

THE CONCEPT OF GOD AS FORCE IN AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

Umeh, George-Franklin Ph.D*
Jude I. Onebunne**

Abstract

The concept of God has been a perennial problem in philosophy and that has given rise to theistic and Atheistic theories or principle in the world of philosophy and religion. The idea of God as the force which is self-sustaining but rather creates and sustains other forces in the world occupies the centre place of African philosophy, religion and cosmology. In this work, we will look into this trend of thought raising questions such as: does God exist, how was it created? Is it powerful as to create other things? We shall apply the method of analysis. In the analysis, we discovered God as a force in relation with other categories of forces in African philosophy. For different philosophers, this force has many interpretations depending on the epoch. These interpretations also brought about some theistic and atheistic tendencies. In conclusion, the idea of God remains indispensable whether believed in or not because there are so many mysteries in the world.

Introduction

The concept of God as the Supreme Being was coined in philosophy of religion by Ludwig Feuerbach as the principle of Hypostatization. This principle holds that the idea of God is man-made whereby man placed so high those values he desired so much to serve as a model to his imperfect nature. More so because the perfection of those desired qualities such as goodness, faithfulness, mercy, beauty, truthfulness and son on, cannot be achieved fully in human beings, men then attributed those perfect qualities to God. These qualities have force, because of their association with the greatest force-Ntu; God, who determines their existence and sustains them in being.

Kagame begins by giving a distinction between a prefix and a determinative in African ontology. In describing the four categories of being, he discouraged the use of prefix to qualify them for when a prefix such as (un)pleasant is used to describe a word or concept. The word retains its meaning. However, in Bantu language, the stem without the determinative is meaningless. The stem cannot stand alone and it at the same time loses all the concreteness that accrues from it. The four categories of forces in African philosophy are: *Muntu* (human being), *kintu* (thing), *Hantu* (place and time), *Kuntu* (modality.) All that exist in the universe of being and becoming is summed up under any of these categories, “everything there is must necessarily belong to one of these four categories and must be conceived of not as substance but as force”¹.

Man (*Muntu*) is therefore a force, dog (*Kintu*) is also a force. West and yesterday (*hantu*) are forces; also beauty and laughter (*Kuntu*) are forces. Being forces, they are related to each other. Their relationship to each other is seen in the determinative *Ntu*: this is common to all of them ². What then is *NTU*? It appears meaningless and some extent contradictory to begin to give credence to the concept of *NTU* as Kagame had already referred to it as a determinative from which all four categories of force are derived. But it is not meaningless and poses no

threat to our understanding of the categories, for *NTU* is what all the categories are. It is not something that completes itself. It is the central force in which all four categories find their unity and express their being.

Force

God for Tempels (1959) is the 'great Muntu', "The great person", 'The great, powerful, life force'. But in another passage Tempels describes God as 'The supreme wise man, who knows all things, who established at the deepest level the kind and nature of their forces. He is force itself, which has force within itself, has made all other beings, and knows all forces...' (77)

Since all four categories of African philosophy are forces and *Ntu* is what the categories are, then *Ntu* is a force. To say that *Ntu* is what the categories are, is to say that force is what they all are too. But to define force would be contrary to the very nature of force as it can only be described and not defined. In African worldview therefore, force has a metaphysical connotation. It is not accessible to science. It is described as a vital principle or animating force within living beings. It is the breath, divine spark, the soul, Spirit, vitality, and psyche. It is responsible for the evolution and development of organism. Also, it is referred to as an energy that is responsible for life and is essential for its continuation. It is the sum total of primal energy from which all mental and physical energy has evolved; it sustains physical life, thought-force, and bodily action. The central element in all these descriptions is the fact that vital force is what guarantees the sustenance of the life, it is that without which all that exists ceases to be. In its meta empirical state, it is dynamic and it is its dynamism that gives it quality.

Kagame who analyzed Bantu language in order to sieve out the rudiments of their thought system chose the stem "Ntu" in Bantu language as the word that captures the essence of force in Bantu language. Thus, life force, vital force is what "Ntu" means in African philosophy. What Kagame points out is that if being is the ground of everything that exists in Western Philosophy, *Ntu* serves as such foundation in African philosophy.

K. C. Anyanwu captures the essence of the argument which the paper tries to project very aptly as he observes that "-ntu" is an evidence that there exists relationship of all forces in the universe" (Anyanwu 63). In a way there is the tendency to view everything as a unit or coherence. This view does away with whatever contradiction you may be seeing in natural life and everyday experience as sense appearance.

It is suitable and convenient as Anyanwu cited above, to hold that there exists a coherence and unit between things in the African world. But proper reasoning could have told him of that; that since everything has the same origin, everything has to exhibit coherence with one another. This view of unity of all realities therefore is not peculiar to African people. Spinoza who holds that only one substance exists whereas all other things are attributes of that single substance ended his philosophy on this note too as he emphasized the unity of all realities.

The unity of the African thought system accounts for the absence of dualism in African world. God is at the foundation of everything. Anyanwu and Ruth, thinking in this line, would argue that in African, forces are not in isolation from their creator and sustainer.

Ntu as a life force is created by God and has been in existence since the beginning of the world. This existence cannot be traced except in the concrete things it manifests itself in. Thus, Jahnheinz Jahn (1961) would warn his readers that if they want to find Ntu, they should only look at its "manifestations: Muntu, Kintu, Hantu, and Kuntu" (101). This is so as "all being, all essence, in whatever form it is conceived, can be subsumed under one of these categories" (100). The implication of this is obvious as it points out that one cannot conceive Ntu independent of the manner in which it is experienced. Only the essence of God goes beyond the confines of categories and hence beyond the category of *Ntu*.

We shall do well to remember that Hegel advanced an argument similar to what Jahn wrote above. He had written about the absolute spirit that manifests itself in concrete beings and in history. God as force manifests itself through the medium of other lesser forces in a hierarchical form or order. This manifestation is natural to God for that is the only way to display his supremacy of influence on the lesser forces.

THE CATEGORY OF FORCES

The idea of the category of forces is hinged on the belief that forces are differentiated according to their vital power or rank. Thus, "it is the unequal possessions of life-force by different manifestations of being that constitute differences within particular specie of being and another" (Egbeke Aja as quoted in Oguejiofor J.O. 1996, 89). Based on this, as Jahn reports, Kagame differentiates between four categories.

- i *Muntu* = 'human being' (plural: Bantu);
- ii *Kintu* = 'thing' (plural: Bintu);
- iii *Hantu* = 'place and time';
- iv *Kuntu* = 'modality' (100)

i. The Muntu

The *Muntu* sits at the apex of the categories and denotes all beings with intelligence. According to Jahn J., God, the great life force, stands at the height of the Bantu forces. He is not just a being with intelligence but intelligence itself. He creates the other forces and apportions intelligence to them. Once a being is created, its annihilation cannot be contemplated unless designed and initiated by him. This view is also shared by Leibniz.

But the hierarchy descends immediately to man-the living and the dead. It is note-worthy at this point to state that *Muntu* and human being are not coterminous for it includes both the living, the dead and spirits. However, human beings are separated from animals by the possession of the principle of intelligence. Life, which in Bantu language is called *Amagara* is definitely not on the same plain with the animalistic kind of life. In the sub-species of man, the *orishas*, that is the founders of the clans (ancestors) occupy the uppermost place because they possess the strongest forces in the rank of Bantu simply because God communicated this force to them first. Then, from them, we see a degradation of force in level of perfection, each being has force, as force weakens and grows thinner depending on how far it is from the creator. This has a dangerous implication as the Bantu who are living today are inferior to their forebears who are since dead and who are inferior to their own forebears and the chain of perfection continues to go higher until it reaches God Himself. On the other hand the living man will be

superior to those who come after him. There is the tendency that this degradation will continue until it reaches a point that the potent ingredient in the Bantu force is completely eroded. To maintain the tenacity of this lineage and linkage, the concept of Ubuntu has to come into play, which literary means *I am what I am because of who we are*.

Ubuntu

For Onebunne J.I.(2018), The concept of *Ubuntu* leaves an impression of relationship that is governed by the idea of *We* that makes one to be open and available to others. Such a person does not feel threatened that others are able and good based from a proper self assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole and is diminished, when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed. This is Ubuntu, that is, one's self worth as a result of the other's value (44-45). This is part of the force, a binding force that unites instead of dividing, for united we stand and divided we fall. Supporting this view Ogugua P.I (2004) has this to say: the solidarity underlying these members which is the effect of the principle of oneness or belongingness to the same roof is what is described as African Communalism. Hence there is a strong force in African communalism with its principles such as belongingness, liberty and integrity (Iroegbu P. 1996). In his article 'Ohazurume: A Philosophic definition of communalism as the typology of igbo being' Umeogu B. (2007) shows a definitional understanding of being and goes further to assert the language structure or typology of igbo being in belongingness.

ii. The Kintu

The next category is the category of frozen forces, that is, of things without intelligence. Trees, animals, cars, etc. find their place here. The general notion of life force is that "it is only when it enters into man that it becomes alive..." (Oguejiofor 1996: 8) But it is necessary to seek to discover under what condition dead forces can be said to be life forces. Oguejiofor's tone shows that they are regarded as life forces only in potency. But potential beings may or may not exist. In so far as they are in potency, they cannot be regarded as being *qua tale*. The argument is that a frozen force may never be activated by man. When this is the case we cannot talk of an actual force. The proponents of force did not make this distinction but I think it is a valid one. If it is accepted as a valid one then we will be right in holding that only actual forces are real forces. In this case, frozen forces unacted upon by man remain potential forces and in a sense no force at all.

iii. The Hantu

This is the category of time and place. The belief here is that the African does not make any distinction between the two of them. "*Hantu* is the force which localizes spatially and temporally every event and every motion, for since all beings are force, everything is constantly in motion." (Jahn 102). For instance certain hours of the night have special significance and force (e.g 12 midnight to 3am) and places like the evil forest, at the centre of a criss-crossed road and so on.

iv. The Kuntu

The *Kuntu* category is the category of the modal forces. Examples of the modal forces are laughter, knowledge, beauty etc. The African conception of the modalities view them as abstract and perfect entities as understood by Plato. The perfection of the Kuntu forces is

shown in Tutuola's writing about the Kuntu force "beauty". Thus, as a perfect force the Kuntu is indestructible, unchanging and uncontaminated. He writes that if beauty which takes the form of a gentleman

Went to a battle field surely, the enemy would not kill him or capture him and if bombers saw him in a town which was to be bombed they would not throw bomb in his presence and if they did throw it, the bomb itself would not explode until this gentleman would leave that town

Kuntu is also a substance as defined by Aristotle. Aristotle conceives substance as that which does not inhere in another. When viewed in this order we consider the *kuntu* as that which does not inhere in another thing. Though our daily experience would tend to inform that the modality, laughter, for instance would need a laughing person to exist, but the reality is that laughter exists on its own independent of the man that laughs.

As a substance, laughter is active and continuous in its existence. Thus, due to the possession of this continuity in existence, it is not conceivable that laughter ceases to exist when a laughing individual ceases to laugh. Thus, even when people stop laughing, laughter continues to laugh for to laugh is its nature, for if it ceases to laugh, there will be no more laughter in the world.

Janheinz Jahn portrays this point aptly with Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard* where the drunkard encounters laughter in its form as a substance. He is amazed by the fact that things are not exactly as he perceives them in the world for it is also part of African thought system that appearance deceives. Thus, against how things appear in the world, Tutuola reports that the drunkard and his companion knew "Laugh" personally on that night because as every one of them stopped laughing at us, "Laugh" did not stop for two hours (103).

Here the impression should not be created "Laugh" only, laughed for two hours and stopped. If it did, it would no longer be "Laugh," or more correctly there would no longer be "Laugh" for it has stopped laughing. The two hours marked here signifies the time the drunkard spent before "Laugh." Within those two hours "Laugh" was begged to stop laughing but it could not as doing so would mean bringing about its own cessation which is akin to suicide in our own world.

The abode of the *Kuntu* is not terrestrial, It is spiritual devoid of all the limitation of earthly existence. In Tutuola cited above, we must bear in mind that the drunkard only met the *Kuntu* categories as he journeys to the land of the spirits to retrieve his tapping instrument. It was there that he met the *Kuntu* forces. That actually is their abode.

The *Muntu* in Bantu philosophy is seen as being with intelligence. With its intelligence, the *muntu* is able to control things, the *Bintu*. But in a world governed by forces where forces take time to influence and control one another, the *Muntu* himself is also controlled and influenced by the *Kuntu*. This view is not explicit in Janheinz Jahn but a careful analysis of Tutuola's writing which he adopts in his work easily reveals this. Now, look at what Tutuola says about "Laugh" and *Muzima*, (the living *Muntu*.) We did not know the time that we fell into this

laugh, but we were only laughing at "Laugh's" laugh and no body who heard him when laughing would not laugh (103)

This portrays a state of helplessness in the *Muntu* in the presence of *Kuntu*. He is incapacitated to act contrary in the manner in which the *Kuntu* has affected him. Perhaps, one of the modal forces, knowledge, is better- placed to be used in the analysis of the implication of this. The knowledgeable man is controlled by what he knows. Knowledge changes his outlook in life and his behaviour even when he does not will this change intentionally. There is nothing he can do but to be knowledgeable once possessed by knowledge. This shows to a great extent how forces influence themselves.

THE INTERACTION OF FORCES

As we have discussed above under force, God is described as a vital principle or animating force within living beings. It is the breath, divine spark, the soul, Spirit, vitality, and psyche. It is responsible for the evolution and development of organism. Also, it is referred to as an energy that is responsible for life and is essential for its continuation. It is the sum total of primal energy from which all mental and physical energy has evolved; it sustains physical life, thought-force, and bodily action. The central element in all these descriptions is the fact that God guarantees the sustenance of these forces, it is that without which all that exists ceases to be. In its meta-empirical state, it is dynamic and it is its dynamism that gives it quality.

The forces are presented as beings that engage in perpetual interaction among themselves. This interaction is mostly seen in the aim of every life force which is to increase its share in the life-force. Thus, a force may decide to increase its own share of life-force but the only way of doing this is by decreasing the life-force of another being. A man may decrease the life force of another man or of an inferior force in order to enhance his own life-force. This he does through incantation which is the force and power of *Nommo* (or witchcraft in African metaphysics). A greater force may influence an inferior force either to positive or to a negative end. For instance a *Muntu* (man, spirit) may possess a *Kintu* (cat, dog, spider, owl, trees etc) in order to harm an enemy. There is a widespread belief in African that the gods are more inclined to possess the trees and that informs the culture of most of the African shrines erected under or around a tree. We must note also that not all trees can serve this purpose but special ones.

On the other hand, a man may increase his vital force by making sacrifices and prayer in honour of his departed ancestors who has the obligation of protecting and providing for their living descendants in order to ensure continuity in their lineage. More so, a man may decrease his vital force by going against the law of nature (by committing an abominable act) and incurring the wrath of the gods which may come in form of an infirmity, disease or infertility. It is worthy of note that in African cosmology, infertility is the highest evil that can befall a man for it shows the impotency of his ancestors to perform their divine duty of procreation. A man's childlessness means the extinction of his lineage and the loss of the vital force of his ancestors.

But more importantly the interaction of forces has serious philosophical implication to human freedom. Granted that it may be argued that every human force has the freedom to increase its

own life-force but then in a world where only the superior forces influence that of the inferior ones, a superior force may starting from the beginning, decrease the force of another human being in such a way that he lacks all energy and will and power to increase his force. When this happens, such a being is controlled by the manipulating higher force. Here freedom is greatly vitiated, and with it responsibility and that brings about the issue of determinism.

But then there is a wide gap in the way European-influenced writers wants us to see these practices among the two peoples. Among the Europeans, the practices are presented as occultic and therefore evil. But the African is presented as one who cherished it as a positive aspect of life, something he glories in but this is not true. Africans detests occult practices especially when the intention is to use it to cause harm to another person in order to weaken his vital force.

Conclusion

We have been able to find in the African philosophy of *NTU* (force) nothing that would contradict, in principle, the modern naturalistic view of the world or the structure of a society based on the division of labour, for modern science does in fact conceive the world as a world of forces, although it still grossly underrates the forces of the spirit. God is the life-force creator and its sustainer and other forces depend on God for their survival. And the society of specialized labour sees man, just as African society does, rather as function than as individual. Perhaps African philosophy could even add something of its own to this conception, by enlivening and making meaningful once more its one-side materialistic orientation in human relationships.

***Umeh, George-Franklin Ph.D**

Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka
gi.umeh@unizik.edu.ng
07030275410

***Jude I. Onebunne**

Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka
juno.anyi@gmail.com

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