

## Going Back To the Stream: An Existential and Integrative Imperative

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### Abstract

“Going back to the stream” is a coined term from an expression “KENWERE É KOTSE YAN KOBUE KETSE” gotten from the Boki heuristic beliefs system. It connotes an existential command that injects consciousness in an individual and a guiding device in conflict resolution, and is integrative since it embraces a wide spectrum of issues and meanings in African philosophy. In this paper we would look at this term with a view to exposing it as an existential and integrative tool for explaining Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialism and also for resolving human problems.

**Keywords:** Boki, Sartre, Existentialism, Conflict Resolution, Integrative.

### 1. Introduction

#### *1.1 The Boki Nation*

The expression which forms the topic of this discussion, is a Boki expression found within the folk philosophy and psychology of the Boki people. It would be germane therefore, to briefly introduce by explaining who the Bokis are and where they can be located for the purpose of tracing the source of this rich aspect of Africa philosophy.

The people of Boki, are a sub-Bantu group whose origin is traceable to south Africa. The Bokis are believed to have migrated through central Africa to Cameroon, and later to Nigeria (Njama, 1996). According to Mgbang, they are found both in Cameroon and Nigeria. In Cameroon, they are found in Manyu division of South West province, while in Nigeria, they are found in Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State, and lies within the tropical rainforest zone and is blessed with abundant forest resources of great diversity. To the Boki people, the forest is a great source of wealth and is a dependable source of livelihood. This may be why Etukudo, said that the Boki people, depend on the forest for their economic livelihood and quality of life, and as such is a divine treasure

which provide a wide range of goods and services as well as being a part of their very existence.

It is interesting to mention that the forest forms an important aspect of the sources of the folk philosophy and psychology of the people. This is seen in the fact that streams are part of the forest, just as birds are inhabitants of the forest. Accordingly, the expression above which forms our topic is drawn from the forest birds and the streams where they drink from. These form part of their thought system, which in turn forms also an aspect of the African philosophy. A careful look at the Boki thought system shows that within the folk philosophy of traditional African communities, people do philosophize and reflect on fundamental problems about human nature. Through this way, they mould the total world view which gives meaning to reality using a distinctively African experience. This is so because, philosophy aims at making a synthesis and coherent picture of human experience and the world (Ncha, 138).

Our aim in this write up is to show that the term “kenwere é kotse yan kobue ketse” as an existential imperative, explains my unique way of understanding Sartre’s existentialism which could be used in conflict management, as the term is a wholistic tool in issues of human concern.

## **2. Existentialism**

Existentialism is a philosophical movement which claims that individual human beings create the meaning and essence of their lives. It is a movement or revolt against traditional philosophy in its method and concern. Simply, existentialism is a movement that believes in subjective choosing over objective reasoning, concrete experience over intellectual abstractions, individuality over mass culture, human freedom over determinism, and authentic living over in-authenticity. Lescoe, defines it as a type of philosophy, which endeavours to analyze the basic structures of human existence and call individuals to an awareness of their existence (Lescoe, P. 9).

For Ozumba, a commentator on existentialism, the term could be understood from the angle of integrative reasoning from which he sees it as a method of arriving reality through self-consciousness of action in order to achieve authentic existence (27).

Existentialism is also seen as an attitude or outlook. It was in this sense that Harold, uses it. According to him, existentialism is an attitude which emphasizes human existence and the qualities which are distinctive in individual person rather than man in the abstract or nature and the world in general (Harold, P. 290). Specifically, the existentialists reflect on the concrete human condition and assert that the neglect of this human condition could disrupt the peace and stability of an existing government. The civil and violent uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other Arab countries in the Arab world, appear to buttress this point.

Themes such as dread, boredom, alienation, the abused, freedom, commitment and nothingness, characterize existentialism. There several strands of existentialism. However, regardless of the strands one talks about, one idea remains thematic, and that is the concern with the basic facts of human existence. The dictum “existence precedes essence” is understood from the idea above. Some major existentialists include: Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Marleau Ponty, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and Soren Kierkegaard.

### **3. Jean Paul Sartre’s Existentialism**

Sartre was a French existentialist, who was born in 1905 in Paris and spent a good part of his life there. Although contemporary existentialism could be traced to the footsteps of Soren Kierkegaard, Sartre is widely seen as the key apostle of existentialism. What is called Sartre’s existentialism is the strand of existentialism peculiar to Sartre in which the human condition rather than the human nature is supreme and forms the corner stone of existentialism.

Francis Lescoe, says that “it is no overstatement to say without qualification whatsoever, that the best known existentialist today, is Jean Paul Sartre” (6). It is the direction or focus of Sartre’s existentialism that makes it relevant to human existence because it attempts to liberate man from the clutches of human predicament, and enables one to be creative at survival techniques. Sartre’s existentialism is heavily characterized by individual subjectivism. Man has no human nature and therefore, can step out to arrange for himself anything he wishes, making himself different from a stone, chain or other objects through the possession of human dignity by the fact of his subjective life. Man, according to Sartre, is a being that has the capacity to move himself towards a future and is conscious that he is doing so.

Sartre introduces two modes of existence or modes of being, that is two antithetical modes or ways of being. These modes of being are captured in his idea of Being-for-itself (L'être pour-soi) and Being-in-itself (L'être en-soi). It is germane to point out that if we relate this distinction to man, the implication may be that man shares both these attributes, one showing that his is just like a stone-en-soi, while the pour-soi indicates that he is a conscious subject which is a distinguishing feature that makes him different from a stone. Furthermore, to be a conscious subject, is to be placed constantly before a future. This means that the consequence of existence coming before essence which is the motto of existentialism, is that man not only creates himself but that the responsibility of man’s existence rests heavily on him.

Again, these modes of being are associated with consciousness and unconsciousness. To this end, Being-for-itself is the being of consciousness with man. Other entities outside man are identified and denoted by the being-in-itself which is the unconscious being. The being-for-itself as consciousness of an object, is also associated with nothingness,

emptiness and negativity. These features constitute the very foundation for man's struggle and suffering in the world. The reason being that man is always in the process of negating nothingness so as to perhaps reach a fullness. Man is not a totality but is always in the process of totalization. So, we can see that the being-for-itself becomes being simply by negating being by separating itself from and placing itself away from it. So the for-itself, is a being of nothingness and nothingness constitute its very essence (Sartre, P. 18).

Furthermore, the conscious being always experience a gap, a vacuum, an emptiness and nothingness which the for-itself attempts to fill by negating itself. In this way, the very traits of the for-itself lie at the base of its power of negation. The incomplete nature of man brings about the senselessness of his existence and this strives to accomplish his project of self-fulfillment, a process of totalization which ironically cannot reach totalization, because man is not and cannot be a totality. This shows that man is always in a state of becoming and potency which shows that being is meaningful at the level of the for-itself. Again Sartre, says that, this transcendence of the being-for-itself, is made possible by the tool of freedom with its heavy load of responsibility. Thus, the being-for-itself cannot have a steady identity and cannot be captured in anything in a permanent manner. The entire existence and happenings of the for itself, constitute a mammoth project for it to conquer nothingness and emptiness which negates itself in a consistent way. So, the being-for-itself is not what it is and is what it is not. The implication is that nothingness cannot be overcome since it is the very foundation of being and negation comes from nothingness. In this case, the reality of the individual human being is possible by a perpetual negation of being.

In contrast to the being-for-itself, the being in-itself, does not have nothingness and negation within its being. It cannot have anything other than itself, it is simply there and full of itself and nothing more. Following this, the being-in-itself is incapable of becoming something else other than itself. It is itself indefinite, and exhausts itself in being. It does not lack and therefore, needs no association with the other, it is what it is and is subject to temporality, Sartre explains further.

This Sartrean idea of polarized beings could be used in explaining most actions of man, and man's struggle and conflict in life could be discerned from the totalization process of the being-for-itself. Sartre's being-for-itself, is man conscious of the environment. This is the basis for social consciousness, which plays a prominent role in the stability and instability in any government.

In this write up we shall be explaining the implication of Sartre's existentialism in a social environment using the notion of "Going back to the stream".

#### **4. Going Back to the Stream as an Existential and Integrative Imperative**

In studying Sartre's existentialism I discovered that his philosophy could be understood from the phrase "Going back to the stream". I have coined this expression as a way of

giving a background to my way of understanding existentialism as a unique philosophy for solving contemporary problems in our society. We believe that Sartre's existentialism could most probably be explained and understood from the angle of this term. This expression is derived from aspects of African philosophy. This means that African philosophy has existential issues as part of its contents. Igbafen, supports this when he says that "Existential issues arise at every turn in the cultural lives of African peoples, but little or no conscious effort has been made to thematically situate existential issues in African philosophy" (91). This expression is properly located within the Boki heuristic belief system which is a fundamental content of the folk philosophy of the Boki people.

African philosophy, as we know is rich in proverbs, and wise sayings which apart from giving colour to our rich cultural heritage, plays a functional role in moulding and giving meaning to our world view and reality. This view gets support from Enyimba, when he says, "we believe that the basic concern of African philosophy is to address topical issues of philosophical interest which have bearing on African realities, world views and the way and manner in which they make sense of their existence" (96). Proverbs and wise sayings are pregnant with meanings and are constructed with the aim of repositioning and conscientizing and sensitizing man, so as to inculcate a sense of direction as he manages to get along with the complexities of his life.

This proverb in Boki that is pregnant with existential connotations is "KENWERE É KOTSE YAN KOBUE KETSE" This literally means no matter how high a bird flies, it must come down to the stream. It can as well be explained as going back to the root, the fundamentals, the facts, the crux of the matter. It involves a heavy task of retracing one's steps, to reappraise, reorganize, reinvent, reposition, reinforce, for the onerous task of existence. Philosophy as a concept means many things to many people. It provides a medium through which we can have an insight into reality. One role of philosophy is that it enables us to develop the ability to see all aspects of situations (Egbeke, 1). This integrative and cognitive role of philosophy could be seen in existentialism. Here we see philosophy in action through the technique of "Going back to the stream" which is metaphorically understood and which connotes the heart of existentialism. We can also see philosophy taking a dive to its roots, 'man and his existence' for a worthwhile relationship.

The import of the above is seen in the definition that "existentialism is a philosophy which is concerned with the concrete aspects of existence and the ambiguities and paradoxes that constitute the inner being of man (Agulana, 47). "Going back to the stream" is an invitation for man to become involve in existence and not only to think. The bird that flies high in the sky suddenly realizes an empty space, a dangerous void with no place to rest. The only solution is to resort to the stream. "Going back to the stream" therefore, constitute an existential imperative, a call to action, to look inward, to re-examine oneself and square up for the existential task. The radical movement of the bird down to the stream shows that there is nothing up there to give meaning to life, but that life is understood from the stream

which is the concrete environment. It is a radical negation of the deception found in the sky. As we know, existentialism and existentialists opposed abstract intellectualism but turned to man's immediate personal experience.

One major aim of existentialism, according to Nyong, was to correct the perceived imbalance in the perception of reality which rendered philosophizing arid, abstract, and totally out of touch with human being (1). The reason was that much premium was placed on reason as a human faculty. "Going back to the stream" denotes a number of things: man kind has freewill. The decision of the bird to go back to the stream involves a choice, and freedom of choice, through which each individual creates his own nature, is one of the basic themes of existentialism.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his "Being and nothingness" says that nothingness is the substratum of freedom understood in terms of negation and nihilation. In this case, by saying that something is, one is at the same time saying that something else is not. That is any affirmation implies a negation of the opposite (18). For instance, the "bird" that made the choice of going back to the stream, is negating the emptiness of the sky. It does so by affirming that it exists and does so in a concrete environment.

When we apply this to a conflict situation, such as the Niger Delta, during the militancy period, we realize that the people are actually affirming their existence by negating the degradation of their environment. Through their actions, they attempt to define and redefined their existence which constitutes their living. For the existentialists, life is a series of choices and they believe in fighting for life. In the Niger Delta, and of course in most human activities, one finds the instinct of self-preservation dominant. Existentialism is best understood by this idea of self preservation and protecting the environment on which life is hinged, and this entails standing up to embrace the situation and fighting for survival. It is worth mentioning that Camus, Sartre, and Nietzsche, were involved in various wars, because they had strong belief in fighting for survival of their respective countries. They believed that man is a conscious subject, rather than a thing to be predicated or manipulated. Man exists as a conscious being and not in accordance with any definition, essence, generalization or system.

"Going back to the stream" as the best option for the 'bird' instills a sense of consciousness in the bird about its existence to embrace it and subjectively fight for it. Existentialism as we know ignites social consciousness, responsibility, and encourages genuine struggle for control and survival. We can see this in the activities within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. People are struggling to control their lives and resources, against the imposition and control of the federal government and any systematization of their lives. This is an expression of their freedom which is basic to any existentialist. Sartre mentioned that freedom consisted in frankly confronting the situation into which one had deliberately entered and accepting all one's responsibilities (Sartre, 487).

It is important to point out that responsibility is effective and realistic when it is seen from the angle of action. Till the introduction of amnesty for the militants, the problem of the

Niger Delta only received words and talks but no reasonable action. Existentialism is a call to action and responsibility. “Going back to the stream” is a clarion call on the Nigerian government to come down and appreciate the problems on ground for positive action rather than engaging in ideas that have no existential importance to the Niger Deltans. Gbenga, a Vanguard columnist, observes this way, “the people have lost interest in talks, they might have found a criminal route to this human instinct, but have the authorities provided alternatives? (Vanguard, Jan. 12. p. 18).

Here we find that talks are unreal and deceptive and are left only at the level of ideas. The Nigerian government posture as it concerns the Niger Delta over the years confirms this observation. The cause of incessant strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities-ASUU, is heavily attributed to this attitude. Equally, the people of the Niger Delta, particularly those that live along the creeks, are constantly faced with the stark realities of life, such as death, starvation, underdevelopment, lack of education, polluted land, unemployment, gross abuse of human rights and other ecological disasters. The conflict in the Niger Delta could be traced to the activities of the oil companies which have impeded the effort of the people to carry out their existence authentically. This led to the rise in defence of their existence. Oshita, explains it this way “the conflict in Niger Delta could thus be linked to be a denial of the ontological needs of the people, and complicated by communal content, governance of the state and international linkages. It transcends the conception of simply as the fear of the past lived in the present; it is an engrained and habitual consciousness of deprivation” (244).

Following this, it would be efficacious using an existential approach of “Going back to the stream” to solving the Niger Delta problem, since this approach seeks for an understanding and firm grip of the existential situation, rather than dwell on the rationale for the presence of the oil companies.

Sartre’s existentialism is all about responsibility, consciousness and recognition of the individual subjective existential situation. It is argued from the point of Sartre’s existentialism, that Nigeria should be subjectively conscious of the fact of her problems around the Delta region and respond aggressively towards ameliorating the plight of the people. The posture of government over the plight of the Niger Delta region shows disrespect for humanity and deliberate alienation of the people from their environment. The degradation of the environment reduced the people to mere objects without much relevance, and worse still; the army of unemployed has been instrumentalized and provides channels for mayhem which in turn provide a fertile ground for unfairness and injustice. The revolt of the people against the government is largely due to this factor. It is a fight for life and survival. Existentialism is seen as a revolt or movement against the degradation and depersonalization of man which was a consequence of the industrial society which failed to accord man his due status and dignity as man, and this led to his alienation.

It is important to point out that philosophy has a symbiotic relationship with the environment, because philosophy is environment friendly. This is relationship could be

traced to the ancient times. It was in the ancient period of philosophical enquiry among the pre-Socratics that the first direct interest in the physical environment with the emphasis on matter as the definitive character of the age was made (Oshita, 35). This is where man's importance is drawn, for man's presence within the environment gave rise to the motto of existentialism. "Existence precedes essence". So, the relationship of philosophy with environment is most captured in existentialism. The antecedents of existentialism in Europe, the suffering, anguish and self condemnation by man required a reappraisal of his concrete existence. This is the strongest message of existentialism. "Going back to the stream" as an existential imperative call for a second thought over the inhuman situation in the Niger Delta. In view of the horrible experiences of hunger, oil spillages, poverty, violence, killings, misery and uncertainty, Sartre's existentialism solicits for the enthronement of a safe and secured Niger Delta where disasters like the ones enumerated above, and ecological breakdown as a result of the failure of human reason will be checkmated.

"Going back to the stream" represents a turning point in man. Implicit in this idea are the notions of choice, responsibility and reexamination. These notions are fundamental to existentialism and serve as pathfinders in our search for authentic existence. They also constitute ingredients of man's freedom. In explaining Sartre's existentialism, Omoregbe says that the most important thing among others that man does with his freedom is the making of a fundamental choice. Sartre calls it original choice (99). This is the basic choice or decision that every man makes and it forms the basis for self-orientation and the determining factor for other choices and actions. In the face of an indifferent government, the people of the Niger Delta are thrown back upon their own freedom. In this case, acting authentically becomes acting in the light of the open space of possibilities that the situation allows. It allows the people to discover the need to define their own existence and to fashion out their techniques for survival. This is discernible in the various approaches the people of Niger Delta have adopted to address their problems around the Niger Delta.

It is important to say that existentialism attempts to inject the spirit of seriousness and consciousness in the life of an individual or people. In this case, "Going back to the stream" involves taking a radical decision about one's existence. This is because life needs a constant renewal, reappraisal and repositioning in order to be able to mould meaning out of life. Just as the people of the Niger Delta consciousness and social awareness is aroused through existential thinking, the federal government equally can be guided by this philosophy by refraining from the old ways of doing things or following others blindly. The government can reject the advice of the imperialists and their agents-oil companies-by boldly steering its own canoe through the existential ability of continuously reinventing itself through authentic actions and decisions. It should take a fundamental decision of diving down to the stream where there is real life in order to chart a new course for the Niger Delta. This would constitute a radical charge, a major characteristic of existentialism, in Sartre's understanding, captured by "Going back to the stream" phenomenon. It would



also mean for the government, a new way of looking at the situation, a new value system, a new attitude, a new standard of judging things and a new position of interpreting the activities in the Niger Delta. This exposes “Going back to the stream” as an integrative and humanistic approach with existential trappings. This complementary and integrative approach is seen in the fact that integrative humanism provides a method and channel for us to enjoy the advantages of existential justice, thus fulfilling its humanist role as the most human philosophy of life (Ncha, 60).

It is worth mentioning that the lack of political and moral will, indecision, avoidance or postponement of concrete decisions characterized the behaviour of the Nigerian government over the years. This is what is called inauthentic life” according to Heidegger and Sartre calls it “bad faith”. Sartre’s existentialism advises that we take immediate decisions in certain situations, no matter how unpleasant such may be. So, when the right decisions that affect the people in terms of solving their problems are taken, then social justice would have been achieved. Sartre therefore, sues for social justice since he advocates for a reappraisal of the concrete existential situation of the people.

“Going back to the stream” is a negation of inaction it is a call to inclusiveness and participatory governance since existentialism recognizes every one as part of existence. This is where one finds the integrativeness of existentialism as a purposeful and useful humanism.

## 5. Conclusion

So far, we have seen that the expression “KENWERE É KOTSE YAN KOBUE KETSE” Going back to the stream” is an existential phenomenon. Through this, we have been able to see that the happenings in the Niger Delta have existential trappings. It is also possible to draw a relationship between the activities around the Niger Delta, the impact on lives of the people then, their reactions in all ramifications, and the position of existentialism. The struggle in the trouble region is against the authorities who have ignored the common man’s existence but concentrate on ideas that generate selfish money, embarking on elephantine projects that are executed in the sky with no relevance to the people on the ground. It is recall that existentialism came as a revolt against some grandiose philosophical programmes that have no relevance to man on ground. The authorities are concentrating on the characteristics which people generally have in Nigeria, but the subjective peculiarities and uniqueness of the Niger Delta is often ignored, while its welfare and importance is sacrificed on the alter of common good.

In conclusion, one can say that using Sartre’s philosophy, the state holders in the Niger Delta could see existentialism as the living philosophy and the peace process-amnesty- as a unifying process of totalization, a synthesis that brings an anachronistic past the existential present, towards a future that is not already made but is in the making.

Conclusively, it is germane to point out that in a world where personal accountability for decisions and actions made, seems to be fading in public opinion and excuses seem to be replacing responsibility, “Going back to the stream” is liberating the oppressed people of the world, who do not rely on fate or chance to guide them through the path of life, but on the consciousness of individual existential situation. Finally, this paper submits that existentializing politics in any society, especially in Nigeria, becomes the panacea for stability, indeed, “Going back to the stream” is a tool for conflict management and resolution.

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