



AFRICAN METAPHYSICS

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ABSTRACT

Do Africans have a metaphysics that is unique to them? If they do, what differentiates it from Metaphysics of other continents? This is the task that this paper sets to investigate and evaluate. This paper, however, holds that denying the existence of African metaphysics based on its primal pre-literate and non-documentary culture is to be unfair to the Africans, as this does not substantially inhibit the possibility of the capacity for logical reasoning and reflective capacity that are the pre-requisites for such a philosophical enterprise. The dexterity of African reasoning can best be appreciated after pains-taking analysis of African thinking pattern, which this paper sets to undertake.

Keywords: Metaphysics, African metaphysics, Harmonious monism, Complementarity, Duality.

INTRODUCTION

Without fear of resurrecting the already settled issues of the existence and non-existence of African philosophy, with its attendant polemics and argumentations, the appellation, “African Philosophy” pre-supposes and strongly assumes the existence of a Metaphysics that is distinctly and peculiarly African; that reflects the African weltanschauung (universe of experience) and African reality of existence. This is in contra-distinction to the Western, Eastern or Jewish metaphysics, which have their uniqueness and characteristics. This position, apart from meeting the stout criticisms and apathy of philosophers like David Hume to metaphysics and metaphysical issues in general, would definitely be repudiated by the Universalist philosophers who contend that philosophical and metaphysical issues should have and make universal appeal without being regionalized or sectarian.

To the Humean criticism, the existence and non-existence of Metaphysics have long been debated and settled. Indeed, it will amount to labouring the obvious and a serious logical lag to deny that reality is not just the physical, the sensible and the material. Therefore, “Metaphysics would continue to be with man, as long as, metaphysical (spiritual dimension) remains part of the human nature”(Omeregbe, 1993) .

In any case, the unfortunate attack on Metaphysics, precipitated by the platonic and Cartesian bifurcation of reality and the circumvention of Metaphysics only to the supra-sensible and the transcendental is, of course, uncalled for if Metaphysics is understood as “the study of reality”. The universalists’ position too is contentious in that “philosophers do not spring up like much room from the ground but are products of their time and nations, whose most valuable and invisible signs, flow in their idea of philosophy” (Marx, 1885). This socio-cultural influence on the gestation, germination and articulation of philosophical ideas is attested to by F. Hegel who avers that, men do not at certain epoch merely philosophize in general; for, there is a definite philosophy, with definite character, which arises among a people and permeates their spirit. This philosophy is contemporaneous with and a reflection of the people’s constitution forms of government, morality, social life, capabilities, customs and enjoyments. Corroborating this submission, Onyenwenyi (1985) argues that granted, the themes dealt with in philosophy are universal, yet the treatment of these themes is relative to a people and coloured by their conceptions of life in which everything around them become meaningful. This then justifies and provides the basis for calling a philosophy or a metaphysics, European, Asian, Indian, etc.

Metaphysics therefore is a philosophical outlook, which tries to reach “a more comprehensive, all embracing, totalistic view of reality without neglecting the unique place of individual things in the holism of reality” (Ozumba, 2004). And, as the Africans daily struggle to survive the hazardous nature of the world and being faced with the fundamental issues of the purpose and meaning of existence, the natural tendency is to ask some salient and basic questions in these regards. So the questions raise by the Africans and the solution they proffer to these existential bugging issues constitute, “African Metaphysics”.

However, as noted by G. Ozumba, the process and methodology employed in African Metaphysics may not be as rigorous and analytic as in Western Philosophy of today. But that is not to deny African Philosophy certain rigorousness just as in the case of the Ionians and the pre-Socratics. Esen (1982) analysis of Ibibio thought on causality and (Anyanwu, 1967) discussion on African Arts strongly repudiates any denial of “analyticness” and “scientificness” of African thought system. E. Esen, for instance, avers that “the mind that thinks in hierarchical modes and categories rather than in single, isolated individualistic phenomenon, the mind that perceives relationship between things and analyze situation in terms of cause and effect, balance and conflict must be scientific, logical and analytic” (94). However, the rigorousness, scientificness and analyticness in African philosophy in its purist form cannot be equated with contemporary paradigm and standard. Again, lack of documentation could not be “a minus to African philosophical strive as the ideas were stored in folk wisdom, mythologies, traditional proverbs, religion, world view, etc” (Ozumba, 2004).

G. Ozumba further contends that Africans had a pragmatic metaphysics in that acceptability of an idea, an explanation, a conception, a belief or folk wisdom was based on workability, not minding

whether they fulfilled certain fundamental criteria or objective reality. It should, however, be noted that pragmatism as conceived by the Africans is not in isolation to the basic ontology that provides the bases and theoretical framework to African understanding of reality. Sometimes recourse was made to divination in order to unravel the ontological basis of such phenomena. This is explainable by the fact that in African Metaphysics, empiricism merges with rationalism based on its operational ontology of “duality” or “complementarity of reality,” which is anchored on the dualistic but integrative cosmology of the African. In this case, the epistemological task fuses into metaphysics.

NATURE AND CONTENTS OF AFRICAN METAPHYSICS

Ontologically, Africans, as noted by [Esen \(1982\)](#) think in hierarchical categories. Beings do exist but in hierarchical structure. At the apex is the creator, Supreme Being known as AbasiIbom among the Ibibio/Efik, Odudumare by the Yorubas, Chineke or Chukwu in Igbo and Allah among the Hausa. For instance, among the Ibibio of the Niger Delta Region of the South- South geographical area of Nigeria, the name of the supreme deity, AbasiIbom is etymologically derived from a two compound word, Abasi and Ibom. Abasi is taken from *abai*, which is a building terminology referring to the king post of a house, without which no serious house is constructed among the Ibibio. The *abai*, is usually taken from a tree, like cedar or timber that is believed by the Ibibio to survive for a very long time, sometimes even outlive the life span of the particular building. *Abasi* is therefore believed to live forever like the *abai*. *Ibom*, the other component of the name refers to a very distant town. It also depicts the pinnacle, the apex of a building. On the other hand, it refers to the first location that the Ibibio settled after their migration from the Bantu region. So, AbasiIbom unlike other beings in the hierarchy of beings is transcendental in nature and pure spirit, therefore distant from the people. To depict its transcendental nature, the Ibibio at times refers to God as *Abasi asana enyong*, meaning “the God of the clearest sky”. Everything, however, exists according to his plan and purpose. Accessed to Him is impeded by His transcendental nature hence, the existence of intermediates like the ancestors and the localized deities who are approached through rituals and sacrifices.

The ancestors are dear forefathers who were revered while alive because of their good standing in the society. At death they become unfettered spirit, therefore, can interfere in the affairs of the living, and can also be approached by the living through rituals and sacrifices. It is the unfettered nature of the ancestors that provide the ontological basis for the African’s idea of re-incarnation since, the ancestors through projection could naturally be re-born while still existing in the spirit world.

The nature of the localized deities is not very dear. As gods, they are regarded as spiritual in nature but localized in trees, rivers, hills etc. There is virtually a deity for everything of existential importance to the Africans like thunder, war, fertility, agriculture, fishing, family, etc. They are

approached for help in moments of unexpected events within the area of their jurisdiction. The localized deities are ambivalent in nature hence, can be manipulated by men to cause good or bad effects or consequences. Their ambivalent nature makes them susceptible to manipulations by men, analogous to the Greek gods and goddesses that were repudiated by ancient philosophers like Plato, who despised them as too anthropomorphic to be regarded as gods. It is not very clear whether they are created by AbasiIbom (Supreme Being) but as deities, they are immortal. The localized deity is analogous to angels in Christian and Islamic religious conceptions who are known by their functions. Their relevance and reverence is determined by the existential role they play among the community.

Man is next in the hierarchy of beings. Though the Africans differ as regards the constituents of man, but that man has a mortal body and an immortal soul is not debatable. The Igbo, for instance, believes that man has three components, namely, *ahu-* body, *mkporu obi* – soul and *mmuo*– spirit. Man, therefore for the Igbo is both a physical and psychical entity (Ozumba, 2004). The Akan, according to Kwame Gyekye believes in a dualistic conception of man, that is, *okra-* body and *nipadua* – soul. For the Ibibio, man is a created being with a composite nature of body- *idem* and a dual soul–*ukpong*; one soul, unites with the physical body while the other, resides in plants and animals known as, *ukpongikot* “bush soul” (Talbot, 1962; Ekong, 1985). The relationship between the body and the soul is, of course, metaphysically problematic. It is not very clear if the union is substantial or accidental especially as the “bush soul” can actually be said to reside either in plant or animal. It is also believed that any mishap to the bush soul spells doom for the associated body. It is, no doubt, this belief that provides the basis for the Ibibio’s belief in transmigration of soul and metempsychosis. Commenting on the African idea of metempsychosis, Ekong (1985) writes:

The concept of metempsychosis is a clear indication of the profoundness of the Ibibio (African) traditional worldview. This worldview is phenomenally rich in that it attempts to describe the ultimate foundation of human experience in order to describe the “essence” underpinning these experiences (137).

Reacting to this African conception of man, Ojong (1996) writes:

The immediate philosophical problem arising from this belief is that of the body and a rarefied spiritual entity that can be likened to Gilbert Ryle’s concept of “the ghost in the machine”, or what could be referred to as the substance view of the soul. The implication is the bifurcation between the soul and the body with the soul as an imaginable entity with its own characterization and capable of independent existence from the human body (82).

Man plays a vital role within the community of beings either as an intermediary cause (who exploits and manipulates the gods and nature to his advantage), or as the receiver of the causal effect. As mortal, man is checkmated by space and time, but this limitation can be overcome by acquiring some mysterious and esoteric knowledge of nature and of the gods. This is what Africans believed of the witches, wizards, sorcerers and traditional medicine men.

Plants and animal, which constitute the terrestrial plane also, have a place in the hierarchical conception of beings. They are believed to be created and imbued with the spiritual dimension. Not all plants and animals are of equal importance and reverence by the Africans. Some are believed to possess extra-ordinary powers that can be manipulated to man's advantage or disadvantage. Plants like *acantusmontanus* - Leopard's tongue, *Justiciaschimperi* - hunter's weed, *amphianitica* – calmwood, alligator pepper, bitter kola, African pepper, and animals like Owl, Crocodile, Python, etc are of this characterization.

To properly understand the relationship among the various kinds of beings, then the notion of force as the fundamental causal and uniting factor is very important. It is the permeation of force or spirit in all things that is responsible for whatever exist. Force is here understood as life, energy, power, dynamism, strength or what P. Temple's technically referred to in his *Bantu Philosophy* as vital force. Whatever exist, from the lowest to the highest being has a force. Every existence then exists in virtue of force, hence, different kinds of existence is a fraction (or function) of the degree of the life force in different beings. There is a supreme Spirit or Force, who is God, the force in the deities and the force of the ancestors, then the embodied force in man. There is also the force in animals, animate beings as well as inanimate beings. To get to the Supreme Being, man must go through the intermediacy of ancestors and minor duties. This dynamism of spirits and forces in nature explains why the Africans invoke and talk to trees, rivers, mountains, stores, wood, etc. In this way, the Africans believe the spirit/ force, which is the fundamental substance in reality, can be harnessed and manipulated to their personal benefits.

In the hierarchical structure of beings, man appears the dominant spirit among the created visible spirits. God is the source and the highest vital force followed by the divinities and ancestors (the living dead,) in the invisible realm. Apparently, however, this African conception of reality gives privacy to the spirit, but not in the exclusive nature of Descartes' dualism or in the absolute spiritualism of the Eastern thought. The Africans also give room to the physical but only as a secondary consequence. No being, however, exist in isolation but ontologically in connection and interaction with other beings (both animate and inanimate). An African therefore realizes himself only in the midst of hierarchy of beings, some acting above and others below, outside of which human beings have no existence (Unah, 1992). This interaction is called "communal spiritualism" by Momoh (2000), which is the culture of harnessing the spirit of the whole community for the benefit of the individual (9). The visible grouping is simply a reflection of the ontological order and harmony in the universe, which is animated in various senses by the dynamic power of the spirit.

This spirit is not identified with God or with something mysterious, but only an aspect of reality. Hence, reality cannot be said to be one, two, many or static but dynamic (Idjakpo, 1995)

The Africans believed in a dualistic, cyclic but regulated cosmology such that any upset is an intrusion. The world and nature works optimally only if there is proper balancing and blending of all the ingredients in a given situation. The Africans, therefore, abhors extremities since this will upset the balance necessary for proper functioning of nature and society. Despite the desire for balancing and harmony, however, conflicts and contradictions abound. Both realities too do play significant and vital roles in African metaphysical thought especially in upsetting monopoly in nature and also revealing the mysterious nature of existence. These contradictions and disharmony sometime reveal the uncertainty that characterizes existence without which life would become boring and meaningless, unfulfilled expectation, and disappointments. So, in African worldview, contradictions co-exist. In any case, events do not just occur per chance to upset the harmony in nature. Every event is traceable to a cause, which has to be identified if the harmony is to be restored or event is to be properly understood and handled successfully. Rituals and sacrifices are often employed as veritable means of maintaining, and sometimes restoring the much cherished and needed harmony.

In consonant with the theocratic nature of African cosmology, the Supreme Being is regarded as the ultimate cause, the ancestors and localized deities are intermediate causes, besides witches, wizard, sorcerers and traditional medicine men. Since the cosmos is integrated with interplay of spiritual and physical forces then the material cause/ event must necessarily and concomitantly have a spiritual cause or dimension. To treat any event in isolation, only as physical, is to achieve no result or only transient one.

It is difficult to talk of freedom of man within this ontological hierarchy of being. Man acts and lives in accordance with his nature as a creation of the Supreme Being. Other beings and forces like the deities, the ancestors, witches, wizards, nature, etc., also play a determining role in man's existence. This explains why lots of sacrifices were performed in traditional Africa society to help maintain the harmony between these forces for the benefit of man. The African, however, do not rule out freedom of man. They believe that man is free and can take his destiny in his hands as the Igbo adage says; "if a man says yes, his chi also affirms", after placating the gods through rituals and sacrifices. If there is any doubt, the diviner can be consulted for advice and direction.

However, the Africans seem to abhor the idea of the absolute freedom of man. Man's freedom is in his free capacity to choose to work with the god and nature or not. The former leads to man's successful living, while the later leads to man's peril. Evil or unsuccessful living is not caused by the gods but by man through the negative manipulation of the forces in nature and the ambivalent nature of the gods.

CONCLUSION

It is a fact from the fore-discussion that African metaphysics exists. To deny it is to deny the Africans the capacity for reflection, which is a natural endowment of every Homo sapiens. To regard it as primitive is comparatively to make a mess of the Ionian and pre-Socratic philosophies. While not denying the fact that some of what is regarded as African Metaphysics are definitely replete with philosophical and metaphysical problems, these are no reason to blanketly reject and repudiate African metaphysics as nonsensical. There have been lots of de-construction, re-construction, construction and structuring of African metaphysics by philosophers over the years at least for the past four decades with the intent and hope of establishing African metaphysics on a sound and logical footing. On this rest the future of better understanding and appreciation of African philosophy.

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