A META-EMPIRICAL DISCOURSE ON THE CONCEPT OF PURE AND DISEMBODIED SPIRITS IN AFRICAN METAPHYSICS

By

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Abstract

The primary and underlining reality in traditional African metaphysics is a sort of coalesce between the material and the spiritual realm. In traditional African metaphysics, there exist a sort of holism and an ontological continuum in their understanding and interpretation of reality. The nexus between these two realms in African metaphysics is made concrete through the activities of various kinds of spirits. These spirits are the players in the relationship between the empirical and the meta-empirical world. Fortunately, this relationship has from time remained a major source of socio-political and moral order in the traditional African society. Flowing from the astonishing role of this existential phenomenon, this paper attempts a meta-empirical analysis of the nature and role of these spirits so as to expose the ont-ontological status of the dynamism inherent in the relationship that exists between them.

Introduction

African metaphysics can in general be considered as the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of reality. In its bid to comprehend an all embracing and totalistic view of reality as well as the unique place of individual beings in the holism of reality, African metaphysics considers among other things, the fundamental institutional embodiments of the African traditional thoughts. It is important to note here that, it is not all the African communities that share the same understanding or thought pattern about reality. Because various communities operate from different theoretical background of reality but in spite of their diversities, it is still possible to abstract the general orientation of the African in their metaphysics most especially in their perception of Being, Substance, Causality, Time, Immortality of the Soul, Appearance and Reality. Of central importance in this paper is the consideration of the concept of spirit-being as an aspect of the overall consideration of the concept of being in African metaphysics.

The African Understanding of Reality

An appreciation of the way traditional Africans perceive reality will serve as a background to the concern of this paper. The tradition African is inclined to the metaphysical explanation of reality and therefore finds matter not as appealing as the spirit. Africans make effort to explain reality in spiritualistic terms, rather than in the materialistic. It is because of this that C. B. Okolo considers Africa as belonging to an idealist philosophical tradition especially for their view that “the ultimate reality is spirit, God or consciousness and not matter” (Okolo 210). Reality for the African is parallel to the dualism in Platonic tradition recognizing the material and the spiritual realms of being. Unlike the Platonic consideration, the African considers both worlds as real and not mere shadows and therefore all the things in both worlds are beings in African thinking. The spiritual world is considered to be inhabited by God, highest being or the pure spirit, the ancestors and nature gods or spirits while the material world houses the human beings, animals, plants and inanimate beings. Being is here considered as a generic term covering every existence both in the spiritual and material world. Though every existence in the material and physical world is considered under the term, the African
does not consider every being as equal but like the scholastics, considers being in a hierarchical order “from lower to higher, or lesser to greater” (Porter 58). The Igbo-African in particular has great respect and fear for supernatural beings or forces which is predicated on what we shall call the unipolarity of the invisible and visible where the noumenal and phenomenal world coalesces. He does not see the invisible as quite distinct from the visible but as a continuum of realities by some sort of metaphysical nexus. For the African therefore, God is considered to be the greatest or the highest of all beings while other beings are considered as subordinates. He is therefore not subjected under any other being. Being a spirit, it is dependent on no other but other spirits rather depend on him, he is considered a pure spirit.

Pure Spirit

It should be noted here that there are many notions of the concept ‘pure spirit’ in African traditional religion. Most writers refer to the Supreme Being as the pure spirit while few other authors refer to a grade of disembodied human spirits as pure spirits. However, this paper mentions the later here only to disregard it and proceed with the former as a proper characterization of pure spirit in African metaphysics. Some African tribes particularly the Igbos make a distinction between two types of disembodied human spirits, the good spirits (those who lived good lives while on earth) and the bad spirits (those who lived bad lives while on earth). In some instances, the good spirits are referred as pure spirits not in the sense of superiority and transcendence but in the sense of goodness and freedom from impurities. The postulate of God as a pure spirit or Supreme Being on the other hand is universal in Africa. The particular names for such pure spirit considered to transcend all other spirits however differ according to the tribal languages. The names for such spirit differ while the conception of its existence is universal. The universality of this conception is asserted by Mbiti after a study of the concept of God held by nearly three hundred peoples in Africa. Kwame Gyekye quotes him as holding that “in all these societies, without a single exception, people have a notion of God as the supreme being” (Gyekye 196). He is further considered in his ‘pure form’ invisible and unapproachable (Walker 42). Its invisibility and inapproachability explains why in most African religions, more reference is made to other spirits considered closer to human beings.

The African consideration of the spirit world is henotheistic. This is a type of belief in a single spiritual entity but with a further view that other possible spiritual beings exist. The single spiritual being is considered as distant incomprehensible and a tremendous mystery (mysterium tremendum). The closeness to minor spirits rather than the pure spirit in African religion for example as explained by Nlenanya Onwu (online) is because Africans lost contact with the creator and then focused on the worship of created things not as creator but as sustainer and protector, and also as an intermediary and in certain times and circumstances, mediator with the pure spirit. This explains why throughout Africa, it is believed that the pure spirit or the creator is supposed to be absent and indifferent to his people, having left them to the protection (and care) of lower spirits (Wetherford & Johnson, 1994:38). This conception is similar to the conception in classical yoga where the withdrawn God or Deus Otiosus is considered to have “no function except to serve as a focus for concentration to that of the Highest Person who is supreme Lord and Creator of the universe” (Zeahner 125). Not much reference is made to the pure spirit by Africans not just because it is considered to be distant, but also because it is considered to play very little role in the affairs of humans having delegated his works to lower spirits. P. Clarke and S. Sutherland holds that because of the little or minimal role of the pure spirit in the affairs of men, He “exists as a Deus Otiosus, remote from every (human) affairs” (117). While God, Chukwu (Igbo), Olodumare (Yoruba) is considered the Supreme Being, the pure spirit, Absolute Spirit or even the Supreme Deity, there is a further consideration that other deities or spirits which are closer to men exist.

Other Spirits

Following the hierarchical structure of beings in general, the spirits are found midway between the Supreme Being or pure spirit and the human beings. They include formal created beings and the beings who were formally human beings. John Mbiti refers to them as divinities, associates of God, ordinary spirits and the living-dead” (Mbiti, 1969:75). For purposes of clarity, this paper will essentially make use of Ikenga Metuh’s model differentiations of the Igbo understanding of being in categorizing the different kinds of spirits. Explaining the categories of being in Igbo worldview he writes, “they are differentiated according to their kind and importance. They can accordingly be arranged in a hierarchy, depending on their power and the role they play in the ontological order in nature. All beings known in the Igbo hierarchy can be grouped into five categories: Okike, Creator,
Mmuo, Deities, Arusi spirit-forces, Ndi Muo, Disembodied human spirits and Uwa, the material, physical world (Metuh 82). Between the creator or the pure spirit and the material or physical world, we have three other categories: the deities, the spirit-forces and the disembodied human spirits. These three categories cover what the African refer to as spirits in most reference to spirits. The existing beings so to say in the spirit world of the African are therefore considered to be exhausted with the full consideration of these three categories along with the creator. Their actions are considered to constantly dovetail between the spiritual and the material world. Therefore, they form a unit that fully populates the African universe.

The Deities

The deities are the creatures of the pure spirit who form a representative kind of relationship between the pure spirit and human beings. They are often symbolically identified in the form of material objects such as land, water, moon, sun, human beings etc. at other times, they are personifications of "certain natural phenomena; others are deified heroes or ancestors" (Kibicho 47). The deities are in most African tribes referred to as nature spirits. Following this, most African societies believe that "there are major spirits in charge of stronger forces of sky... they may be featured as ruling over or associated with the weather, storms, the sun and so on" (Mbiti, Introduction to Africa ...66). Equally, it is believed that the forces of the earth such as water, mountains, hills, lakes, ponds, rivers, waterfalls and so on are being occupied by beings invisible to human beings who direct them.

Most writers especially the Judeo Christian traditions consider the African deities as equivalent to a belief in many gods. This might be true of the Ancient Egyptian gods but it fails to satisfy the general African views, which include such African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya among many others who hold the deities to be creatures of the supreme God. They are spiritual beings who in the ontological hierarchy, come next to God, the pure spirit and therefore are closer to him. Communication with the pure spirit is considered easy for the deified. Because of their closeness to the pure spirit, Africans prefer to seek their help in approaching the pure spirit who they consider to be distant, hidden and withdrawn as we find in Thomism. Sacrifices and offerings are offered to them so that they can help in relaying the African requests to the supreme God. As God's agents, they work towards a proper harmony of every part of the created world. Ikenga Metuh elaborating further the works of the deities as the agents of God writes:

Some have their abode in the sky and are believed to be very near to Chukwu; others live below and come under Ala, the Earth-mother. However, the deities are more often conceived with reference to the services they render to man; Chukwu who created them, assigned them specific functions. Anyanwu, the Sun brings fortune; Ala herself is the custodian of law and morality and guarantor of political stability. Chi assures fertility and provides guidance and protection; Agwu is the deity of medicine and is also responsible for spirit possession, prophesy and divination. Ofo is a symbol of justice; Ikenga symbolizes the strength of a man's right hand and brings him good luck and success. Ekwensu, often identified with the devil, provokes people to violence and is therefore invoked during wars (God and Man 82).

The deities having abode in practically every part of the universe manifest themselves most times in different forms and often in some particular African tribes invoked to take up the abode in specific things or human persons where they feel that it will be beneficial. Geraldine Pinch affirming the limitless abode of the deities and of their manifestation in the ancient Egyptian tribe, writes that the "deities could manifest themselves in natural phenomena such as storms, floods, and plagues. Their spirits could be 'resident' in special or unusual people, such as kings and dwarfs, and in sacred animals, trees, and objects" (33). Because of their special role as representatives of the pure spirit, they are worshiped, appealed to for assistance and they are obeyed. The number of the deities in African understanding of reality varies according to different tribes and cultures. The Yoruba tribe with about one thousand seven hundred different deities constitutes about the highest in African. Sometimes the survival or destruction of a particular tribe after a natural calamity is attributed mythically to the intervention of a deity identifiable in a particular instrument that helped in preventing or causing the calamity.

The Yoruba tribe for example reverences the Ogun as the deity of war and iron. Following this, they pay special homage to Ogun in times of war and all who work with iron things and tools such as hunters, barbers, butchers, blacksmiths etc. hold him in high place of honour and worship. At other times, the tremendous mystery in particular events and places are recognized and personified or attributed to an embodying spiritual being. In such situations mountains, hills, certain rivers and
hills are considered abodes of great spirits. In general, the deities are considered to stand for pure spirit's activities in the world. John Mbiti (Introduction 76) reports of a pantheon of deities known as Abosom in Ashanti through whom the activities of God are manifested in the universe. They are known as a bosom; are said to 'come from Him' and to act as His servants and intermediaries between Him and other creatures. They are increasing numerically; and people hold festivals for major tribal divinities. Minor divinities protect individual human beings; and it is believed that God purposely created the bosom to guard men.

There is further a recognized kind of hierarchy among the deities in their relation with God and human beings. This is more clearly stated by Idowu in his description of the Yoruba divinities. The first among the Yoruba divinities in the hierarchy is the Orisa-nla. He is known as the supreme divinity in Yoruba land as well as the great or arch-divinity. It is sometimes said that he is the father of all the other deities (Idowu 71). He acts as God's deputy before all other deities. Some other deities recognized in Yoruba belief include the Orunmilan who is believed to be God's deputy in wisdom and knowledge. He is sought during divinations; Ogun recognized to be the owner of iron and steel, very strong in perfecting human labour as well as reputable for helping in times of war; Sango is the manifestation of God's wrath. Of particular significance in Yoruba belief and indeed in most African tribes is the deity considered parallel with the Christian devil. In Yoruba, the deity known as Esu is characteristically regarded as devil because of her function in trying the sincerity of men before God. Idowu insists that this deity cannot be considered as being the same with the Christian conception of devil. The closest this deity can be linked with is the devil as is evident in the book of Job "where Satan is one of the ministers of God and has the office of trying men's sincerity and putting their religion to the proof" (Idowu 80).

Among the southeastern Igbos, the Christian missionaries construe the deity, Ekwensu to be the devil. This is shown in their representation of the deity in the Christian Igbo catechism as the Arch-enemy of Chukwu in Igbo beliefs'. Ikenga Metuh reports that Basden in his work, The Niger Ibos holds that Ekwensu is further reputed to be leader and master of all spirits that act as agents of wickedness. Ikenga Metuh however insists that this conception is not necessarily true of the Igbo tribe of Nigeria but calls this a missionary accretion. Ekwensu in Igbo conception of reality is rather according to him "the spirit of violence, patron of warriors" (Metuh, African...43). Quoting Basden's explanation of the Ekwensu annual festival in Asaba Ikenga Metuh writes that the primary aim of this festival is a display of wealth and enjoyment, but in Asaba display of military prowess is combined. It will be logically inconsistent for the Igbo people to have a feast for a deity considered to be a devil. Though the manifestations of Ekwensu in violence and war may be regretted, nevertheless, the deity is still very useful in fighting enemies. The Ekwensu in Igbo conception therefore will not be considered a revolting deity as the Christian conception of devil as a revolting angel. A little language analysis of the word Ekwensu will be helpful here. Ekwensu is a combination of two Igbo words ikwe (re) – if you agree and o su – it begins. The word literally means if you agree to any mode of action, then the action will take effect. It implies the will power to take a particular course of action. Only in circumstances where the will power or acceptance to take an evil course of action is identified can the spirit be identified with evil. There are times however when the will drives one to pursue a good line of action. In those circumstances, we cannot identify Ekwensu with devil but with an inspiring deity.

**Disembodied Human Spirits**

Disembodied human spirits belong to the category of spirits between the deities and human beings. This is a natural consequence of the African belief that human life does not end with death. Many African tribes believe that the living has intimate relations with the dead and that the wellbeing of the living depends mostly on the living members of their folk referred to as dead ancestors. In South African for example, the ancestor spirits are considered the most intimate to the Bantu people. In Zimbabwe, the dead ancestors are revered as family divinities and are therefore highly esteemed and revered. The Igbo people as well revere their ancestors as having overwhelming influence in their lives and therefore are usually required to do anything to make sure that their dead ancestors are placed well in the land of the dead by proper burial ceremonies. This is usually done in a second burial ceremony, which is believed to secure for the dead happy repose in the spirit land. Special reference is made here to a second burial ceremony because of its special place in giving a proper rest to the dead. It is important also to note that there is usually a first burial, which is done during the interment of a dead person. This is the right accorded to every Igbo person. The person's achievements or character plays no role here. This however gives him no warrant into the spirit land.
The denial of a second burial is believed to spell doom and denial of a place in the land of the dead for the dead person. According to Jennifer Hildebrand, such souls denied proper burials "suffered a sad fate: they became ghosts, not of the earth, because they no longer had physical bodies to house them. But neither could they exist on the ancestral plane because improper burial prevented entry into the spirit world, which was the portal to reincarnation" (Hildebrand 127). This likewise explains why, for example the Igbo-African like thee Bantu regard the dead as the living dead or spiritualized beings which must be respected through dignified and lavish burial or funeral rites. The traditional funeral rites are performed so as to send forth the dead to the spirit-world where though dead has acquired greater spiritual powers or force to influence the fortunes of the living through the process of intercessory communion between man and the supreme deity. It is for this reason that some writers on African erroneously regard African religion as nothing but ancestor-ship.

An important differentiation in Igbo understanding of spirits noted by Jennifer is the distinction between ghosts and ancestral spirits. The ancestral spirits belong to the category portrayed as being useful to human beings especially to their immediate family members. This is particularly the type of spirit referred to as pure spirits by some people. The ghosts on the other hand or the evil spirits destroy and foment trouble. A spirit in this category (ghost) is described by Luke Anameze as a wonderer "in the evil forest and graveyards. Sometimes, he is even identified among the living... because he is not settled, he is angry and can inflict serious injuries on the living, especially his own relatives who failed to give him a second burial" (Anameze, 1996:5). Even though, the description above is more closely that of the Igbo understanding of the ancestral spirits, many other African countries share similar views. Geoffrey Parrinder in his work African Traditional religion further gives an account of some African tribes' relation with the dead ancestors.

All Ibo believe that their lives are profoundly influenced by their ancestors, and this belief has far-reaching sociological consequences. Sacrifice has to be offered to them at regular intervals, or when a diviner indicates. In the Gold Coast," in the everyday life of the Ga the dead are very present. Most people, as a regular habit, never drink, and many never eat, without throwing a small portion on the ground for their forefathers" (just like among the Igbos as well). In Sierra Leone, "prayer is normally offered through a succession of ancestors. Two distinct groups of ancestors are 'worshipped'. Those ancestors whose names and feats are known... and those who died in the far distant past (57).

Most African tribes believe that the ancestral spirits are invisible: This is because they are considered to have sunk into the past. They cannot be seen in reality, according to Mbiti, they have sunk beyond the horizon of Zamani period, so that human beings do not see them either physically or mentally. Memory of them has slipped off. In spite of their invisibility, their activities are felt everywhere and everywhere present. One of the central beliefs of the African is that the ancestral spirits can make their wishes and intentions known to human beings. It is on this basis that they are further believed to be capable of making themselves visible to human beings when they consider that to be necessary. Being individuals who were previously alive, they are believed to be capable of agency and therefore can initiate actions aimed at a particular end. An awareness of the agency of the ancestral spirits as well as that of deities provides grounds for understanding physical occurrences (Brown 158). Even though they are considered as ancestors, some African tribes like the Igbos anthropocentrically consider them as impersonal beings. The humanity, which characterizes them as persons is supposed to have left them at death. Ontologically considered in this sense, they are not part or the maturation of individual human beings even though in the formal process of activities they can be considered as a stage or the end process of becoming.

Viewed from this perspective, death in African understanding of reality is a loss, and the spirit mode of existence means the withering of the individual, because his personality evaporates, his name disappears and he becomes less of a person. This however does not rob them the right of participation in human affairs. They participate in a different mode of existence - as spirits in the case of good ancestors and as ghosts in the case of dead evil humans. In Zimbabwe for example, it is reported that the dancing and celebrations during burials are meant to please the dead person's spirit so that it can peacefully journey to the dead and come back to be compassionate to the living (Primus 168). Because of the priceless value which the traditional Igbo as well as many traditional African people place on human life and its enhancement and continuity, Igbo traditional religion like those of other African groups may be regarded as dominantly "anthropo-centric". Human life is therefore believed to be the prime value and every other thing is expected to serve its realization (Nwala 144).
The concept of life (ndu) is also existence itself and existence could, take various forms either material achievement only or material-spiritual nexus. Hence, even at death, which is the dissolution of the flesh, the spirit enters a separate existence maintaining the (ndu) or what we may call "vital energy" in another sphere or form of existence. In a collaborative effort towards reinforcing our earlier view, Madu (27) infers that "life encompasses both the material and spiritual spheres of existence for the Igbo". This existence, according to him must be dynamic. Life therefore, he concludes, embraces both the person's material and spiritual wellbeing. Thus, anything that threatens the material and spiritual wellbeing of man is feared by the Igbo since, this would diminish the dynamic quality of life. This underscores the reason why the traditional Igbo revere and fear the deities: the supreme God (Chukwu, Chineke), the nature beings such as the earth deity or goddess (Aja ala), the sun deity (Anyanwu), the god of divination and healing (Agwu-nsu) and lesser spirit forces (Alusi) which can be good or evil.

**Pure Spirit and Disembodied Spirits**

The relationship between God and other categories of being is better explained by Ikenga Metuh in his explanation of the Igbo world.

The Igbo world presents itself as one fluid coherent unit in which spirits, men animals, plants and elements are engaged in continuous interaction. The invisible world of spirits, 'ani mmuo' and the visible world 'uwa' shade into, and mutually influence each other. Spirits, mmuo, of various kinds inhabit the spirit-world. There are 'Chukwu,' the creator, the deities 'Mmuo' which manifest themselves through important natural phenomena such as the sun, the sky, thunder, the earth etc. There are the spirit forces 'Arusi', titular spirits of the clans. Then come the ancestors 'Ndichie,' and 'Ogbunuke,' evil wandering spirits of the dead (The Nature...62).

Okolo further corroborates this in his explanation of the African ontology. According to him, the invisible or immaterial world is the dwelling for "God, or the highest being; the ancestors, or souls of the heads of clans and of the departed relatives; and nature gods, or spirits. The material realm, on the other hand, contains human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate beings" (Okolo 211). Reality in African metaphysics can summarily be said to be essentially spiritualistic. It does recognize the reality of the material but gives it less consideration. A conceptual distinction is made between the spiritual and the material world but this distinction is not made in the realm of being for both the spiritual and the material are regarded as real in terms of being. African ontology homogenously unites both the monistic and pluralistic as well as idealistic and materialistic conceptions of reality. It claims that matter is the only real thing but considers it to possess as well the attributes of the spirit. In the dual conception of being as spiritualistic and materialistic, God is considered the highest of all being both spiritual and material. The spiritual realm, which concerns us specifically involves God the pure spirit and other spirits which are further given complex hierarchical positions.

**Concluding Reflections**

Some person on seeing this might resort; so much of talking, so much of belief, so much of philosophy, little or no practical. Such na"ive persons are oblivious of that fact that, if there are leaders and scholars to talk and no religious and moral beliefs system whether to moderate human life, the society would degenerate into something worse than the Hobbesian state of nature, It also shows that such persons involved indeed have no knowledge of the history of ideas and more still of philosophy. Moreover, the issue that should be of practical concern is not whether those beliefs are scientifically verifiable or not but whether they have some philosophical merit. Undoubtedly, these different views about spirits raise some questions about the ontological commitments within African cultures or tribes. However, it suffice to state that the central issue which is of importance here is that Africans consider every empirical fact as having a relation to something spiritual and this is very important in every consideration of their metaphysical views. L. Brown puts it this way:

A fundamental tenet of tradition African culture is that there is more to reality and to the realm of experience than that which is readily accessible through empirical inquiry, and that one can acquire an understanding of natural phenomena by appealing to experiences whose characterizations are not empirically confirmable but are nonetheless warrantable assertible. The warrant is rooted in a felt sense that there are spiritual components to nature that influence experiences and perceptions. It is also rooted in the belief that phenomena that are not readily explainable via empirical means can best be explained by appealing to the causal efficacy of the spiritual components of nature (159).

The implication of this is that Africans are committed to unobservable entities, which act as causal agents. We may call them mere religious beliefs but they transcend that. These are the
theoretical posits that cannot be observed by the senses which are not also alien to western philosophy itself. Descartes for example posited the mind in need of the explanation for the active agent that reasons, proves, understands and whose knowledge is to be accepted as more authoritative than the academic tradition which claimed that intellectual knowledge begins with experience (Wilson 676). Unequivocally, African metaphysics has remained a potent force to reckon with as far as African ethics and moral schemes are concerned. It helps to maintain a sane socio-political sphere in traditional Africa hence; one cannot really appreciate the traditional African without recourse to them. A good example is the place and role of the disembodied spirits after death hence, the human spirits strive to live responsibly while on the physical plains and it also explains why the living make frenetic effort to prepare the ‘good’ dead to the land of the dead so that that person can fully and responsibly be equipped to performed its cherished and esteemed role as an ancestor.

I have argued elsewhere that the family is the locus of African communalistic theory of being (Ukwamedua 68) but Paul Ogugua (47) went further to posit that African metaphysics is the foundation of Igbo-African communalism and that the existential practices in Igbo-African world points towards an ontology. He further asserts that the existence-in-relation, communal or collectivist attitude of the Igbo-African are manifestations of an ontology. This purports the view of this paper that African communalism is the brainchild of African ontological theory of being. Therefore, this African concept of being and forces explains the status of spirits and they are the foundations to a proper and thorough epistemology of the African ontology. However, one wonders if in the face of globalization, Africans would will be able to still contend with and manage these very personal realities that have kept them alive and active right from the time of pre-modern Africa? One also wonders whether these realities still come to play in the way that Africans live move and have their being today? However, while this is an important aspect of this type of research it should be the concern of further research by African philosophers in the same spirit of doing African philosophy.
Works Cited


