



International Journal of Advance Research Publication and Reviews

Vol 03, Issue 9, pp 388-392, September, 2026

African Existentialism: A Catalyst for Good Governance in Africa

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ABSTRACT :

Africa's persistent governance crisis, marked by corruption, electoral malpractice, weak institutions, and recurrent instability, endures despite decades of policy prescriptions borrowed largely from Western liberal-democratic templates. This raises a fundamental problem: governance frameworks that are transplanted wholesale onto African soil, without regard for the lived, existential condition of the African being-in-the-world, tend to wither on contact with local realities. This paper argues that African Existentialism, understood as a fusion of classical existentialist categories such as freedom, authenticity, anguish, bad faith, and responsibility with indigenous African communal ontology such as Ubuntu, Igwebuike, and relational personhood, offers a more organic philosophical catalyst for good governance than imported models alone. The central thesis is that sustainable good governance in Africa must be grounded in an authentic existential consciousness that compels leaders and citizens alike to choose responsible freedom over bad faith, complicity, and fatalism. Employing the analytic, hermeneutic, and comparative methods proper to philosophical inquiry, the paper examines primary existentialist texts alongside recent African and Nigerian scholarship on personhood, ubuntu ethics, and governance failure. It finds that Africa's chronic instability reflects a collective existential bad faith, in which leaders evade responsibility and citizens surrender agency to resignation, and that recovering an authentic, communally answerable selfhood can catalyse transparency, accountability, and civic participation. The paper concludes that African Existentialism, properly indigenised, is a native resource capable of regenerating governance from within, and recommends its deliberate integration into political education and leadership formation across the continent.

Keywords: *African Existentialism, Good Governance, Authenticity, Ubuntu, Bad Faith, Nigeria*

1.0 Introduction

There is a peculiar restlessness that trails the African continent, a restlessness that no election cycle, no donor-funded reform, and no borrowed constitution has been able to still. Governments rise with the fanfare of promise and fall with the quiet of disappointment, while the ordinary African, caught between hope and hunger, continues to ask the oldest of philosophical questions in the most unphilosophical of circumstances: what does it mean to exist, to choose, and to be responsible, in a state that so often fails to see her? It is this restlessness, at once political and deeply personal, that this paper sets out to examine.

For more than six decades, African states have imported governance architecture, constitutions, electoral systems, separation of powers, bureaucratic hierarchies, largely from the Western liberal tradition, in the sincere hope that structure alone would deliver order. Yet structure without soul has repeatedly proven brittle. Coups return where they were thought buried; corruption metastasises where transparency laws are freshly signed; and citizens, weary of promises, retreat into a fatalism that asks little of government and expects even less. The problem this paper confronts, therefore, is not a shortage of governance models, but a shortage of governance grounded in the authentic existential situation of the African person, one that neither borrows blindly from the West nor romanticises an imagined precolonial past, but reckons honestly with the freedom, anguish, and responsibility that define human existence in African particularity.

It is here that existentialism, ordinarily associated with the smoky cafés of postwar Paris and the private anguish of the European individual, finds an unexpected but fertile home in Africa. Existentialism, at its philosophical core, insists that existence precedes essence, that human beings are condemned to freedom, and that authenticity requires the courageous acceptance of responsibility for one's choices rather than flight into bad faith. African Existentialism takes up this insistence but refuses to leave the human being isolated; it locates freedom and responsibility within the communal fabric of African personhood, where one is because others are, and where authentic selfhood is inseparable from authentic community. This paper argues that this synthesis, neither purely Sartrean nor purely communitarian, but a disciplined marriage of the two, offers Africa a homegrown philosophical catalyst capable of animating good governance from the inside out.

The paper proceeds in seven movements. It first clarifies the key concepts of African Existentialism and good governance; it then constructs a theoretical framework that weds existentialist categories to African communal ontology; it states the methodology adopted; it undertakes an imaginative, discursive examination of the African state as a site of existential absurdity, bad faith, and possible authenticity; it discusses the findings that emerge from this examination; and it concludes with reflections on what an existentially conscious Africa might yet become. Throughout, the paper writes in the conviction that philosophy, far from being an ornament of the academy, is a practical instrument that a wounded continent can pick up and use.

2.0 Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Existentialism and African Existentialism

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, gathers around the shared conviction that existence precedes essence, that the human being is not born with a fixed nature to fulfil but is instead thrown into the world and left to fashion meaning through free choice.¹ This is the burden and the glory of human freedom: burden, because no external authority, divine or political, can absolve the individual of responsibility for what he becomes; glory, because it is precisely this freedom that confers dignity on human action. Camus extends this insistence into the notion of the absurd, the collision between the human longing for meaning and a world that offers none ready-made, and argues that the only honest response to this absurdity is neither suicide nor blind faith but lucid, rebellious living.²

African Existentialism does not simply transplant these European categories onto African soil; it reworks them through the lens of African lived experience. Iyare distinguishes two phases of this thought: a premodern phase, in which African existential reflection wrestled with the meaning of life within an already communal cosmology, and a modern phase, in which colonial contact, postcolonial disillusionment, and the daily grind of underdevelopment sharpened the African's confrontation with absurdity, anguish, and the demand for authentic choice.³ African Existentialism, then, is the philosophical articulation of what it feels like to be free and responsible within a continent whose political and economic structures too often conspire against the exercise of that freedom.

2.2 Personhood and Communal Ontology in Africa

Personhood in African thought is fundamentally relational. One does not simply arrive at selfhood by private introspection, as the Cartesian cogito would suggest; one becomes a person through participation in community, through the recognition and nurture of others. Molefe argues that African moral and political thought grounds personhood in this relational achievement, such that a human being is born a mere biological entity and only becomes a full person through the cultivation of communal virtue.⁴ Asouzu develops a complementary ontology in which no being, human or otherwise, is complete in isolation; each finds its missing links in relation with others, a metaphysics of mutual completion that stands in creative tension with, rather than contradiction to, the individualist thrust of Sartrean freedom.⁵ Afolayan and Falola, writing from within the Nigerian context, caution against romanticising any single tradition, whether Western or African, as the sole authentic philosophy, insisting instead that African philosophy is irreducibly entangled with multiple traditions, an entanglement this paper takes as its starting assumption rather than its embarrassment.⁶

2.3 Good Governance: Conceptual Contours

Good governance, for its part, is conventionally defined around the pillars of transparency, accountability, participation, the rule of law, and responsiveness to citizens. Southall observes that many African democracies exhibit a widening gap between the formal architecture of these pillars and the informal practices that erode them, such that constitutions promise what patronage networks quietly withdraw.⁷ Tukur, writing on the Nigerian situation specifically, traces this erosion to institutional decay, wherein agencies designed to check executive excess are themselves captured by the very interests they were meant to restrain.⁸ Williams and Sunjo broaden the picture across sub-Saharan Africa, showing that bureaucratic inefficiency, weak judicial independence, and arbitrary decision-making function together as a single syndrome of governance failure rather than as isolated pathologies.⁹ What these accounts share, and what this paper wishes to add to, is an implicit recognition that good governance is not merely a technical arrangement of institutions but a moral achievement that presupposes a certain quality of human character, precisely the quality that existentialist authenticity describes.

3.0 Theoretical Framework: Existential Communitarianism

The theoretical framework of this paper rests on a deliberate synthesis, which the writer calls existential communitarianism, in which the Sartrean insistence on radical freedom and responsibility is held together with the African insistence on relational personhood and communal accountability. Where Western existentialism risks isolating the individual in solitary anguish, and where undisciplined communitarianism risks dissolving the individual into an oppressive collective, existential communitarianism proposes that authentic freedom is exercised precisely through, not against, one's responsibility to community. Nzimakwe illustrates this synthesis in practice through the philosophy of Ubuntu, arguing that ethical leadership grounded in Ubuntu requires leaders to recognise their humanity as bound up with the humanity of those they govern, such that good governance becomes an existential extension of good relationship.¹⁰ Asiimwe similarly argues that African leadership, properly understood through Ubuntu, resists both the tyranny of unchecked individual will and the tyranny of an undifferentiated collective, insisting on a reciprocal balance between the person and the community as the foundation of legitimate authority.¹¹ Patel, Mohammed, and Koen extend this reasoning into the post-apartheid South African context, showing how Ubuntu functions simultaneously as an educational, cultural, and philosophical resource capable of shaping public character long after formal liberation has been achieved.¹²

On this framework, the African state fails not merely because its institutions are weak, but because its political actors, leaders and led alike, frequently choose bad faith over authenticity. Bad faith, in the existentialist sense, is the flight from freedom into the comfortable fiction that one has no choice, that corruption is simply how things are done, that resistance is futile, that the individual citizen bears no responsibility for collective outcomes. Good governance, by contrast, is what emerges when both leaders and citizens choose authentic, communally responsible freedom over this comfortable fiction. This is the theoretical wager on which the rest of the paper builds.

4.0 Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative philosophical methodology, combining analytic, hermeneutic, and comparative approaches. The analytic method is employed to clarify and interrogate the key concepts of African Existentialism, authenticity, bad faith, and good governance, ensuring that terms are used with philosophical precision rather than journalistic looseness. The hermeneutic method is employed to interpret primary existentialist texts and contemporary African philosophical scholarship, reading them not as museum pieces but as living resources whose meaning unfolds afresh when brought into conversation with present African governance realities. The comparative method, finally, situates existentialist categories alongside African communal concepts such as Ubuntu and Igwebuike, drawing out points of convergence and productive tension. Data, in the philosophical rather than empirical sense, consist of published primary and secondary literature, drawn deliberately from both Nigerian and foreign, African and non-African, scholars, with preference given to recent publications so as to keep the discussion abreast of the continent's evolving governance landscape.

5.0 African Existentialism and the Governance Crisis: An Imaginative Reconstruction

5.1 *The Absurd African State: Anguish and the Politics of Disappointed Hope*

To speak of the African state as absurd is not to mock it but to describe, with philosophical honesty, the yawning gap between the promise of governance and the experience of it. Ugwu and Abah, examining the existentialist philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre against the backdrop of African development, argue that the African situation exhibits precisely the structure of the absurd: citizens hunger for a meaningful, well-ordered political life, while the state, again and again, presents them with disorder, insecurity, and betrayal.¹³ Their recommendation, that African societies deliberately apply existentialist tenets of authentic engagement rather than passive resignation, anchors much of the imaginative reconstruction attempted in this section.

The absurdity is not merely rhetorical; it is measurable in the erosion of democratic confidence across the continent. The Brookings Institution's Foresight Africa report notes that citizen satisfaction with democracy has declined across a majority of surveyed African countries, even as a wave of unconstitutional changes of government, from Mali to Niger to Gabon, has swept through the continent within a few short years.¹⁴ Confronted with this absurd gap between democratic promise and lived disappointment, the African citizen faces a genuinely existentialist choice: to fall into despair and disengagement, or to rebel, in the Camusian sense, through lucid and persistent civic engagement that refuses to accept disorder as destiny.

5.2 *Authenticity as Civic Virtue*

Authenticity, in existentialist usage, names the courage to own one's choices and their consequences rather than hiding behind excuses, whether those excuses take the form of colonial legacy, ethnic loyalty, or bureaucratic inertia. Fagbadebo and Dorasamy argue that public administration across Africa and beyond can only be reformed when officeholders are made to internalise a genuine sense of stewardship rather than treating public office as private entitlement, a claim that is, at bottom, a call for existential authenticity translated into administrative practice.¹⁵ Bridoux, examining the influence of external actors on governance reform in fragile African states, cautions that authenticity cannot be imported alongside foreign technical assistance; reforms designed elsewhere and imposed from without tend to produce compliance without conviction, form without soul, precisely the bad faith this paper identifies as the enemy of good governance.¹⁶

Civic authenticity, then, is not a private virtue confined to the individual conscience; it is a public achievement that must be cultivated through education, example, and institutional design that rewards honesty over expedience. A leader who governs authentically does not merely obey the letter of anti-corruption law; she internalises the freedom-bearing responsibility that no law can fully enforce, choosing integrity even where enforcement is weak. A citizen who participates authentically does not merely vote and retreat into apathy; he holds government accountable between elections, refusing the bad faith of learned helplessness.

5.3 *Ubuntu and the Existential Community*

If authenticity supplies the individual half of the existential equation, Ubuntu supplies the communal half. Nicolaidis and Ndlovu, examining the Kenyan notion of harambee, meaning pulling together, show how indigenous African cooperative practices have historically mobilised communities toward shared social and educational development, offering a template for governance that neither the isolated Sartrean individual nor the impersonal liberal state fully captures.¹⁷ Uduh, Tusasiirwe, Mugumbate, and Gatwiri similarly argue that Ubuntu values, generosity, interdependence, and collective dignity, offer a distinctly African framework capable of reshaping not only social work practice but public institutions more broadly, precisely because Ubuntu insists that one's own flourishing is bound inseparably to the flourishing of others.¹⁸

Read existentially, Ubuntu is not a denial of individual freedom but its communal fulfilment; the African person becomes most fully free, most fully himself, precisely in responsible relation with others, not in isolation from them. A government that internalises Ubuntu as an existential rather than merely rhetorical commitment would treat the citizen not as an abstraction to be managed but as a co-participant whose being is entangled with the being of the state itself; corruption, on this reading, becomes not merely a crime against the treasury but a betrayal of one's own communal selfhood.

5.4 Existential Praxis: Comparative Illustrations from Africa and Nigeria

The Institute for Security Studies' Africa Governance Futures analysis reports that more than half of surveyed Africans expressed willingness, as of 2023, to accept a military takeover should elected leaders abuse power, a startling figure that reveals just how far bad faith, on the part of leaders, has corroded citizens' faith in electoral governance.¹⁹ Yet the same analysis notes a rising tide of protest and political awareness among Africa's youth, from Kenya's resistance to punitive taxation to Nigeria's own #EndSARS demonstrations, suggesting that existential rebellion, in the Camusian sense of lucid refusal, is already stirring beneath the surface of apparent resignation.

Existential praxis is also visible in the diplomatic and economic sphere. Nilsson and Svensson show that inclusive, trust-building negotiation mechanisms are indispensable for resolving resource disputes and rebuilding post-conflict governance across Africa, a finding that mirrors the existentialist insight that authentic relationship, rather than coerced compliance, is the only durable foundation for peace.²⁰ Barlow further demonstrates how resource nationalism, when handled through negotiated rather than imposed sovereignty, allows African governments to balance national interest against global demand without surrendering the dignity of self-determination.²¹ Carbone, examining Africa's external partnerships, argues that responsible negotiation, grounded in mutual respect rather than dependency, offers a more sustainable path to governance reform than aid conditionalities that treat African states as passive recipients rather than free, responsible agents.²² Taken together, these studies confirm that wherever African governance shows signs of genuine improvement, it is because African actors, whether citizens, negotiators, or reformist officials, have chosen authentic responsibility over bad faith, and communal solidarity over isolated self-interest.

6.0 Findings and Discussion

Three findings emerge from this philosophical inquiry. First, the persistence of governance failure across Africa is not merely institutional but existential; it reflects a widespread, though not universal, retreat into bad faith on the part of both leaders who evade responsibility and citizens who surrender agency to fatalism. Second, indigenous African communal philosophy, chiefly Ubuntu and its cognate concepts, is not an obstacle to modern governance, as some Western-derived frameworks have implicitly assumed, but a resource capable of grounding accountability in relationships that citizens already recognise as morally binding. Third, wherever existential authenticity and communal solidarity have combined, in civic protest, in negotiated diplomacy, in ethically grounded public administration, governance outcomes have shown genuine, if fragile, improvement.

These findings suggest that the choice facing Africa is not, in the end, between imported liberal democracy and indigenous tradition, but between authenticity and bad faith, whatever institutional clothing either might wear. A borrowed constitution, sincerely and responsibly inhabited, can serve good governance; an indigenous council, dishonestly manipulated, can betray it just as thoroughly. What African Existentialism contributes is not a new set of institutions but a new, or rather a recovered, quality of consciousness, one that Africa's leaders and citizens alike are free, and therefore responsible, to choose.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper set out to examine whether African Existentialism could serve as a catalyst for good governance across the continent, and it concludes, with due philosophical caution, that it can. The African state's troubles are not merely technical malfunctions awaiting the next reform document; they are, at their root, expressions of a collective failure to choose authentic, responsible freedom within community. African Existentialism, as this paper has reconstructed it, refuses both the isolating individualism sometimes associated with its European ancestry and the suffocating collectivism sometimes associated with uncritical communitarianism, insisting instead that the African person becomes most free, most authentic, and most fully human precisely in responsible relationship with others.

Good governance, on this reading, is not primarily a matter of importing the correct institutional template from abroad, though institutions certainly matter, but of cultivating, deliberately and patiently, a citizenry and a leadership class capable of choosing honesty over convenience, service over self-interest, and solidarity over suspicion. The paper therefore recommends that political education across Africa's schools and universities, and leadership formation within its political parties and civil services, deliberately integrate the existential categories examined here, so that freedom is taught not merely as a right to be claimed but as a responsibility to be lived. If Africa's long and painful history has taught her anything, it is that she has never lacked resources, material or intellectual; what she has too often lacked is the collective courage to choose authentically from among them. African Existentialism, imaginatively and rigorously applied, offers precisely that courage as a philosophical catalyst, waiting, as it always has, to be chosen.

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