

# Screening the African Cogito Ergo Sum: A Challenging Socio-Epistemological Question

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to scrutinize Kpakala's statement. For us Africans, the Cogito, ergo sum (I think therefore I am) of Westerners turns out to be Sumus ergo sum (We are therefore I am). I tried to show that this statement is ambiguous because it can lead to a certain denial of any epistemology to Africans. On the other side, I pinpointed the fact that Kpakala might have scrutinized the Western principle on existentialist basis that regards actually one's own existence by thinking without caring or worrying about others. By bringing together the epistemological principle with the anthropological one, the existentialist interpretation prevails because as one cannot doubt of his/her own existence, so one cannot think for him/herself alone according to African principle of thought. That means human beings have to fight the boundaries and the opposition between the individual and the community; between the "particular and the universal; between the "I" and the "WE"; between the global and the local. That is my socio-epistemological stand: "think globally, universally and act locally or think individually, locally and act universally. Any genuine thinking has positive repercussions on the society. I totally agree with Bodrunin when he says: "if a problem is philosophical, it must have a universal relevance to all men". Therefore, I suggest Kpakala's statement to sound like "For us Africans, the Cogito, ergo sum (I think therefore I am) of Westerners is not enough; it requires the Sumus ergo sum (We are therefore I am). My wish is that Sum ergo sumus becomes one day a reality for Africa besides Sumus ergo sum.*

**Keywords:** Cogito ergo sum; Sumus ergo sum; Sum ergo sumus

## 1. General Introduction

Two months ago, I was reading a French Book *Le Synode africain: Histoire et Textes (African Synode: History and Texts)* of the Belgian theologian Maurice Cheza.<sup>1</sup> It is a compilation of the texts, talks of the Synod Fathers of the First African Synod of 1994 in Rome. While reading on *Church, Person and Society*, I came across a phrase that challenged my mind. The late archbishop of Liberia, Michaël Kpakala Francis wrote: "*Les Africains se voient naturellement, et nécessairement, comme faisant partie d'un tout relationnel où l'individu est considéré comme bon dans la mesure où il est fidèle à ces relations. C'est le problème de la « grande famille ».* En Afrique, le « cogito, ergo sum des Occidentaux devient « nous sommes, donc. *Jesuis. Je suis ce que la société fait de moi »; « Naturally, Africans perceived themselves as belonging to a holistic relationship whereby the individual is considered as a good person as much as he/she is faithful to that holistic relationship. That recalls the issue of the Extended Family. For Africans, the Cogito, ergo sum (I think therefore I am) of Westerners turns out to be "We are therefore I am". I am the outcome of the society, the product of my society".<sup>2</sup> It is especially the last statement that raised in me two main observations:*

- To some extent I felt as if there was a will of opposing the Western principle to African principle; the sociological principle to epistemological principle. It reminded me the unfortunate statement of Leopold Sedar Senghor: "emotion is Negro, reason is Greek"<sup>3</sup>?<sup>3</sup> This observation relies more on the epistemological realm.

<sup>1</sup>MAURICE CHEZA (1996) *Le Synode africain*, Paris : Karthala.

<sup>2</sup>MAURICE CHEZA, *Le Synode africain*, 59.

<sup>3</sup>G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of history* (1956), New York: Dover Publications, 9-10. « Reason is the true, the Eternal, the

- What role does the "I" play in Descartes and in Kpakala's thought? It seems to me as if the "I" of Kpakala is enclosed in the WE while that of Descartes is more active. Let us think of this scenario: "Sum ergo sumus"; I am therefore We are" in Africa. Can this principle be possible in Africa? This observation brings us in the sociological aspects.

From these two observations, my principal aim consists of Screening this so-called African *Cogito ergo sum: Sumus ergo sum*. Can these two statements or principles be compared (epistemologically and sociologically) ? My aim is to point out the ambiguity that such a statement can provoke in people's mind and then try to find a point of convergence between them.

## 2. Rene Descartes Epistemology: "Cogito, Ergo Sum"

The French philosopher René Descartes (1596) is well known by this possibly best known of all philosophical quotations: *Cogito ergo sum; I think, therefore I am*, or better "I am a thinking thing, therefore I exist". The "*cogito ergo sum*" argument is more briefly called "the *cogito*". This proposition became a fundamental element of Western philosophy, as it was perceived to form a foundation for all knowledge. René Descartes wrote three most important books wherein we find the genesis of this philosophical quotation: 1. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*

absolutely powerful essence; that it reveals in the world, and that in that world nothing else is revealed but this and its honor and glory is the thesis which has been proved in Philosophy ». « In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence...» (93).

(1637).<sup>4</sup> 2. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).<sup>5</sup> 3. *Principles of Philosophy* (1644).

## 2.1 Philosophical Meaning of *cogito ergo sum*

At the beginning of the second meditation, having reached what he considers to be the ultimate level of doubt (the meta-cognitive doubt) — his argument for the existence of a deceiving god — Descartes examines his beliefs to see if any have survived this doubt. In his belief in his own existence, he finds that it is impossible to doubt that he exists. Even if there were a deceiving god (or an evil demon), one's belief in their own existence would be secure, for there is no way one could be deceived unless one existed in order to be deceived. The true meaning of *Cogito ergo sum* is that thinking about one's existence proves—in and of itself—that an "I" exists to do the thinking; or, as Descartes explains, "We cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt .... " I am a thinking being! He attempted to prove his existence as a thinking being, by thinking.<sup>6</sup>

So, this proposition is sometimes given as *dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum—res cogitans*"; "Since I doubt, I think; since I think, I exist" as a thinking thing. It extends the *cogito* with Descartes' statement in the subsequent Meditation, "*Ego sum res cogitans, id est dubitans, affirmans, negans, pauca intelligens, multa ignorans, volens, nolens, imaginans etiam et sentiens ...*" "I am a thinking (conscious) thing, that is, a being who doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few objects, and is ignorant of many..."<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 Critical summary on *Cogito ergo sum*

In reading Descartes and especially in the light of today's topic, one has to underline four important notes. **First**, Descartes claims only the certainty of *his own* existence from the first-person point of view — he has not proved the existence of other minds at this point. On the existential level, this statement differs much with the African way of thinking *Sumus ergo sum*. **Second**, he does not say that his existence is necessary; he says that *if he thinks*, then necessarily he exists. **Third**, this argument is said to be a methodic doubt (for the sake of knowing more) thoroughly different from the doubt of the skeptics (for the sake of doubting without any aim). **Fourth**, this proposition "I am, I exist" is held true not based on a deduction (as mentioned above) or on empirical induction but on the clarity and self-

<sup>4</sup>3§ « After this I conceived generally what in a proposition is requisite in order to be true and certain; for since I had just discovered one which I knew to be such, I thought that I ought also to know in what this certainty consisted. And having remarked that there was nothing at all in the statement "**I think, therefore I am**" which assures me of having thereby made a true assertion, excepting that I see very clearly that to think it is necessary to be, I came to the conclusion that I might assume, as a general rule, that the things which we conceive very clearly and distinctly are all true — remembering, however, that there is some difficulty in ascertaining which are those that we distinctly conceive".

<sup>5</sup>*Meditations on First Philosophy*, Second Meditation: What then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.

<sup>6</sup>*Second Meditation*

<sup>7</sup>*Second Meditation*

evidence of the proposition. Descartes does not use this first certainty, **the *cogito*, as a foundation upon which to build further knowledge**; rather, it is **the firm ground upon which he can stand as he works to restore his beliefs**. As he puts it: "Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakable. (AT VII 24; CSM II 16).<sup>8</sup> Thinking can move the world!

## 3. African Existential Argument by Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis<sup>9</sup>

### 3.1 Origin of *Sumus ergo sum*

As I previously said, Archbishop Kpakala made this declaration at the First African Synode in Rome in 1994: For Africans, the Western saying "*Cogito ergo sum*" turns out to be "*We are therefore I am*". This statement expresses in short, the innermost African thought. So, Archbishop Kpakala is just repeating and sharing an African existentialist reality. The well-known Kenyan Scholar John Mbiti highlights the same principle in his writings. For instance, in *African Religions and Philosophy*, we read: "Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards others. The individual can only say: "**I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am**". In *Introduction to African Religion and Philosophy* he strongly concludes: "This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of human being."<sup>10</sup>

Though the emphasis of Mbiti relied on the interdependence of existence between the individual and the community; still the community exercised more power on the individual. That means the individual does not exist alone but always within the community and this leads Africans to declare: "**I**

<sup>8</sup><http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-intelligent-divorce/201203/stop-being-anxious-about-being-anxious/comments>.

<sup>9</sup>The late Archbishop Kpakala was a very active Catholic Archbishop of Monrovia in Liberia. He was a very outspoken man and the voice of the voiceless in Liberia during the time of Charles Taylor's dictatorship. "He knew his prophetic role in his country and that it was necessary for him to continue to exercise his role of being the voice of the voiceless",<sup>9</sup> so that everywhere in Liberia the human dignity of every individual be acknowledged, and that people always be at the centre of all government programmes (EA 70-71).<sup>9</sup> He exercised his mission regardless terror and dangers he faced from the government of that time; because he believed strongly in that faith should take flesh in Africa through the inculturation process. So he was one of the prominent Synod Fathers during the First African Synod of 1994 held in Rome. His voice can be heard in this challenging statement which inquires Africa to inculturate the Gospel in our cultures: "In Africa, the need to apply the Gospel to concrete life is felt strongly. How could one proclaim Christ on that immense Continent while forgetting that it is one of the world's poorest regions? How could one fail to take into account the anguished history of a land where many nations are still in the grip of famine, war, racial and tribal tensions, political instability and the violation of human rights? This is all a challenge to evangelization".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>10</sup>JOHN MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106.

am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am". The African "I" stands therefore on the roots of the community life or the family life. For instance, the individual does not get married; it is rather the family, the clan... Whenever one talks of marriage, it must always be in relation of the family and the clan. Mbiti is right when he notes that "the idea of the individual in relation to marriage and family is deeply rooted in his African way of thinking".<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2 Explanation of *Sumus ergo sum*

By their very nature, Africans are 'being with'. That means, they are being taught from their very youth through sayings and proverbs that any human being is powerless without the community and communion. There exist popular proverbs in the mouths of Africans such as *Mtu ni Watu*, "Man is Men"; *Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa*, which means "one finger does not pick out a louse." These sayings emphasize the togetherness dimension and underscore the fact that the family is the first place of education and human formation. There is no individual life, and life outside the community means nothingness. There is no longer life in him/her because to live is to 'be with'.<sup>12</sup> And to be with is to be in harmony with the community-communion. Once the 'being with' is broken, the member loses his/her integrity and lacks energy and vital force. Here, the famous formula of Saint Cyprian can be literally applied: "*Extra communautatem, nulla salus et nulla vita*"; "out of the community, there is no salvation, no life". A person outside the community will die like the fish dies out of water. To be is always to be with the community and never otherwise.

### 3.3 Critical summary on *Sumus ergo sum*

Three important remarks are to be made here.

**First**, the African principle is not epistemological rather anthropological and existential. It relies on togetherness, on belonging and being with. African solidarity goes against the Western individualism and relativism. The argument of solidarity considers the world as a network whereby we are connected to one another. On this field, Africa has a lot to share with the rest of the world. In this globalized world, we are all connected. What unites us is our common humanity. I don't want to oversimplify things, says Archbishop Tutu-but the suffering of a mother who has lost her child is not dependent on her nationality, ethnicity or religion. White, black, rich, poor, Christian, Muslim or Jew-pain is pain-joy is joy. In Southern Africa we have a concept called Ubuntu-which means that you cannot exist as a human being in isolation. You cannot be human all by yourself. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas what you do, what I do, affects the whole world. Taking that a step further, when you do good, it spreads that goodness; it is for the whole of humanity. When you suffer or cause suffering, humanity is diminished as a result". Africa has to offer this universal

value to the entire world which has become a globalized village.<sup>13</sup>

**Second**, this principle of togetherness reminds us the danger when it comes to apply it in the African Society. It reminds us another well-known African saying: "*Damu ni nzito kuliko maji*"; "Blood is thicker than Water". Once one is in a leading position, we should watch out, he/she might bring the whole village without being uncomfortable, he/she wants to be surrounded only by his/her relatives, from people of his/her own clan; from people from his/her own tribe though they are not qualified. For him or her, there is nothing wrong. It is the consequence of "Unless we are, I cannot be". The African solidarity, understood in the sense of *Damu ni nzito kuliko maji*, has become a disastrous cancer for Africa and we are called to open widely our eyes because it can destroy our Institutions.

**Third**, in this principle, the role of the "I" seems to be undermined; the "I" appears only and always in the shadow of the WE. It is precisely on this matter that the principle *Sum ergo sumus* derived from the original African principle of *Sumus ergo sum* challenges us: Is *Sum ergo sumus* possible in Africa?

## 4. Hermeneutics of the African Statement in Relation to Western Argument

### 4.1 First Hypothesis: Opposition between the two statements (Denying to Africans the epistemological principle?)

How to understand and interpret the African statement of Archbishop Kpakala? Without any doubt Kpakala was a great communicator and he knew probably how to cope with the level of audience before him. A good communicator takes into account the uniqueness of his listeners: young people or adults; intellectuals or less educated people; lay Christians or clerics. He knew that his audience was composed globally of clerics who had a sufficient background of History of Philosophy. So, when he cited *Cogito ergo sum*, surely all the participants understood what it was about and it might have brought many questions in their mind: Why does Kpakala compare an epistemological principle with a sociological principle? Does he want to say Africans have no epistemological principle rather an anthropological one? Is it the intention of Kpakala of refuting the *Cogito ergo sum* by substituting it with *Sumus ergo sum*? It becomes even much confusing when one, after reading Kpakala's statement, asks: "what makes someone to exist? We might say for Descartes, according to Kpakala, it is the "I" thinking; whereas for Kpakala, it is the "WE" of togetherness or being with. In order to avoid ambiguities, I think, Kpakala could have been more logical by underscoring his anthropological argument using existentialist philosophers such as Martin Buber (I – Thou theory of subjectivity); Gabriel Marcel; John-Paul Sartre; Emmanuel Mounier; Emmanuel Levinas, than using the epistemologist Descartes. At this point, Kpakala can be

<sup>11</sup>JOHN MBITI, *Introduction to African Religion*, 115.

<sup>12</sup>P. Van PELT (1977), *Bantu Customs in Mainland Tanzania*, Tabora: TMP, 13-15.

<sup>13</sup>D. TUTU, *Ubuntu*<http://www.ubuntu.org.za/2012/09/bishop-desmond-tutu-on-ubuntu.html>: consulted on 8th September 2020 at 14:21.



accused of denying any epistemology to Africans. It is as if he is building up a philosophy of substitution by saying that Africans are more anthropological than epistemological which actually is wrong.

This hypothesis cannot be vindicated since we consider a human being as a thinking animal. The question is not so much about being thinking conscious but on how do we know? How do Africans know? Since epistemology questions what knowledge is, how it can be acquired, and the extent to which it can be acquired, one has to know that it always takes the color of the thinker's context. That is why we can even talk of African Epistemologies or the African modes of thinking. According to Senghor, knowledge is a creative engagement of the subject with the object, an engagement by confrontation and intuition. To know anything, one must touch it, penetrate it from the inside – so to speak – and finger it". To know anything, one must do more than investigate it with the help of statistics and graphs; one must live it."<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Oladipo criticized this view of Senghor. He saw Africans as being "intuitive". Thus, succumbing to the European stereotypical view of Africans as "different", "a species apart", and "inferior" (because they do not analyze).<sup>15</sup> Here, it seems to me that Oladipo misses the connection of Senghor's concept with the publication in 1889 of Bergson's *Time and Free Will* – The Revolution of 1889 as Senghor called it – which criticized the blindness of (European) analytical reason to *la durée réelle*, to *Real Time* as we experience it which he called duration, and which he claimed is grasped only by intuition. Descartes in this regard underscores: "Whatever I know, I know intuitively that I am". Let me borrow this beautiful expression of Robert Schreiter: "glocalisation",<sup>16</sup> meaning, "to think always globally in order to act with success locally and to think always locally in order to act universally". Knowledge cannot be enclosed like a fish in a bottle.

#### 4.2 Second Hypothesis: No opposition (on existentialist ground)

What did Archbishop intend really to say by affirming: "For Africans, the Western *Cogito ergo sum* becomes *Sumus ergo sum*?" Since in the first hypothesis, there was a kind of hard opposition between the two statements, in the second, we ought to think otherwise. For Kpakala, he might have read the *Cogito ergo sum* of Descartes with existentialist mind because Descartes emphasizes only the certainty of his own

existence and does not think about others; whereas he underlines the welfare of the community. For Kpakala, the one who can think, can doubt, can affirm, can deny, can know, and can be ignorant; he/she is also a being with others. One cannot just be pleased of his/her own existence without caring for other minds. The fundamental question in Africa is "When can an individual say I am or I exist?" What makes one to say I am or I exist? It is only when he/she is in harmony with the community that he/she is a thinking being. Archbishop Kpakala seems to underline this sense of belonging, hence the "I" has meaning exclusively in this wholeness: "**We are because I am, since I am, therefore We are**". In this light, the intention of Kpakala seems not to oppose the West to Africa or Africa to the West; rather to focus on the existential part of the statement since on existentialist level Descartes does not bother of the existence of others if not of his own existence because he thinks.

#### 4.3 The "I" of Descartes in the "WE" of Archbishop Kpakala

First of all, I would like to make clear here that I have no intention at all to try to answer a chicken-and-egg question. The statement "*Sumus ergo sum*"; *We are therefore I am*" is an evidence and that is the leitmotiv of our anthropological philosophy. Is *Sum ergo sumus* possible in Africa? It is a process to be realized surely and slowly.

We admire the principle of togetherness in Africa as we pointed out previously, but still there is a serious need of giving more space to the African "I" amidst the community. The "I" in the community should not be like an unknown sheep in the flock but should be more active than passive. Space should be created in order to educate Africans to the "I" of self-esteem. The togetherness principle should not be the reason to overshadow the thinking "I". There is a huge difference between Freedom from the Community to Freedom for the community; freedom from being with the community to freedom for the community. It is not enough to say I am; I exist because I can be or I can exist in the community like an inanimate rock. One can exist in the community like a sheep, like a lamb, like any animal; like a tree or like any other creature without being with and for the community. It is only by being a thinking "I" at the service of the community that one can say 'I am or I exist'. The "I" as a thinking being can be the driving force of the community development. The "I" should be an active electron in the community and for the community. Africa has to get rid of this principle "Being in" without "being for"; "Being with" without "being for" the community.

There is a compulsory assignment for the world to come to a clear demarcation between an individual and individualism; between a community and communism, or between solidarity and solidarism. Africa needs to wake up from its slumbers of overshadowing the individual-thinking "I". "**The individual does not just exist alone; he exists because others exist. He must, therefore, play his full role in that interdependence of existence.**"<sup>17</sup> The hidden African 'I' should show that he/she is a thinking-conscious being. He can prove his existence by realizing that he is a

<sup>14</sup>H. D. KREILKAMP, *Must Western ways of Thinking be Foreign to Africa*, in *Sauti ya Mwokozi*, No 7 (May 1997) 72-75.

<sup>15</sup>O. OLADIPO, *Reason, Identity, and the African Quest...* No 3 (1995), 26-36.

<sup>16</sup>R. ROBERTSON, cité par R. SCHREITER, *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll, New York, 1997, p. ix. This term « glocalisation » was used, for the first time by ROLAND ROBERTSON, *Glocalisation: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity*, in *Global Modernities*, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (eds.), London, 1995. Pour Robertson, according to Schreiter, glocalisation shows the encounter between global and local. He underlines the dialogue between the two: Global and Local. As he notes: « Intercultural encounter on whatever scale is frequently conflictual and calls for dialogue and mutuality », 12.

<sup>17</sup>JOHN MBITI, *Introduction to African Religion*, 115.

living-thinking-being. The fact that he lives and thinks must be vindicated by thinking for the welfare of the community under whose umbrella his identity is unveiled.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to scrutinize Kpakala's statement. For us Africans, the *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) of Westerners turns out to be *Sumus ergo sum* (We are therefore I am). I tried to show that this statement is ambiguous because it can lead to a certain denial of any epistemology to Africans. On the other side, I pinpointed the fact that Kpakala might have scrutinized the Western principle on existentialist basis that regards actually one's own existence by thinking without caring or worrying about others. By bringing together the epistemological principle with the anthropological one, the existentialist interpretation prevails because as one cannot doubt of his/her own existence, so one cannot think for him/herself alone according to African principle of thought. As Shuttes states it about Senghor: Senghor, one of the principal developers of the concept of Negritude, had a deep appreciation of European culture, but he strove to defend and develop African culture and other cultures as well. However, Senghor's main criticism of European culture was directed to its materialism and individualism, whether Marxist or Capitalist, which in his judgment makes a true understanding of persons and society. So does Archbishop Kpakala too.

Moreover, I do believe in the values of what Senghor calls the "civilization of the universal"; which refers to a symbiosis of cultures and civilizations. As Wiredu states it: "The intellectual history of mankind is a series of mutual borrowing and adaptations among races, nations, tribes and even smaller sub-groups", and "the work of a philosopher is part of a given tradition if and only if it is either produced within the context of that tradition or taken up and used it."<sup>18</sup> Any epistemology which is not rooted in one's way or tradition of life alienates that same society. On this point, Robert Schreiter's concept is of great importance: "glocalisation": the encounter of the global and the local. Using Schreiter own words: « *Intercultural encounter on whatever scale is frequently conflictual; calls for dialogue and mutuality often express more than reality* ». <sup>19</sup> *The local situation may indeed feel itself overwhelmed by the global, and sometimes that feeling is also fact. But local situations are not powerless either. They work out all kinds of arrangements, from syncretic borrowing to living in subaltern or dual systems.* <sup>20</sup> That means human beings have to fight the boundaries and the opposition between the individual and the community; between the "particular and the universal; between the "I" and the "WE"; between the Global and the local. That is my socio-epistemological stand: "think globally, universally and act locally or think

individually, locally and act universally. Any genuine thinking has positive repercussions on the society. I totally agree with Bodrunin when he says: "if a problem is philosophical, it must have a universal relevance to all men".<sup>21</sup> Therefore, I suggest Kpakala's statement to sound like "For us Africans, the *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) of Westerners is not enough; it requires the *Sumus ergo sum* (We are therefore I am). My wish is that *Sum ergo sumus* becomes one day a reality for Africa besides *Sumus ergo sum*.

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<sup>18</sup>P. BODRUNIN, *The Question of African Philosophy in Philosophy, (Journal of the royal Institute of Philosophy), (1981) No 56, 161 – 179.*

<sup>19</sup>R. SCHREITER, *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local,* 12.

<sup>20</sup>R. SCHREITER, *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local,* 12.

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