Kierkegaard's and African existentialism created which has not gained adequate attention so far based on the known existing scholarly works. It therefore sets to defend the thesis that man's authenticity of life lies in his ability to strike a healthy balance between the two poles of radical subjectivity and extreme communitarianism. On this note, African existentialism especially as found among the Igbo-Africans offers a more balanced attitude to life through the interplay of

personal and community existence. It deploys philosophical and conceptual analysis and clarifications to achieve that.

Existentialism and Human Existence: Kierkegaardian-African Perspectives

With regard to human existence, Kierkegaard as well as Africans share the view that man was posited by a Higher Being. However, relating to the nature of man's origin, both of them differ from each other. Kierkegaard as well as most forerunners of existentialism have pessimistic attitudes towards the being of man in the world. They (Kierkegaard, 1967; Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1958) hold that man was just thrown into the world without being consulted. Hence, man is being also referred to as *thrownness* (*Geworfenheit*). Heidegger indicates this situation of man as *dasein* (being-there), while Sartre designates it as 'being-in-the world' in which case, man is expected to assign meaning to his life through radical freedom, choice and responsibility of actions. Kierkegaard (Lavine, 1984 p. 322) states,

I stick my finger into existence- it smells of nothing. Where am I? What is this thing called the world? Who is it who has lured me into the thing, and now leaves me here? Who am I? How did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted?

This conception of human existence informs the existentialists' creed that 'existence precedes essence'. Analyzing the existentialists' notion of *thrownness*, Egbekpalu (2021, p.75) elucidates,

This notion highlights that man did neither create nor choose himself but was simply abandoned into the world without any consent of his. He is therefore left with the freedom to make sense out of his life and the situation in which he found himself. This idea actually informed the existential stance that radical freedom is the ultimate option to self- realization and meaningful existence.

Kierkegaard's (1967) anthropology with regard to the being of man is inextricably bound to his dialectics of the stages of human existence where man experiences himself as a being in continuous state of becoming. According to him, man *never is*, but *always becomes*, thanks to his conscious decisions that make him take a leap at each stage of despair. Thus, the concept of thrownness brings about radical freedom in which case man tries to create himself always anew.

On the other hand, Africans (Edeh, 2007 p.100) admit that man was created (*Chineke*) by God who loves and still cares (*Osebuluwa*) for him. That is, God still carries the world in His hands and directs his affairs. In this sense, they believe that nothing happens without his knowledge. Within this context, Africans conceive themselves as possessing the presence of God. Buttressing this, Gyekye (1984, p.85) establishes that "the presence of this divine essence in a human being may have been the basis of the Akan proverb, "All men are the children of God; no one is the child of the earth".

Although Kierkegaard submits that man was thrown into the world, at the same time, he admits that he has the vital force in him (spirit) that motivates him to realize his free nature and build on it for authentic existence. Along this line of thought, African world-view (Ihuah, 2022 pp. 1-21) also acknowledges that "there is the immortality of life force in which the individual life force participates in the advancement of the general wellbeing of all." In his *Sickness Unto Death* -SUD Kierkegaard (1974, p. 146) presents man as a relation:

The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation (which accounts for it) that the relation relates to its own self; the self is not the relation but (consists in the fact) that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the finite and the Infinite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, it is a synthesis.

On this note, he persistently holds (Purissima, 2007 p. 41) that "the self as a positive third does not represent a passive self. It is rather active, for without being active, it would not be in the position to control the relationship between the opposite categories or components, which it also relates to itself." Kierkegaard's sense of relationship which authenticates the life of an individual is that of self to itself and less to others; the subjective being which eventually culminates in total resignation to Supreme Being at the conscious recognition that it is being empowered by another, other than itself. Thus, "man is a spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self." Differing from this notion is African sense of relationship which connotes community living. It is a triadic form of relationship whereby man relates significantly to himself, to others in the community in which he lives and to the creator. 'Others' in this context can equally include those in the spirit world. Spirit here can as well include the ancestors. The ancestors (Metuh, 1991 p.120) "are people who have made it to the spirit-land and are being venerated by their descendants." Nonetheless, Kierkegaardian self may share a common view with African understanding of soul as man's constitutive element of his innermost self where he experiences the Divine spark which avails him communication with the Supreme Being.

Again, Kierkegaard gave the understanding that man is a synthesis of not just the body and soul but also of other opposite elements of reality and ideality, time and eternal, necessity and possibility. Thus (Kierkegaard, 1974 p. 146) "man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of possibility and necessity, in short, it is a synthesis." African concept of man (Ogugua, 2003) also acknowledges this duo-dimension of man as existing in temporality but also partaking in spiritual nature. This is evident in her view of man as a being with multiple elements of body, soul, mind, spirit, psyche, destiny, common sense (*ako na uche*) parent's lineage (*agbo*), spiritual dimension (*chi*) and the part of him that becomes ghost at his death (*muo*). Infact, Ogugua (2003, p.10) stated that, "man is a

spiritual manifestation in a physical body.” Ekwunife (1990, p.18) captures it better,

Igbo world is principally a world of two interacting Realities – the spiritual and material, each impinging on the other. It is both the world of spiritual beings and the world of man with other animate and inanimate beings. In this world, the material mirrors the Sacred in different degrees. Though homo-centric (man-centered) in practice, yet it finds its ultimate meaning in Transcendence.

As Kierkegaard (Purissima, 2007 p. 43) maintains “despair is the misrelationship in a relation which relates itself to itself” and that the self as an active entity strives to control the relationship between the opposite categories or components within itself, so do African ontology (Onwuatuegwu, 2021 p.30) holds that,

Man is in a constant struggle to keep these two aspects of relationship in equilibrium and this gives rise to the ceaseless struggle of man in the world of things for survival... it is the onus of man to maintain the harmony between the physical and the spiritual or metaphysical.

Existentialism as a Path to Conscious and Authentic Existence: Kierkegaardian-African Viewpoints

Kierkegaard perceives man as a conscious being who always realizes himself in moments of freedom of decision and choice-making. Hence, man is a subjective being that enjoys a lone existence. Africans too especially the Igbo accentuate human freedom but they do not perceive themselves as condemned to it as is the case with Kierkegaard and many Western existentialists. Naturally, African existentialism supports man’s free actions in creating his essence but it also admits his sacred duties to the community where his life has greater purpose, meaning and relevance. Although, as a naturally community conscious being who despite his unique personality that distinguishes him from the crowd and bestows upon him the sense of responsibility, man still maintains his sense of personal identity within his community where he fully flourishes. Hence, African sense of freedom is one guided by community norms and cultural practices.

Self-awareness, knowledge of one’s existence, acceptance of oneself, proper discernment of one’s actions and effective adaptation to one’s environment all play great roles in both Western and African existential perspectives for proper drive towards authenticity of life. According to Kierkegaard, the more the consciousness of the individual, the more the ‘will’ and the more the will, the more the self. Self-consciousness is gained from the ‘will to choose’ which leads effectively to self-creation and responsibility to life. Therefore, ‘will to choose’ is the constant search and propelling force for meaning in life. It denotes the ‘courage to be’ and the ‘courage to take a leap’ that aids man always in continuous definition of his essence in renewed actualization of free choices.

Existentialism and the Meaning of Life: Kierkegaard’s and African Standpoints

Kierkegaard’s existentialism educates that life is an absurdity. This absurdity of human life is expressed in his concept of nothingness of human existence. For Kierkegaard, man’s life begins and ends with anxiety and despair. His concept of anxiety designates the German word, *angst* and it relates to dread. It depicts an emotional state of existential tension, a sense of hopelessness and depression that accompanies man’s recognition of the meaninglessness of his existence. In Kierkegaard’s understanding, anxiety is a feeling that has no object. As Pattison (1999, p. 60) writes, “in *angst*, we find ourselves as related to that which does not (at least, as yet) exist, what is only possible, a lack, an absence, a void, an abyss, a nothing.” Sartre (1958, p.28) states, “If we now ask more closely what this, what the object of *angst* is, then the answer must as usual be that it is nothing. *Angst* and nothing stand in a constant reciprocal relation to one another.” Hence, the fear of nothingness of human existence brings about anxiety. Further, Kierkegaard explains (Egbekpalu, 2021 p. 76) that anxiety lies in the freedom to responsibly create oneself. It is “the dizziness of freedom that the individual experiences in recognizing that he is solely responsible for all his free actions. This mental state of man produces paradoxical feelings of what Kierkegaard termed ‘*sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy*’.”

Despair is also an emotional state (another form of existential tension) that confronts man in his journey to self-realization and authentic selfhood. It is intertwined with anxiety. As Purissima (2007, pp. 67-68) hinted,

Anxiety is contained in despair, while despair is revealed in anxiety... Both anxiety and despair depict very important and indispensable conditions that drive the self to undertake a transitional sprung into a new phase of existence. Despair is conceived as that which paralyzes the momentary feelings, thoughts and actions of the individual and spurs him to make a leap for a greater height. So understood, despair sets in “when an individual realizes that his present stage of existence does not form an end in itself, but it is rather only a passage to yet another higher level which should be reached, there arises a tendency to despair.

Analyzing this position, Broudy (1941, p.310) illuminates, “anxiety is an existential manifestation of the proximity of essence and existence in the human individual. It is the nascent tension which comes into full force in the progressive levels of existence.” Buttressing it, Purissima (2007, p. 53) accentuates that “despair heightens man’s sense of existence which individuates him, increases the quality of his being and discloses the fact of his *solus ipse*; the task that he realizes all alone by constantly examining his own life as man’s optimal obligation is to his very own self.”

Palmer (1996, p. 74) also establishes that “the possibility of survival is found in the fact that the despair begins to become

passionate, and where there is passion, there is the will to live.”

Considering the reality of anxiety and despair that surround human existence, Kierkegaard delineates that man’s life is not meant for pleasure. Referring to the dramatic events of the beginning and end of life, he states (Lavine, p. 322), “hear the cry of the mother at the hour of giving birth, see the struggle of dying at the last moment: and say then whether that which begins and that which ends like this can be designed for pleasure.”

Differing from Kierkegaard’s notion, source and object of anxiety, the African man’s experience of anxiety embraces not only religion and psychology but most importantly the economic, socio-cultural and political factors. Perhaps, Kierkegaard did not consider those factors as causes of anxiety because he stemmed from a well-established country where economic, political and social status are more stable and offer protection, assurance and relaxed emotional states to the citizens than to cost them their nerves.

Authentic Existence in Kierkegaardian-African Existentialism

Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death* (SUD) chiefly portrays his existentialist’s reflections where he offers a very broad exposition of man’s life towards authentic existence. Above all, man is a subjective being whose authenticity lies in his freedom of actions and responsibility to life. On this note, Kierkegaard (1967, A90) underscores that,

At every person’s birth, there comes into existence an eternal purpose for that person, for that person in particular. In the light of this faithfulness to oneself is faithfulness to one’s God-given vocation, destiny, fate, fortune.

Also in Igbo-African existentialism, each individual is perceived to be unique despite the fact that he identifies himself actively with the community in which he lives. Corroborating Kierkegaardian position, Onwu (2002, p. 66) declares,

In creation, *Chineke*, the Supreme Being brings man into being, at the same time endows him, his nature and destiny. This nature and destiny are spoken of as *uwa* and the personal *chi* which every human being possesses...this idea of *chi* explains the elements of luck, fortune, destiny or fate unique to an individual.

However, as Kierkegaard’s individual controls his life in radical freedom in actualizing his potentials, the African individual actualizes himself in recognition of the Supreme Being that controls his life in collaboration with his human efforts. To this, Nwala (2010, p. 61) highlights,

It is believed that each individual has a destiny ascribed to his life and for this, he has a personal God (*chi*) which controls his destiny. The idea of *chi* explains the elements of luck, fortune, destiny and other unique and individual characteristics.

Buttressing this position, Onwu (2002, p. 64) states, “in Igbo thought and life, man finds ultimate meaning in transcendence even though it is a homo-centric world.” In African Philosophy, man is also perceived as a communitarian being unlike the subjective being in Kierkegaard’s existentialism. Ihuah (2022, p.10) states,

This idea of communal living prevalent in Africa has intrinsic value; it is a product of African humanism which is concerned with the preservation of life because life is his or her ultimate concern, and that life more meaningfully grows in solidarity with other members of the community... Therefore, African personhood exudes an ethic of existence that is organically embodied in a series of associations and activities that portrays life as fully valuable only in those close ties.

Elucidating the intrinsic value of African community living as a tie that assures solidarity for human flourishing, Achebe (1959 p. 55) highlights that “we come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.” So, a core African harmonizes both the individual and the communal life for authentic living.

II. CONCLUSION

The above analysis revealed that Kierkegaardian existentialism has many comparable notions with that of Africans. However, Kierkegaard subscribes more to pessimistic ideas about man, while Africans submit to a more positive understanding of man. As such, Kierkegaard’s authenticity of life is gained through ‘lone existence’ actualized in radical freedom and ‘will to choice’ laddened with responsibility which he himself referred to as ‘sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy’, that is, the fear and anxiety that freedom of life with consequent responsibility implied. On the other hand, African authentic existence is realized through conscious membership of one’s community and recognition of ‘others’ in shaping one’s own growth through shared responsibility. Finally, it could be noted that African existentialism offers a more balanced attitude to life through the interplay of personal and community existence realized in conscious free acts and sometimes in shared responsibilities which lead towards more authentic existence, well-being and optimal development of the individual as well as the larger society.

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