Exploring Recent Themes in African Spiritual Philosophy

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Abstract
There are theoretical and thematic shifts in African spiritual philosophy literature on the meaning of spirituality. On the one hand, traditional conceptions of spirituality are based on the dimensions of transcendence and supernaturalism. Common themes include ritualism, totemism, incantation, ancestorism, reincarnation, destiny, metempsychosis, witchcraft, death, soul, deities, etc. On the other hand, the evolving trend appeals to naturality and immanence. Common themes include sacrality, piety, respectability, relatability, existential gratitude, sacred feminine, etc. This work explores these recent and developing themes. It aims to show that the understanding of spirituality in African modernity is increasingly linked to psychological traits expressed in attitude and behaviour as against traditional understanding that focused on cultural/ religious practices such as ritualism, ancestorism, and deities. The analysis reveals that recent studies link the experience of spirituality with wholeness and interdependence, and a recognition of one's place in the connective web of other existents in nature. **Keywords:** Sacrality, Piety, Respectability, Relatability, Gratitude, Sacred feminine, Spirituality.

Introduction
Interest in spirituality is as old as man. Early discussions about the nature of man and being in general centred around the idea of spirit. Ancient Greek literature is annotated with stories of interactions of spiritual forces and their dominance in human affairs (JAEGER 1936). In fact, in early Greek philosophical tradition, doing philosophy was seen as a form of "spiritual exercise" – connected with the transformation of the whole person defined as a unity of body and soul (ŠĶESTERIS 2013, 1743). This began with the thought of Pythagoras who introduced a spiritocentric account of history, that the phenomenal world is animated by spiritual elements that transmigrated from the world of spirits to embody in matter (JAEGER 1936, 83). This account became dominant and later influenced Plato's thought, who regarded the transcendent spiritual realm as the ecosystem for eternal truth (PELTONEN 2019, 235). This idea influenced subsequent thinking in the West – described by Whitehead as footnotes to Plato's thought (PELTONEN 2019, 234). Importantly, spirit took on the character of

invisibility and transcendence. One could not have access to the spiritual via material sensations since spirit was beyond matter, except by transcendence (intuition, meditation, or reflection). This later characterized experience of spirituality as an attunement towards the invisible 'being' that lies outside matter. This attunement required mortification of the sensuous seen as the 'phenomenon of concealment' (JAEGER 1936, 58). With the spiritual viewed as invisible and transcendent, yet the authentic mode of being, human beings placed a premium on the invisible and transcendent as against the visible and immanent.

This approach dominated Western thinking until the time of Spinoza, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Husserl – who viewed spirit as immanent in, and inseparable from, matter. Hegel, for instance, defined spirit as the driving force of history; matter became the unfoldment of the spirit, and human consciousness emerged as the highest stage of the evolution of spirit (HEGEL 1870, 253-254). So, in the modern era, spirit became immanent (contemporaneous, ubiquitous and visible) in matter as against the absolute transcendence and invisibility in Platonist-Aristotelian philosophical disposition that characterized pre-modern thought. After Hegel and fellow idealists, the subject of the spiritual was relegated to the background in Western philosophical discourse. Modern science, which prioritizes empiricism, dominated Western thought through the re-enactment of Cartesian-Humean empiricism. The physical world was defined essentially as composed of material particles that aggregate and continue to evolve (GLENNAN 2017). The spirit of empirical science was extended to Western philosophy by the logical positivists who sought empirical explanation and interpretation for all phenomena (PASSMORE 1967). Any event that could not be given the empirical explanation of positive science was regarded as a myth. Thus, the spiritual was disparaged, and any discourse on spirit was discouraged. Meanwhile, in early African philosophy, discussion on spirit gained traction. This would later be disparaged by a group of professional philosophers who saw themselves as universalists. The discourse on the spiritual was tagged ethnophilosophy and condemned (IBANGA 2022a, 40-41). So, in African philosophy, as in Western philosophy, discourse on spirit was suppressed because it was thought to suffocate reason and counterproductive to the development of human consciousness.

In the African philosophical tradition, discourse on spirit has been reanimated. Recent works by contemporary African philosophers have discussed various themes in spiritual philosophy directly and indirectly. But sometimes they mask their works as metaphysics even though they are discussing spiritual themes. This article is designed to explore the recent themes in African spiritual philosophy. One thing that will be evident in this article is the increasing shift from supernaturalism and transcendence to naturalism and immanence in the spiritual philosophy of the continent although, philosophers like Godfrey Ozumba, Thaddeus Metz, Ada Agada, Aribiah Attoe and others have continued to discuss God-related issues in their works. In this article, I focus on the themes of sacrality, piety, relatability, existential gratitude, respectability, and sacred feminine – which are recently raised especially in the works of Chigbo Ekwealo and Diana-Abasi Ibanga. I will appeal to some ideas discussed in Asouzu, Metz, Agada, and Attoe to strengthen the analysis. In the next section, I will briefly discuss the traditional conception of spirituality in African philosophy. Thereafter, I will introduce

another section to discuss the contemporary conception of spirituality in African thinking. This is to be followed by a comprehensive analysis of six selected evolving themes in recent African spiritual philosophy. I will show how these spiritual themes are grounded in the theory of force, which is the overarching metaphysical framework of African philosophy. From the discourse, I will develop a comprehensive definition of spirituality.

Defining Spirituality

What is spirituality? Drawing from both the traditional and the contemporary paradigms, a generalized definition of spirituality may be given as: (a) religious systems of beliefs and values such as one's faith and connection with God; (b) life's meaning, purpose and connection with others such as family, friends, work, nature, culture, and even oneself; (c) non-religious systems of beliefs and values such as success and failure, lifestyle and preferences, materiality and secularity, individualism and collectivism, exclusivity and diversity; (d) metaphysical or transcendental concerns about existential challenges such as questions of identity, suffering and death, guilt and shame, freedom and responsibility, reconciliation and forgiveness, hope and despair; and (e) principles, qualities, and values such as love, kindness, concern, meekness, mercy, cooperation, tolerance, friendliness, brotherliness, empathy, justice, patience, truthfulness, inclusivity, modesty, gratitude, piety, devotion, and accommodation.

Precisely, in contemporary African thinking, "spirituality involves deeper human values" expressed in attitudes and behaviours (MARUMO and CHAKALE 2018, 11697). Hence, spirituality is linked with the 'experience of beauty' or the 'beautiful soul', which is a psychological disposition of love, kindness, tolerance, and harmoniousness (EKWEALO 2012a, 174, 297). In African philosophy, "Experience of beauty has to do with wholeness and interdependence; and recognizing one's place in the connective web of other existents" (IBANGA 2017b, 258). Therefore, locating spirituality in the experience of beauty implies that spirituality involves the feeling of the complexity of relations and complementarity, that is, a feeling of connection to other existents, rather than a feeling of opposites or isolation. Spirituality understood in terms of mutual exclusivity or "I-alonism" is un-African (EKWEALO 2012a, 296). Hence, Attoe describes the experience of God as that of interdependence (2022, 55). Yet, spirituality is conceptualized as "personal experience" or the process of "self-realization" based on an intimate relationship with the transcendent-immanent self (EKWEALO 2012a, 296). Spirituality implies self-realization in the communal sense, that is, the tendency to want to flourish and realize oneself in harmony with other existents. Importantly, self-realization is attainable in conversation or interaction with other existents. Conversation is the foundation of meaning-making in African worldview (ATTOE 2021). It is in conversation that one can participate in the web of life (IBANGA 2017c, 84-85). Spirituality is a category that belongs to the definition or basic constitution of the relations between two or more persons/things considered as complementary wholeness, so that without the relation, persons and things lose their individual sense of spirituality.

Traditional Conception of Spirituality

The notion of spirituality is not new to African philosophy. For decades, African philosophers, especially those in the tradition of ethnophilosophy, weaved their research activities around themes related to spirit. Descriptions and explanations of the notions of the spiritual was pursued with diverse research questions using different methodologies. A body of literature was considered African philosophy if it was rooted in the assumption that "reality is primarily spiritual" (MOMOH 1989a, 18). A certain understanding stood out from the works of scholars about the concept of spirit, which was the main reason African spiritual philosophy was disparaged by professional philosophers on the continent. In many works by early African philosophers, spirit or the spiritual was interpreted to imply the 'supernatural' (AGADA 2022a, 68-70). Also, as a reaction to Placide Tempels's seminal work that denied the idea of transcendence in African conceptions of being (TEMPELS 1959, 52), many African philosophers sought to interpret the spiritual to imply 'transcendence' (in terms of being-outside-the-world) to level up with Western philosophy that they saw as a model. So, the notions of spirit and the spiritual in African thought were mainly associated with transcendence and the supernatural. In addition, some scholars like John Mbiti and Pantaleon Iroegbu summarily conceptualized the spiritual merely in relation to God (or deities) so long as God was conceived as transcendent and supernatural. Thus, transcendence and supernaturality formed a conceptual framework that enabled an understanding of the various spirit-related or God-related themes in early African philosophy.

This conceptual framework is crucial to understanding the different themes that were developed in African spiritual philosophy. The main themes include worship/religion, sacrifice, ritualism, incantation/prayer, totemism, reincarnation, soul, destiny, spirit, deity, sacredness, metempsychosis, transmigration, living-dead (ancestor), witchcraft, magic, evil, death, deities, force, God, etc. To understand these themes, one must appeal to the conceptual framework alluded to above. In each of the themes, there are dimensions of transcendence and supernaturalism. Early African spiritual philosophers articulated these themes to bring out these dimensions, thus, earning the criticisms of some professional philosophers, like Paulin Hountondji, Peter Bodunrin, Odera Oruka, and Kwasi Wiredu, who disparaged their works as either unphilosophical or anachronistic. Let me explain what each of the key concepts in the framework means and entails.

Transcendence: This term is formed as a combination of two Latin words "trans" meaning 'beyond' and "scandare" meaning 'to climb'. Together, they mean 'to go beyond' or 'to climb beyond'. The latter disjunct best expresses the meaning of the word as it is used in philosophy, which is usually attuned to signify vertical-hierarchical relation. According to Karl Jaspers, the use of the term in a philosophical sense is traceable to St. Augustine – who sought via "philosophical transcending" to ground the idea of God in reason (1962, 196, 262). Later, the term was critically employed by Immanuel Kant (1998) in his *Critique of Pure Reason* to deal with the relation between subject and object, in terms of establishing the metaphysical basis of cognition. Generally, in philosophical

usage, transcendence means passing over that which is present in sense experience to that which can be intuited in the mind. This is captured in this definition, that transcendence is "going beyond" or "passing over" that involves "essentially one from beings to their Being" (UNAH 2002, 80). This expresses an effort to reach essences, which is viewed as something that exists beyond sense reality.

On the one hand, philosophical transcending is grounded in analytical (logical) reasoning. On the other hand, the transcendent is predisposed as an independent, objective, invisible, other-worldly, and suprasensible phenomenon. In traditional African spiritual philosophy, "transcendence indicates the supernatural sphere" and is related to deities (AGADA 2017, 26). In fact, the transcendent is associated with God and the invisible spiritual order. Transcendence is rooted in intuition. Also, some early African spiritual philosophers believe in, what may be called, 'spiritual transcendence' as Africa's own unique way of transcending. This includes esoteric, paranormal, mystical, and emotive activities such as adulation, ritual, astral projection, telepathy, precognition, remote viewing, telekinesis, teleportation, etc. Conversely, recent African spiritual philosophers are more analytical in their approach to spiritual themes.

Supernaturality: This term comes from the Latin word "supernaturalis", which means 'beyond nature'. It refers to events that are not explicable with the physical laws of nature (MAJEED 2012, 58). In other words, supernaturality is an attribute of something that is beyond scientific intelligibility. It is not necessarily suprasensible or invisible. The key point is that it is not natural, that is, inexplicable or unintelligible within the framework of physics. The closest philosophical synonym is metaphysics – if we take the literal definition of metaphysics that means 'beyond nature'. However, metaphysics cannot be used as a substitute for supernaturality. Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that studies the fundamental nature of reality, the structure of being – including notions of freedom and determinism, subjectivity and objectivity, mind and matter, physical and spiritual, nothing and something, reality and unreality, one and many, being and non-being, etc. This definition implicates both the natural and the unnatural, the material and the immaterial, the physical and the spiritual within the scope of metaphysics. This is not the same thing with supernaturality, which focuses exclusively on unnatural phenomena (UNAH 2002, 6). In traditional African spiritual philosophy, the notion of supernaturality is associated with extraterritorial phenomena in terms of its causal origin and cosmic effect (MARUMO and CHAKALE 2018, 11697).

Contemporary Conception of Spirituality
The meaning of spirituality is changing in the African philosophical context. This indicates a shift in consciousness about what is regarded as 'spiritual'. The shift implies that spirituality is no longer viewed via the lenses of postcolonial African religions (Islam and Christianity) and supernaturalism that characterized traditional African religions:

> By spiritualism, we are de-emphasizing theology of the contemporary African religions namely Christianity and Islam which are sectarian and promote divisiveness and extremism. Unlike these post-colonial, alien religions, African traditional religions were grounded in tolerance, accommodation and inter-faith activities and relationships, a correlation of their man-nature connectedness. (EKWEALO 2011, 9)

This means that contemporary understanding of spirituality is the consciousness rooted in psychological traits expressed in attitude and behaviour. Spirituality is a consciousness of one's place in the world as part of and one with the gestalt oneness of the world together with animals, plants, and ecosystems. This is in tune with the African communal conception of relationship as one "in which individuals cognitively, emotionally, conatively and volitionally identify with each other, that is, through psychological attitudes such as thinking of oneself as part of a group" (EWUOSO 2021, 4). This consciousness enables us to exhibit harmonious attributes such as love, kindness, benevolence, fairness, friendliness, truthfulness, peacefulness, patience, justice, tolerance, cooperation, etc. Also, spirituality is defined as "spiritual consciousness grounded on the principle of equity, justice, respectful and dignified relation of all beings in reality" (EKWEALO 2011, 11).

From the foregoing, it is evident that spirituality in African philosophy is inclined towards human-to-human, human-to-nature, and human-to-God relatedness. In fact, God is viewed as part of nature (MOMOH 1989b; EKWEALO 2012a; AGADA 2015; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). This does not mean that there is no sustained discourse on the notion of God and its implication for events in the world. African philosophers like Agada (2015) and Attoe (2022) are renewing the discourse on God with interesting dimensions. Yet, recent works by African philosophers demonstrate an increasing shift away from supernaturality towards naturality, and from transcendence towards immanence. Together, the two concepts – naturality and immanence – form a conceptual framework for making sense of the evolving trend in African spiritual philosophy. This conceptual framework is crucial to understanding the recent themes that are developing in African spiritual philosophy. Let me briefly explain them here.

Naturality: A simple way of understanding this notion in our context is to juxtapose it as the opposite of supernaturality. The term comes from the Latin word "naturalis". It refers to a sphere of nature or phenomena associated with nature. Philosophically, this term is used in two senses as: (a) biomimetic realism often in a functional or teleological sense, and (b) relating to reason or rationality. It seeks to provide the standard for action. The aim is to shape our actions to meet the standards set by nature, especially in terms of the processes and structure of the natural environment. In African philosophy, synthetic statements are used to represent the naturalistic dimension of spiritual thinking and conceptual modelling (ASOUZU 2011, 13). Supernaturalism no longer dominantly characterize the notion of spirituality as was the case in the past. The focus is now on naturalising spiritual-connotated concepts via synthetic reflection.

Immanence: A simple way of understanding this concept in our context is to juxtapose it as the opposite of transcendence. "Immanence is conceptualized in terms of the material world" (AGADA 2017, 26). The term comes from the Latin word "manere" meaning 'to stay within' or "immanere" meaning 'to inhabit'. It was used to express the presence of God in the world or the world as the manifestation of the being of God (ROLLI 2004, 51-52). In African philosophical tradition, immanence is often expressed simultaneously as transcendence. This is usually demonstrated with the notion of *force*, which is distinct, objective, independent, and prior to the universe yet participating in the world through its yearning (AGADA 2015, 96) or interactions/activities (ATTOE 2022, 84).

The notion of immanence expresses the view that the universe is a manifestation of *force,* and this is implicated in its interconnectedness. In this sense, everything is intrinsically linked to everything else and together they constitute the unity of being. Even though *force* (or being) is conceived as immanent-transcendent spiritual essence, its mode of expression is through the concrete physical nature opened to sense experience. *Force* is the transcendent spiritual essence of all things, yet it is immanent in everything. In different African philosophy texts, *force* is interpreted to mean God. Hence, some African spiritual philosophers appeal to pansophism (MOMOH 1989b), pantheism (EKWEALO 2012a), and panpsychism (AGADA 2015). So, in this context, spirituality is about interconnecting with human and nonhuman nature as part of oneself (EKWEALO 2017, 96). Attitudes that promote harmony, interrelatedness and loveliness are designated as an expression of spirituality.

Recent Themes in Spiritual Philosophy

There is an increasing shift in the literature on the meaning of spirituality or the spiritual. This shift has been implicated in the types of themes frequently discussed and the dimensions brought to them. The recent themes evolving in the field include sacrality, piety, relatability, respectability, existential gratitude, sacred feminine, life-meaning, etc. Metz leads the field of spiritual philosophy in Africa with his pioneering works on *meaning in life*. However, his work is deeply influenced by the Anglo-American intellectual tradition (KUKITA 2015, 208). Nevertheless, there are works by African philosophers concerning *meaning in life* and its variant *meaning of life*, which are reactions to the pioneering works of Metz. However, discourse on *meaning in life*, an aspect of spiritual philosophy, is not included for consideration in this work because of the European influence on it. This article focuses squarely on recent themes in spiritual philosophy that are rooted in African intellectual history.

Sacrality: This theme is central in Ekwealo's analysis of the notion of *ndu* (life-force). Sacrality is the noun for the adjective sacred. There are two major expressions of its meaning. First, in the commonly used religious denotative sense, it means consecrated or sanctified, that is, set apart for solemn religious devotion.

Second, in the religious connotative sense, it means inviolable, inalienable, and unalterable. To say that something is sacred or sacral means that it is not to be violated, dishonoured, altered, alienated, infringed upon, or interfered with. It is in this second sense that Ekwealo uses 'sacrality' in his works in relation to the notion of life-force. The idea is that *ndu* (life or life-force) is sacred because it is the essence of life (EKWEALO 2017, 74). It is the primal energy that begets all things both animate and inanimate. Life-force is the wellspring from which beings come into existence and are sustained therein. This quality is not just present in everything, but it connects everything to everything else (Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya 2022, 202). This gestalt wholeness of all things is held as sacred. Since life-force is the building block of life – the primary quality that sustains every existent being – it becomes imperative to protect it from being infringed upon, interfered with, violated, or estranged. In this direction, every entity that possesses this quality must be protected and nurtured.

This is how life or life-force acquired the status of sacrality in African spiritual philosophy. The notion of *life-force* is used alternatively with *vital force* (IBANGA 2020, 25), and it is identified with God due to its creative quality (EKWEALO 2012a, 297). This implies that in securing life one is rendering a service to God. Life is supreme and the most important quality (EKWEALO 2012b, 104). Preservation of life is considered the highest duty man owes to himself and God. In relating to any existent (animate or inanimate), one must pay attention to the fact that it possesses life or life-force and must relate with it in such a way that this quality is not violated whether willingly or by negligence. If this quality would be affected in the relation, then such must be out of necessity or inevitability (EKWEALO 2014, 194) but one that adds to the pool of life in the cosmic gestalt sense (IBANGA 2017a, 117) and must be accompanied with permission-seeking akin to supplication indicating a need of borrowing to complement (EKWEALO 2011, 4).

Piety: This is another major theme in Ekwealo's writings. Piety is loaded with religious intonations referring to deference, veneration, profound awe, and an expression of reverence or devotion (duty) to something – especially of a deity. In Ekwealo's writings, piety is expressed as an attitude of the mind and a behavioural disposition that inspires awe, devotion, and respect for another entity (EKWEALO 2017, 94). It is an expression of innate mental attitudes such as cleanliness, friendliness, kindness, benevolence, truthfulness, love, peace, patience, tolerance, gratitude, modesty, justice, harmony, and interdependence. Ekwealo asserts that "Whenever as humans we are exhibiting these attributes, we are calling forth our innate godliness in ourselves" (2012a, 167). In other words, these qualities are an expression of our godliness. Spirituality consists in promoting balance, harmony, well-being, and social justice.

Meanwhile, these attributes are not applicable to the human realm only; rather it is to be demonstrated towards nonhuman animals, plants, and the entire ecosystem (EKWEALO 2017, 122). This is considered service to God since nature itself is an embodiment and a reflection of God (EKWEALO 2012a, 166, 297). Piety is defined as the attitude of mind and/or an activity that serves to maintain existential balance in nature. Impiety refers to the mental attitude or an activity that can disrupt this balance. Maintaining a good and respectful relationship with fellow human beings and with all entities in nature is regarded as the height of piety (EKWEALO 2017, 94). One does not need to pour libation, recite sacred verses, perform rites, or bow to certain deities to be considered pietistic or spiritual. Spirituality is defined by our relationship with fellow human beings and nonhuman nature. Attitudes and behaviours that disrupt balance and harmony in the community/ecosystem or that bring hardship and pain to any part of nature are regarded as evil. Sustainability practices such as caring for the environment are recognized as an expression of one's sense of goodliness or spirituality.

Respectability: This is one of the most widely discussed themes in African philosophy. But its applicability to spiritual philosophy is scanty and recent. So, what is respectability? The way this notion is used in African philosophy literature is about recognizing and acknowledging rights, limits, boundaries, self-worth, dignity, identity, and the existence of others in nature (EKWEALO 2012b, 92; 2014, 195; IBANGA 2014, 187; 2018, 127). According to Julius Nyerere, respect means "a recognition of mutual involvement in one another" (1968, 107). Francis explains that "mutual involvement implies that by recognizing one's basic humanity and sacrality of one's life-force one must also simultaneously recognize those same qualities in the other person by virtue of his/her basic humanity and membership in the human society" (2018, 49-50). In addition, Ekwealo argues that the recognition of the rights of others is not only applicable to human beings but must be extended to all beings including nonhuman animals, plants, and inanimate nature (2011, 5). We must recognize that every existent in nature possesses basic rights and intrinsic values – making existent things ends-in-themselves.

Life or life-force is the basic right that every existent (animate and inanimate) possesses in-itself and that entitles it as a member of the wider natural community (EKWEALO 2011, 4; 2012b, 92; IBANGA 2014, 188; 2018, 127; 2020, 25; CHIMAKONAM and OGBONNAYA 2022: 201). Life is sacred and must be secured. It is the primary value that makes existence possible and sustains it. Life is prior to all other values, and it is by it that every other value becomes possible. This makes the right to life a basic right possessed by every existent thing in the wider natural community – including the ecosystem. This basic right must be recognized and respected in every existent (EKWEALO 2012b, 92; IBANGA 2014, 188). Since everything has life in itself; they are made sacred by the life that they possess. Therefore, our relation to any existent, human and nonhuman or animate and inanimate, must be one based on respect. It follows that

any action that will negatively affect this right must be "absolutely necessary" (IBANGA 2018, 130) and accompanied by modesty (EKWEALO 2011, 4). Moreover, respect is not seen merely as a negative duty such as 'do no harm'. Respect involves acting to secure, protect, support, and nourish other existents or their ecosystem so that they can continue to flourish within the natural community (IBANGA 2018, 130). So, the duty of respect is one that can be identified with spiritual care vis-à-vis deference, reverence, devotion, observance, and moral care. Precisely, spiritual care is about the act of helping a person or thing to experience meaning in life by making the person experience a connection with the divine or the wider natural community.

Furthermore, respect is about recognizing, acknowledging, and securing natural boundaries. Drawing from the Annang sustainability principle *K'unuk Adaha Abot* (do not shift natural boundaries or do not alter natural order), Ibanga calls for respect for "natural boundaries" (2018, 127). There are boundaries in nature that must be respected to avoid the disruption of the web of existence. For example, certain places are sacralized as the abode of the spirits, and/or as dedicated spheres of certain plants or animals, etc. These can be water bodies, wetlands, forests, highlands, wilderness, etc. These are spaces in nature that provide a safe operating threshold for the functionality of specific existents and that if encroached could result in catastrophes. Encroachment on natural boundaries can be due to unsustainable practices involved in human activities leading to the extinction or depletion of some members of the natural community. Generally, earth systems (air, land, water bodies, etc.) interlock with the basic right to life of existents in nature. Therefore, "Respecting the right of existence of other entities in nature implies not denying them space to exist" (IBANGA 2018, 127). Space is crucial in the African moral worldview. Space provides the support system for both visible and invisible beings to express themselves vis-à-vis "wellbeing of the environment [which] invariably entails a good life" for all existents (LAWAL and AYUBA 2021, 43). It is an important spiritual charge that these spaces are respected to ensure existential harmony.

Relatability: This is another widely discussed theme in African philosophy. In fact, there is hardly a work done in African philosophy where the theme of relatability would not be discussed under different nomenclatures. In recent times, the theme of relatability has been employed by Ibanga in developing African spiritual philosophy. So, what is relatability? Since relatability is derived from relationality, I will first discuss the latter before the former. There are different ways African philosophers have tried to describe it – including interdependence, mutuality, complementarity, interrelatedness, interconnectedness, mutual dependence, relationalism, interactionism, and so on. I want to focus on the definitions provided by Metz and Attoe. While the former promotes a normative (ethical) account, the latter offers a metaphysical account to undergird the account of the former. Both approaches are important to understanding the spiritual relatability theory provided here.

Relationality is the philosophical viewpoint that accounts for solidarity (with others) as the authentic ground of being. This is not peculiar to African thinking, but it cannot be held to be salient in Western thinking (METZ 2015, 1180). However, relationality is considered uniquely African if it includes 'communal relationship' (EWUOSO 2021, 3) or is rooted in the African notion of personhood (IBANGA 2022b). One can exhibit the attitude of solidarity towards others without identifying with them, such as anonymous gifting to motherless babies' homes (METZ 2022, 97). In African thought, such a relation of solidarity must be rooted in a relationship of identity (EKEI 2014, 192-196). While a relationship of solidarity is about commitment to the general well-being of people, that is, sympathetic altruism towards the good of others; a relationship of identity is about mutual involvement in one another's interests, that is, "experiencing life as bound up with others" or a sense of belonging together (METZ 2022, 94-96). A communal relationship recognizes the two dimensions. It places a premium on harmonious, cooperative, interdependent, integrative, interactive, and multisectoral relationships.

Attoe distinguishes between two kinds of relationality viz. direct and indirect relationalities. While 'direct relationality' is immediate and closer to the latest event in proximity of time, 'indirect relationality' is the totality of all the historical factors that remotely contribute to cause an effect (ATTOE 2022, 69-72). Indirect relationality is squared on the framework of complementarity, which conceives reality as the stitching together of missing links (ASOUZU 2007, 267; 2011, 15). Direct relationality is a process of immediate causal relationships. Nevertheless, both direct and indirect relationalities are anchored on deterministic historicity, since all events are traceable to a single cause that Attoe identifies as God (ATTOE 2022, 56, 71). This view, therefore, shows that the world is a product of, and is anchored on, multiple relationships and interactions that are historically determined. Thus, *to be* does not simply mean 'being there'; rather "it means standing in a particular relationship with all there is both visible and invisible" (OKOLO quoted in ATTOE 2022, 70). This reflects the African conception of communal relationship, which is a kind of totemistic relationship that encompasses both the visible and invisible world and includes animals, plants, and ecosystems in a spiritual community (IBANGA 2017a, 112).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that relationship and interaction characterize being in African thought. From here, relatability can be derived from relationality. The latter is concerned with the way in which different entities are connected. The former is concerned with the feeling of rapport (to feel sympathy or identify with) and connecting to something else (transcendental other or web of relationships). Relationality is more of a substructure, whereas relatability is more of a superstructure. On the one hand, relatability can be directional when the rapport involves those immediate or closer in time (e.g., one's kins and ancestors, neighbours, fellow citizens, etc.). On the other hand, relatability can be non-directional when the rapport involves those remote or distant in time (e.g., future generations, ancestors in general, humanity, ecosystems, an entire planet, etc.). 'Directional relatability' is more personal whereas 'non-directional relatability' is more abstract.

Relatability reflects the African communal conception of relationship "in which individuals cognitively, emotionally, conatively and volitionally identify with each other, that is, through psychological attitudes such as thinking of oneself as part of a group" (EWUOSO 2021, 4). The group, here, is a kind of spiritual community with totemistic relationships between the invisible and visible, humans and nonhumans, plants and ecosystems, and the entire cosmic history. Relatability pre-orients nature. Everything is in multiple relationships with all things and receives inputs from everything else. Nothing exists independent of others. This gestalt wholeness of all things is held as sacred, and sacralization provides for existential balance and harmony (EKWEALO 2011, 5). Relatability is a spiritual consciousness that "discourages attitude of waste and impunity" while encouraging an attitude of love for all based on a relationship that "links nature, community and man" as expressed in the African doctrine of force (IBANGA 2014, 189).

Existential Gratitude: This theme is common in the works of Momoh, Ekwealo and Ibanga – where it is recognized as a key spiritual principle. Existential gratitude is defined as "an acknowledgement of the worth and sometimes a consequent expression of gratitude to an existent for its central and active roles in one's life or of the community" (MOMOH 1989b, 425). This reflects the general metaphysical disposition of African thought, namely, the belief in the interconnectedness and interdependences of all things. There is complementarity at all levels of being (ASOUZU 2007, 267). The complementary status of things implies that things are essentially incomplete in themselves, therefore, must be complemented by other things (IBANGA and PEPPE 2022, 16). The complementary status of things "indicate that no species in nature, whether human or non-human, no matter how developed the intellect, can survive on its own without the contribution of other species to its wellbeing and sustainability" (IBANGA 2016, 12). No phenomenon exists independently in itself, thus, there is no existent thing that is self-sufficient (IBANGA 2016, 15). This interdependence denies any being a claim to superiority (EKWEALO 2014, 197).

Human beings, just like other entities in nature, depend on other existents for their survival and flourishing. Since this is the case, that complementarity is implicated in the being of man, the human being must show gratitude to nature for its supply of vital needs (IBANGA 2020, 25). This must come in the form of "care and protection" of nature (IBANGA 2018, 125). This is implied in the Annang aphorism "*adia mkpo ano isong koro isong adehe ayaka* 'gwo (always show existential gratitude to the land for we share common heritage)" (IBANGA 2020, 25). Human beings are enjoined to appreciate (show gratitude to) the land for its support role. As Ibanga explains, "The land, in this prayer, does not just refer to merely the soil but all entities whose existences are connected thereto" (2016, 12). The emphasis on humans follows from the fact that the human being is expected to play a stewardship role in nature, having attained the highest stage of evolution. Bassey argues that although the human being is a plain member of the natural community, it occupies an important place in the scheme of things with the moral responsibility to care for the environment (2020, 101).

Existential gratitude is an important spiritual principle in the relation between humans and nature – one that reminds a person of the vital roles that both human and nonhuman others play in one's wellbeing. Ekwealo explains that "Existential gratitude is a universal affirmation to God and awareness of man's finitude and respectful belief that in all things, it is not one's sole power, strength and ability that bestows greatness, victory and progress" (2012b, 93); rather it is a shared effort involving the goodwill of all entities in nature including both visible and invisible beings. Hence, the charge: "Act in such a way that reflects your gratitude towards other existents, humans and nonhumans, for contributing to support your beingness or existence" (IBANGA 2018, 128). Existential gratitude means "to reciprocate the supplies from nature, by offering something [of comparative value] back to nature in return" (IBANGA 2018, 129). It is expressed in the form of "care and protection" of nature to secure the ecosystems for the survival and flourishing of all existents (IBANGA 2018, 125). Existential gratitude is an expression of love for nature. The highest expression of gratitude is love. Yet, it is impossible to feel love for nature while harbouring a negative attitude towards it. Hence, existential gratitude is associated with an attitude of thankfulness, kindness, empathy, friendliness, goodness, tolerance, respect, veneration, brotherliness, fairness, and devotion towards nature. This is the disposition associated with ecological self-concept, that is, the view of oneself as an extension of nature and nature as an extension of oneself (EKWEALO 2012b, 103). Expression of gratitude is based on the recognition that entities in nature co-exist and are interdependent on account of the spiritual force *ntu* that holds all things together (IBANGA 2016, 11).

Sacred Feminine: African philosophers known to have used this concept philosophically are Ekwealo and Ibanga. While Ibanga (2012) used it as a metaphysical concept to demonstrate the connection between sexuality and nature, Ekwealo (2012c) used it in axiological terms to show the spiritual values embedded in womanhood. Ibanga sees sexuality and fertility as mainly spiritual qualities. He argues that in traditional African society, "Sexuality was seen as sacred" (IBANGA 2012, 109). Spiritual force monitored female sexual fidelity. Sexual activity was not permitted except by the consent of the community, which had the prerogative power to will such (IBANGA 2012, 109). This was because sexuality was primarily viewed as a spiritual activity. Sexuality is related to the totality of the human condition (OJO 2010, 4), but importantly it was related to the totality of all beings – human and nonhuman, visible and invisible. For this reason, traditional African cosmology imposed enormous responsibility on the female sex as the gateway of the community (IBANGA 2012, 110). Thus, the female sex became sacralized. The female sexual organ became identified with nature and virginity was protected. Womanhood became sacred:

Since the womb was the cradle of life, the traditional society regarded it as sacred. Hence, they demanded sanctity and purity from the woman. And because of the karmic responsibility imposed on the woman due to her oneness with nature, absolute vigilance was demanded of her. The ancient African paid attention and respect to womanhood hence the concept of sacred feminine. In Annang, *abot* (nature) was represented or symbolized as a woman, and it represented the sacred feminine. In Annang ontology, *abot* which is symbolized as woman is the origin and end of life, force or energy. Without her (abot), life is impossible; without her (abot) life is incomplete. A neglect of her (abot) energy is catastrophic. And because the woman was equated with nature (abot), her virginity and the virginity of nature was held sacred. You could not gate-crash into a virgin land or forest; it must always be engaged with acceptable permission in the form of some rituals, in the same

way her virginity was to be broken within the acceptable norms of society. (IBANGA 2012, 111)

Ekwealo argues that, as the gatekeeper of the human race and nature, the woman's role is primarily that of management of nature's resources and moderator of environmental balance. As a sacred being, she occupies a unique place in creation with the mandate to "ensure the healthy maintenance and preservation of reality for those living and those of the future" (EKWEALO 2012c, 2). He added that the woman is by her nature-loving, kind, empathetic, good, deferent, tolerant, obedient, fair, meek, friendly, forgiving, etc. Interestingly, these are the spiritual qualities required to build an equitable, eco-friendly, peaceful, and harmonious society. This spiritual energy that the woman embodies is crucial for the restoration of the world order of harmony as it was at the beginning of creation. In fact, "this primal force is as good as one going back to the very foundation of one's life" (EKWEALO 2012c, 5). Sexual emotion brings out godly qualities in us, "helps us to become more fully human and akin to God… makes us more gentle and caring, more self-giving and concerned for others" (TUTU 1996, x). The sacred feminine is akin to originary sexual emotion, which is a spiritual quality vis-à-vis the primal creative energy that drives all existents and the entire evolutionary process (IBANGA 2012, 109). Spirituality is expressed best through emotion (EKWEALO 2012c, 1; AGADA 2015, 61, 105).

The sacred feminine is about "a connection to universal energy for through it and the emotion therein, every other contact forces are (sic) brought to be" (EKWEALO 2012c, 5). The sacred feminine is the primal emotion that drives all animate things. This primal emotion "is the imbued nature of especially women but is also embedded in all reality" (EKWEALO 2012c, 3). This means that the sacred feminine is not strictly about women. Ekwealo defines sacred feminine as "the-woman-in-all-of-us… that emotional nature which resides in all animates and human species and which challenges us to seek friendlier and altruistic measures"

(2012c, 4). This differs significantly from the general understanding of the sacred feminine in western and oriental cultures as ritualism. The sacred feminine is the force of love, which is the creative energy that instantiates things through centripetal yearning. Agada (2015) opines that yearning is the innate character of being (24) whose driving force is "intellectual love", that is, "emotion of the intellect" (76) undergirded with "pure thought for the good" (207) and recognition of beauty in a person or thing (221). Also, intellectual love is "a moral orientation that brings God, humans, and nature into a moral framework of longing for goodness" (AGADA 2022a, 137). Love is an emotional response to other existents and defines the way we relate with other entities in nature especially those vulnerable to our power (EKWEALO 2014, 196). Ultimately, it is the emotion of love that connects humans to God. As Ada Agada states:

> Intellectual love is an orientation of thinking and feeling beings in which joy is established as a function of empathy for fellow human beings, the acknowledgement of God as the highest moral principle, and solidarity with nature. (AGADA 2022a, 136)

This is the dimension in which sacred feminine must be understood. Masculinity is the opposite of femininity and is associated with valour, ruthlessness, severity, and strictness. However, masculinity does not represent the true nature of man, and thus, cannot be the source of authentic morality and spirituality. Social masculinity is a veil that conceals our true human feminine nature rooted in godliness. Neurobiology indicates that biologically the male brain is defeminized during foetal development by a combination of hormones (KUDWA et al. 2005). Apart from the biological defeminization that affects the male gender primarily, social defeminization via liberal feminism and masculinized morality affects both male and female genders. Thus, Ekwealo argues that the de-masculinization of society will lift the veil that conceals the woman-in-all-of-us:

> When this veil would be lifted, the spiritual qualities of womanhood would be discerned for they are simply a resurrection of the woman-in-all-of-us, the emotional selves which are all exhumed from the sacred feminine, the engine of creativity, holistic development, and wholesome qualitative realizations. (EKWEALO 2012c, 5)

In other words, social de-masculinization will facilitate the realisation of the authentic nature of the human being in society.

Conclusion
This work was designed to explore and analyze the different themes evolving in recent African spiritual philosophy. Traditionally, African spiritual philosophy had focused on worship/religion, sacrifice, ritualism, incantation/prayer, totemism, reincarnation, soul, destiny, spirit, deity, sacredness, sexuality, causality, soul transplantation, metempsychosis, transmigration, living-dead (ancestor),

witchcraft, magic, death, evil, force, etc. Attoe observes that these ideas "have largely remained the same and unchallenged" because of hesitancy among African philosophers to raise critical questions about them (2022, xvii). However, very recent works by Agada and Attoe have started to raise questions to challenge these ideas in refreshing ways. While Agada and Attoe focus on challenging the traditional understanding of God, Metz challenges the traditional notion of meaning in the general understanding of being. This work did not set out to restate the ideas already discussed broadly and deeply in traditional African spirituality literature. It skipped the mainstream thinking of Agada and Attoe in relation to the idea of God because their thoughts are still somewhat trapped in the traditional metaphysical paradigm. Also, works by Metz discussing *meaning in life* and the reactions from African scholars are left out because they are somewhat rooted in Anglo-American intellectual tradition.

This article aimed to explore the unfamiliar territories in African spiritual philosophy to unravel the meaning of spirituality that differs radically from the traditional conception. On the one hand, meaning of spirituality in traditional African thought is rooted in *transcendence* and *supernaturality*. On the other hand, meaning of spirituality in contemporary African thinking is rooted in *naturality* and *immanence*. However, this mapping can be challenged, and rightly so, because many African philosophers researching the subject of spirituality are still relying on the traditional paradigm. Therefore, this mapping may be viewed as exploring the periphery of spiritual philosophy in Africa. Yet, this mapping is pointing to a trend that is evolving while incrementally decentring the traditional paradigm. This article made substantial references to the works of Ekwealo whom I regard as the father of contemporary African spiritual philosophy – for his pioneering works that discussed most of the themes explored in this article. But it is important that readers keep their gaze on the African notion of *force* as the foundation on which the discourse is grounded.

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