

AN APPRAISAL OF THE ‘WHY’ AND THE ‘HOW’ OF AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

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Introduction

African ontology is defined as the principles that determine the essence and actual characteristics of everything that exists in the diverse components of the universe, including human beings and their various worldviews. Hence, African ontology automatically becomes the epicentre of an African mental map for navigation, investigation and provision of answers for the cause of everything in the universe. In Africa, the principles inherent in the ontological root of everything are considered as the foundation that underlined African worldviews and tele-guided African dispositions. It is not surprising, therefore, that African ontology is uniquely anthropocentric and anthropomorphic as evinced in different categories of African ontology. For instance, in Africa, there are African ontological relationship with the Supreme Being (God), gods and goddesses, spirits, animals, plants, cosmos, and inanimate objects like river, mountain, sea, desert, forest, cave, thunder, wind and other phenomena associated with different localities in Africa. A cursory look at African ontology and its characteristics shows that man becomes the centre of any category of African ontology. Thus, it is apparent that African

worldviews on existential realities of life either physical or metaphysical are sourced from African ontology.

This write up tries to outline the outstanding characteristics of African ontology to evaluate the justification of their relationship with existential realities that surround human life. It considers the influence of African ontology on causality and how African mentality is built on the relationship between the two. Moreover, it gives attention to the origin and structure of the universe and its impulse on African thought pattern. Again, the paper examines the ontological relevance of human birth, destiny, purpose in the world, justification for death and their consequences on African worldviews. Besides, the paper attempts to survey the African ontological basis of the relationship between body and soul, the problem of evil in the world, hierarchy of spiritual forces and how each of these issues establishes itself in the mind-set and personality of African people. In the evaluation, the paper discovers that a strict adherent to the impetus sourced from African ontology for determining African world views and disposition in the universe without adequate justification is responsible for many challenges and vicissitudes that served as clogs in the wheel of African progress.

Definition and meaning of ontology

The word ontology is a combination of two Greek words, *onto*, meaning 'being' and *logia*, which means study or science. The common meaning of ontology, therefore, is the study or science of the nature of all existing realities. While the fundamental meaning of ontology is a systematic understanding of the nature and inherent principles in all existing realities in human experience. It is a branch of Aristotelian metaphysics that deals with the nature of all that is intelligible to man, visible and invisible in the universe. In other words, it is the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence and reality as well as the basic categories of being and relationship among them. Prominent and acclaimed ontologists include, Parmenides, Anaximenes, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, Edmund Husserl, Martin

Heidegger, Fredrick Nietzsche, J.P. Sartre and a host of others. In Africa as well, we have some African ontologists like Placide Tempels with his *Theory of Life-Forces*, John Mbiti with his *Theory of African Concept of Time*, E. Bolaji Idowu with his *Concept of divinities*, J. O. Sodipo with his *Theory of Mystical Causality*, Kwasi Wiredu with his *African Concept of Truth*, S. B. Oluwole with her *African Humanism*, Udo Etuk with his *Status Factor of an African Logic*, G. E. Azenabor with his *African Holistic Ontology* and Pantaleon Iroegbu with his *Kpim [essence] of Ethics, Kpim of life, Kpim of death and Kpim of culture*.¹ These scholars with African background have tried to explore the various ontological issues that characterised African ontology different from what is obtainable in the Western world.

African ontology and causality

In African ontology, it is a common understanding that each created being is transcendently inseparable from its creator, each creature holds its being and sustenance to the disposition of its creator. In Tempels' opinion, "Bantu hold that created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature and creator. For the Bantu there is interaction of being with being, that is to say, of force with force".² Africans as well as Westerners have common understanding of how one being and event naturally cause a particular reaction in another being in as much as the process involved is not contrary to principles embedded in the nature of beings. For instance, that fire burns freely in grassland and dried bush is not a surprise to any set of human beings. Nonetheless, as soon as such fire burns across a river, the Westerners will allude the occurrence to the role of chance and accident. It is a common opinion in Africa that Africans do not leave anything to chance because their understanding of ontology does not tolerate such concept. According to A. I. Kanu, "extraordinary or contingent are those that engage the minds of Africans, and such events would include, a woman being pregnant for more than nine months, drought during rainy season, a tree falling and killing a man".³ The fact that such events are infrequent and selective make them supernatural, scary and

lack justification in African law of nature. Hence, they believe that there is another causal force that transcends ordinary causal relationship between two events. In Kanu's opinion, "the African does not just speak of mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions like his Western counterparts; he also speaks of a metaphysical kind of causality, which binds the creator to the creature; the seen world to the unseen world; the spiritual to the physical".⁴ It is the metaphysical causality derived from African ontology that normally shapes the mind set of Africans to always seek for the cause of any event that goes beyond their immediate explanation and justification. E. Aja subscribes to the view that Africans strongly believe that the world of the living is systematically united to an ordered universe to the point that all events are always related to their causal force; and the process involved is potentially understandable.⁵ The understanding of the force at work in unusual event that takes place is often sourced from African experts that have the knowledge of the relationship among the forces in the various parts of the universe. This is properly exhibited when the gods are consulted and sacrifices are made to get solution for the enigma that abnormal occurrence generated for an individual or community as a whole. This implies that a metaphysical force in any part of African universe can produce consequential effect in other parts of the same cosmological entity. The interest of Africans is not basically on what and where it happened but why it occurred at that point in time to the individual that is involved.

It is along this background that African society generally acknowledges the eldest of a family or clan to have divine law and force that bind the ancestors in the land of the dead with their children in the land of the living. The eldest son in Africa community is ontologically saddled with the responsibility of serving as the linkage between the living and the dead. Hence, African ontological realities have interrelatedness of forces in the universe behind the nomination of a king, a community leader and a family head. As a matter of fact, any opposition to this ontological and automatic arrangement is obnoxious and considered in African ontology as fraudulence that bring no good

to any part of the universe. It is believed in Africa that a traditional leader that emerged through deceitful practices will lack the vital force by which he can sustain the bridge of peaceful interaction among the various parts of the universe. As Tempels gathers from Bantu culture, “nothing would grow in our soil, our women would bear no children and everything would be struck sterile”.⁶ The impression one can easily get from Tempels is that African belief in the origin of the ontological principles that bind the sections of the universe together as one of the worldviews of Africans.

African ontology and human relationship with the universe

The cosmological theories of pre-Socratic philosophers like Anaximenes, Anaximander and Pythagoras, serve as the foundational stones on which European understanding and projections about the universe are based. The post-Socratic cosmologists like Plato and Aristotle identified, defined and described what they thought to be the origin of the universe, all that characterised it and the substance by which everything in existence becomes intelligible. However, we observed that African cosmology acknowledges the fact that the universe is invisibly partitioned into four worlds: visible or physical, invisible or metaphysical, the world of the dead and the world of the Supreme Being. There is another theory that identifies only three parts of the universe namely, the world above the land, the world below the land and the world on the land. Africans strongly believe that there is a relationship among the four regions of the universe. In other words, in spite of invisible partitioning of the universe and its respective forces, there is a kind of harmonious interrelatedness among the various portions of the universe. Therefore, “nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. The world of forces is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network”.⁷ For instance, any abomination in the world of the living automatically leads to disharmony in the other worlds, as the inhabitants of each world experience discomfort in one way or the other. In addition, the

dead often comes to the world of the living with a message often delivered in an extra-ordinary manner like what one experiences in a trance. The idea of partitioning the universe in the imagination of the Africans gives credence to the fact that African ontology is anthropomorphic.

African ontology and the problem of evil

Africans ontologically believed that natural forces (good or bad) and the vital force or power in the essence of every creature are made available by God for the good of man in the universe. According to Placide Tempels, “in the minds of the Bantu, all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own...Each being has been endowed by God with certain force capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man”.⁸ They believe that the effects of natural disaster are part of the ontological way in which the gods and the Supreme Being maintain the balance necessary for the harmony in the universe. They recognise the fact that interaction often takes place among the different parts of the universe and there are bound to be positive and negative effects in human life. Again, the Africans hold the view that neither negative nor positive forces have a specific location in the universe, they are everywhere. It is believe in Africa, that ontological forces can be manipulated for the good of man in as much as the effort does not cause disharmony in the universe.

As earlier mentioned, there is no room for chance in any event that transcends natural explanation and brings pain and sorrow in African ontology. This approach to life is culturally embedded into the consciousness of every African and implies that some supernatural events are ontologically caused by invisible forces. As a result of this claim, efforts are often made to forestall negative influence from malevolent forces as well as to constantly seek for favour from benevolent forces. This is a common practice in a typical African society when one aims at achieving any laudable projects and desires like marriage, building of a new house, embarking on a journey, farming, and choosing of suitable date for ceremonies and so on. As Tempels describes sharply, “illness

and death do not have their source in our own vital power, but result from some external agents who weakens us through his greater force. It is only by fortifying our vital energy through the use of magical recipes that we acquire resistance to malevolent external force”.⁹ We often see this happening when some Africans searching for protection and fortification of their life force as evident with the animal and human sacrifices at the beginning of the reign of many African monarchs and community leaders. There are others like African warriors and security officers, and nowadays, robbers and politicians that often seek for extraordinary power who also employ the service of African experts in the knowledge of ontological forces likely abound in the nature of beings for fortification of their inner force. The same thing happens when one gets cured of a sickness through the vital force in a particular herb or root, like vital force in the boiled leaves of mango tree and lemon grass to cure malaria fever. As a matter of fact, every creature is ontologically endowed with, at least, a particular force or power inherent in its nature that makes it stand out from others. As Tempels puts it, “vital force is the reality of which, through invisible, is supreme in man. Man can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures”.¹⁰ This assertion of Tempels points to the African ontological possibility of exchanging a man's destiny for another.

African ontology and its relationship with human body and soul

In African ontology, the human body is characterised with all that is visible to the senses while the soul is identified with the inner force that sustain human personality and unrepeatability identity of a man. This is equivalent to Kantian idea of *phenomena* and *noumena*, that is, the being as it appears and the being in itself, appearance and reality. As Bantu culture in eastern part of Africa portrays, “by the 'thing [being] in itself', they indicate its individual inner force of the thing. They are expressing themselves in figurative language when they say in everything there is another thing; in every man, a little man”.¹¹ So, when an African person dies, the influence of the inner force, 'the little man' in his body will determine if he is worthy of admission into

the company of the ancestors or to reincarnate in another body or to become a vagabond in the world of the living. African ontology also acknowledges the fact that interaction exists between the bodily and spiritual forces in man. For instance, any bodily pain causes distress in the mind or the soul of man and feelings from the soul brings corresponding effects to the body and countenance of man.

The Relevance of African Ontology to Naming Ceremony and Burial Rites

The world view of Africans concerning the relevance of naming ceremony when a new child is born and the rite of passage to the world of the dead is obtained from African ontology. There is always a dramatic and ceremonial joy when a new child is born into a particular African home. The new born child is officially welcomed from the ancestors of the family to a home where the child is to be named and initiated into the family circle. Each culture in Africa usually has a particular date and time for this solemn ceremony in which every member of the family is expected to formally participate actively. The first official pronouncement of the name given to a child comes from the head of the family, the link between the ancestors and the living members of the family. In African ontology, the name giving to a child has ontological relationship to the personality of the child. Hence, African name is not just for identification but rather a possession and ontological signification of who the bearer of the name is to the whole family, both the dead and the living.

The naming ceremony of a child automatically and ontologically confirms him as a *bona fide* member of a particular family. By implication, his joy, sorrow, pain, success, difficulties, aspiration and regret become that of everyone in the family and *vice versa*. It is remarkable to note that whenever metaphysical intervention is necessary in human life for positive or negative purposes, the expected result will be denied if the real name by which the person is enshrined into his family is not mentioned. This is why Africans believe that ontological forces are involved when there is naming ceremony of a new child and nobody wants the name of

his child missing in the family record. Besides, some African families also have ontological attachment to some animals like crocodile, snake, chameleon, buffalo and plants or vegetables. This is evident in the relationship that the Ijaws and the Isekiris of the riverine areas of Nigeria have with crocodile. They often celebrate and honour the presence of such animals or plants and they dare not attempt to eat them, in fact, they see them as part and parcel of them. The reason for this strange disposition is often derived from the family history of how such animals or plants have been used by their ancestors or one of the gods to save them from calamity. This kind of history in some cases and mythology in many circumstances are replete in African cultures to illustrate the relationship between African ontology and naming ceremony.

Furthermore, in African ontology, the fundamental criterion for the rite of burial and union with the ancestral world is good character disposition and healthy relationship with all the tiers of the universe. When a befitting burial is given to the dead that lived a good life, African ontology shows that the person will get admittance into the abode of the ancestors, the world of the spirits and Supreme Being. Moreover, Africans also believe that some people that lived extra-ordinary life can be divinized by the people of his culture. Hence, for someone to deserve divinization, he must have sacrificed for the good of the society in an astonishing way. In Yoruba culture of Western part of Africa, we have divinized people like Moremi Ajasoro, a woman that lived in Ile-Ife, the cradle home of the Yorubas. When the ancient town was experiencing incessant wars that was dwindling her population and prosperity, the oracle was consulted to checkmate the menace and the gods requested for human sacrifice. No woman was ready to give up her child for the sacrifice except Moremi that offered Oluorogbo her only son for the good of Ile-Ife people. As a result of her generosity and selflessness, Ile-Ife People divinized her and Oluorogbo as evident in the people's calendar for festivals and art works that depict their physical representation within and outside Ile-Ife. As evident in Bantu culture as well, such persons are now “spiritualized beings, beings

belonging to a higher hierarchy, participating to a certain degree in the divine force".¹² This implies that they have been canonized and ontologically raised from ordinary dead to divine beings that have intercessory power and influence for the good of their devotees.

African ontology and hierarchy of beings

In African ontology, there is a recognition of theocratic structures and ranks among the gods but God is considered as the uncreated, eternal, immutable and self-subsistent Being whose characteristics are superb than the qualities of other divinities. Africans believe that God is the Supreme Being that created some spiritual beings as co-workers in the direction of human affairs and in the harmonious governance of the universe, their functions and existence are strongly depended on the wish of the Supreme Being. According to E. C. Ekeke and C. A. Ekeopara,

when we refer to the word 'God', we are talking about the living eternal Being who is the source of all living and whose life existed from dateless past. He is self-existed and is the one whose power sustains the universe. He is an all-knowing Being who knows and sees all things...He even knows the end from the beginning.¹³

In the worldview of Africans, there is no picture or image that encapsulates the personality of God because of the ontological complexity and obscurity that enshrouded his Being. African ontology establishes the fact that God and divinities are transcendent and immanent, they are beyond space and time unlike human beings. This implies that human beings are far lesser than God and the gods; and they are always present among humans to assist them but also live far away from them. As Awolalu and Dopamu claim, "the transcendence and immanence of God are two divine attributes that are paradoxically complementary".¹⁴ The paradoxical qualities of God actually make his personality unfathomable for any human being, hence human description of him is full of anthropomorphisms.

In the hierarchy of beings, African ontology admits that God is the Supreme Being, the gods follow him in the order of prominence before the spirits that could be either benevolent or malevolent. Like the gods, they are invisible entities that live anywhere that please them in the existential experience of man. Ekeke and Ekeopara have the impression that “majority of people in Africa believe that spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, and rivers. Others hold that spirits dwell in mountains, hills, valleys or just around the village and at road junctions. Spirits are in the same environment with men”.¹⁵ In African ontology, there is the view that man needs magical power and sacrifice to ward off the action of malevolent spirits and to incur the favour of the benevolent spirits, especially the guardian spirit. It is observed that, “Yoruba people call it *ori*, Igbo people call it *chi*, while the Edo people call it *ehi*. It guards one's steps leading the one to his/her destiny in life. In most cases, it is this spirit that helps to ward off evil spirits that may want to derail the individual from achieving his ultimate in life”.¹⁶ The malevolent and benevolent spirits are interchangeable with evil and good forces already examined in African ontology. In Bolaji Idowu's understanding, the guardian spirit acts like the spiritual partner of a physical entity called man.¹⁷ In African hierarchy of beings entrenched in African ontology, man is next to the spirits, followed by animate beings like animals and plants before inanimate beings like hills, rocks, valleys and caves. They are ontologically provided by the Supreme Being for the use of man in the world to live a good life to the fullest and participate in his grandeur. Nevertheless, all other creatures after the spirits are subjects to the whims and caprices of the spiritual beings, including man. Africans recognise this ontological fact and learn how to keep off from what can bring the wrath of the invisible beings or forces into their lives. Therefore, it is evident that African ontological understanding of the variant spirits and their dispositions form part of the perspective that guide the actions and body language of a typical African man and his projection in the world.

African ontology and the power of words

In Africa, words and thoughts have strong and causal power

especially when the words come from someone that has a higher authority and force like an elderly person or victim of injustice and heartlessness disposition, vulnerable persons like the orphan, the widow, the barren woman and those that are handicap in one way or the other. The words and wishes of the persons in this category have ontological foundation in their feelings and immediate experience and the fulfilment of their wishes depends on metaphysical force traceable to their disposition at the moment the words and wishes were expressed. A quicker examination of African ontology indicates that “thoughts and words in African metaphysics have the power to bring about what they symbolize. While evil words cause harm to others, good words bring blessing. This explains why the blessing of a father or mother is a very important element for the son or daughter”.¹⁸ Hence, we observe that Africans are very discreet in their use of words and expressions especially when one is annoyed or in pain. Besides, we recall the influence of incantations and cognomen in the psyche and actions of many people in African culture. There is no word of incantations that lack ontological causal force on the creatures that are involved. The reason is not far-fetched from the fact that such words and expressions carry information that has inherent connection with the ontological root of the beings concerned. The imaginable power in African ontological disposition to the use of words serves as one of the pillars of African outlook and approach to issues that form the contents of their existential life.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Our investigation into the various characteristics of African ontology has proven to us that the basis of African mentality to life and various categories of beings in the universe is not the same with the Western perspective of life. This paper discovers that African metaphysical experiences with existential realities that surround the Africans transcend the restricted explanatory structure of Europeans and Americans to empirical science alone. The acclaimed ontological experiences of the Africans and influences on their worldviews and dispositions cannot be simply laid off and relegated to misconceptions and superstitions. We

have come to realize that scientific method of understanding human existential realities is inadequate to get the holistic picture of the inherent implications in the essence of every being. As a matter of fact, scientific philosophy in the Western world has reached a stage in which many of their philosophers now realise that empirical science does not give absolute knowledge available in the being of every creature and the creator. African ontology has demonstrated the justification for extra sensory perception by those that are endowed with extraordinary capacity to have a better understanding of the unusual implications and consequences of interaction between invisible forces and human beings in the universe.¹⁹ In Africa, the gifted ones in this regard are considered sacred, revered and authority to be consulted whenever event that defers all natural explanation occurs in the society.

This write up draws our attention to the fact that there is a significant difference between African and European ontology. A thorough examination of the characteristics of African ontology clearly portrayed the fact that dualities in all ramifications become a complementary expression of a single reality. This is opposed to Eurocentric ontology that viewed dualities as incompatible as justified by Aristotelian logic and Cartesian method of articulation. Therefore, the characteristics of African ontology accentuate that man needs to admit the universe as an enormous networks of interdependent structures before he can have clear understanding of the role and purpose of every being, including human beings in the universe. In African ontology, no being that constitutes part of the universe is dispensable without disharmony in the principle that established the universe. Hence, an individual in African ontology gets its relevance in the context of its union with the community just as the community cannot survive the disintegration of her unity. This attitude is boldly exhibited in African culture as evident in their politics, religions, morality and general well-being.

A general look on African ontology shows that one can easily project the philosophical disposition of various peoples in Africa.

This is what John Mbiti meant when he says, “the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African people think, act or speak in different situations of life”.²⁰ It is indisputable that this claim of Mbiti is difficult to fault without self-contradiction. This because the essence of African ontology can be found in its basic assumptions about reality and the suitable theoretical structures with explanatory models that are epistemological, metaphysical and religious in nature. In this context, every being or thing has its meaning and relevance only through spiritual lenses and nothing comes to life without ontological interpretation.²¹

Nevertheless, this research equally ascertains the fact that overemphasis on ontological impulse in African worldviews is responsible for many of the vicissitudes that overwhelmed nearly everyone in Africa continent today. A good number of the issues hurriedly reduced to metaphysical causes in Africa are incredible and ludicrous. For instance, many uncommon sicknesses like stroke, cardiac arrest, kidney failure, different forms of cancer, elephantiasis and similar ones that early medical intervention would have changed the course of event have been attributed to one ontological forces or the other. We observe that many of the victims of these sicknesses were moving from one herbal or spiritual home to the other until they eventually die. Besides, it is incorrect to discredit the impact of ontological forces in human experiences but some events attributed to metaphysical forces are consequences of hallucination, stress, insomnia, addiction to alcohol, mental lassitude and other psychological phenomena. It is always good to explore more and painstakingly into the natural and psychological causes of every event before consigning them to metaphysical influences. The best thing is to ascertain the actual problem so as to know where to seek for necessary solution. In conclusion, it is actually the case that African ontology is the factor that structure the worldviews of Africans. Since ontological issues that characterise their mentality transcend rational logic, there is need for caution arriving at any conclusion to avoid wrong foundation for intended assertion, opinion and belief.

ENDNOTES

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