

# **The Ontological Universalism of the Spirit in the African Worldview**

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## **Abstract**

The African worldview holds a capacity to conceive a mysterious and extraneous potency behind physical elements. According to Parrinder, African world view tends to understand or explain the ‘forces of nature’ in African religions, not as the material energy which is a natural principle of animation (life) in things, but as the supernatural agent that can inhabit any natural element. His analysis therefore shifts scholarship from equating spirits with natural elements, to seeing them as supernatural forces or personages that merely inhabit those elements. Now, to distinguish between natural elements or energy and the spirits or forces of nature, he observes that ‘all trees are thought to have souls of their own, and some are regarded as the dwelling-places of other powerful spirits which take up temporary abode in them’. Among traditional Africans, spirits are still thought to inhabit trees, rocks, hills and water bodies (Idowu, 1973; Quarcoopome, 1987; Sawyerr, 1970). When Idowu speaks of spirits of trees, he simply refers to the spirits that inhabit trees. Africans believe not only in the existence of the Supreme Being but also in the divinities and spirits. Farrow maintains that Africans believe intensely in the spirit world. Evidence of the reality of spirit is apparent, because everywhere one goes in Africa, one finds objects of spirit worship. These objects of worship remind their owners of the reality of the existence of these spirits, whom they worship and to whom they sacrifice, believing these spirits are intermediaries between them and the Supreme Being. To deny the existence of these spirits, is to deny the existence of African religion.

## **Introduction**

In spite of the obvious materiality of the world, the Igbo/Africans perceive the world as a spiritual entity. The natural elements like sun, moon, stars, land, water or rain and sky, as well as the other major factors of human survival, including farming, hunting, medicine or ritual expertise, become indices of spiritual presence in Igbo/African perception. The elements are conceived as abodes of spirits, or sometimes, personified and imbued with human attributes so that they assume the character of substantive beings. The sun, for instance is thought of as moving across the firmament and revealing the thoughts of men. Do the Igbo not say that nothing is hidden under the sun – *o nweghi ihe zolu ezo n’okpuru anyanwu*? The sun sees everything, so as to say. In that case, the natural elements tend to be viewed as spirits in themselves. Thus, the human world, which for the Igbo/Africans consist of three cosmic spaces – the sky, the earth (intricately joined with the water space), and the underworld (Achebe, 1986; Ejizu, 2002; Ifesieh, 1989; Nwoye, 2011; Onyeocha, 1997) – is occupied at all three levels by various categories of spirit-beings. As Uwalaka (1986) puts it, the physical world of the Igbo/Africans is delicately balanced by the interpenetration of the visible and the invisible, the spiritual and material, theocentricism and anthropocentricism, as well as the transcendent and the imminent.

That the Igbo/African world is two, or two-dimensionally ordered into physical and spiritual realms, says Ede, is implied in the people's way of life. It arises from experience and is made practical in different religious observances. Yet, these worlds must not be treated as unduly distinct from each other. For the two are co-penetrating and essentially one – *Uwa bu otu* (Uke, 2007); they are not antipodal or mutually exclusive but overlap, and in fact, beings in the two realms interact (Enekwe, 1987; Madubuko, 1994). Achebe (1986) describes an aspect of this mutuality:

The topography of the spirit world is exactly the same as that of the world of the living. Life mirrors each other in both worlds. Both worlds are also contiguous with each other. Considerable and continuous contact exists between them; for 'man journeys from the spirit land to the land of the living and back in an endless cycle of birth, death and reincarnation' (p. 11).

The word 'contiguous' seems to evoke the sense of an obvious boundary between the spiritual and physical worlds, as if they lay side by side. Egudu (1971) more cautiously speaks of 'a tenuous divide' separating the two worlds. According to him,

One can easily move across the low threshold of either worlds, and this situation creates a whole set of vital values translatable not only in terms of the practical human experience, but also, and more importantly, in terms of mysticism. The dead are, therefore not dead in the sense of passing into communicable eternity, but are living even if occasionally invisible, side by side with men (p. 76).

The 'distance' between these worlds is figuratively depicted in folklores as '*agu na asaa na iyi (ugwu) na asaa*' – seven deserts and seven rivers or hills. In Igbo mythology, hills and rivers represent the boundaries of humans and the spirits. (They also form natural boundaries between human communities). Thus to venture beyond the hills or rivers, or even into the desert or forest zone, is to venture into the realm of the spirit.

The spirits are believed to use the same roads, same market places, and same streams with human beings. They participate in the same festivals with human beings and can be felt or heard and communicated with by gifted persons (Achebe, 1986). But they make themselves manifest.

### **Origin of Spirits in African Belief**

Scholars are not in agreement on the origin of spirits or divinities according to African traditional belief. Idowu contends that divinities are derivatives from Deity, spirits who have no beginning and probably no ending. 'It will not be correct to say that divinities were created. It will be incorrect to say that they were brought into being, or that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe'. According to Idowu, Orisa-nla (arch-divinity among the Yoruba) is definitely a 'derivation partaking of the very nature and metaphysical attributes of Olodumare'.

But other scholars are not so sure. Farrow points to diverse origins, 'some of them, according to the mythology of the country, were always spirits, of divine origin, existing prior to all creation; others are defied men; others again are the spirits of animals, trees, rocks etc.'. Fadipe denies the concept of divine derivation among the Yoruba. 'All the Orisa of Yoruba land are generally acknowledged to be in every case traceable to a human being'. Mbiti also considers spirits in traditional religion to be created beings. 'Divinities are on the whole thought to have been created by God, in the ontological category of spirits'. Parrinder, an authority on West African religion,

says: ‘Any of the divinities worshipped in West Africa seem to have come from the personification of natural forces, since all the universe is thought to be peopled with spirits. Others are defied ancestors. Some may have double qualities, both human and divine combined’. Indeed, it is difficult to see any clear difference between saying, with Idowu, that the divinities ‘were brought into being’ and saying that they were created.

Since the triune of God alone is eternal, according to Scripture, it follows that in biblical perspective all divinities or spirits came into existence through the creative act of God. This is the truth about the origin of the spirit world. The Bible says of Christ, “For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things have been created by Him and for Him. And he is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16, 17)”

The concept of creation is strong in Mbiti’s (2011) notion of the origin of spirits. From the opinions of some traditional African peoples, Mbiti reports that ‘some spirits are considered to have been created as a race by themselves. These, like other living creatures, have continued to reproduce themselves and add to their numbers’ (p. 79). In particular, he mentions the divinities as ‘on the whole though, to have been created by God, in the ontological category of the spirits’ (p. 75). Other categories of spirits, according to him, emanate from dead human beings and animals which are also created beings. To be sure, Mbiti’s worldview holds the entire universe as God’s creation. His survey of African cultures shows that ‘creation is the most widely acknowledged work of God (p. 39). But God himself, as a Supreme spirit, is not created.

With particular reference to human or ancestral spirits, Mbiti sees death as an important factor of change from a hominid to a spirit. In traditional Africa, it is assumed that dead humans pass on to the spirit world. This passage is explained by Mbiti in terms of a shift from one time frame to another.

## **The Reality of the Spirit World in Africa**

### **A.The African Perspective**

Africans believe not only in the existence of a Supreme Being but also in divinities and spirits. According to Farrow, the African ‘believes intensely in the spirit-world, and in the possibility of exercising, through spirit-agency, a power that can be exercised by no physical means’. For example, Awolalu writes that the Yoruba ‘hold the belief that as the Supreme being created heaven and earth and all the inhabitants, so did He bring into being the divinities and spirits... to serve his theocratic world’. Evidence for the reality of spirits is apparent, because everywhere you go in Africa, you will find objects of spirit worship. These objects remind their owners of the reality of the existence of these spirits, whom they worship and to whom they sacrifice, believing these spirits are intermediaries between them and the Supreme Being. To deny the existence of these spirits is to deny the existence of African religion.

### **B.The Christian Perspective**

Throughout the Bible, it is clearly taught that there is indeed an order of beings above human beings. These spirits are both good and bad. The Bible calls the good spirits ‘angels’ who are ‘ministering spirits sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation’

(Hebrews 1:14). These created beings have intelligence (1 Peter 1:12), and are innumerable (Hebrews 12:22), but they are not equals of God. They are not eternal, since they are created beings. They served Christ on many occasions, predicting his birth (Luke 1:26-33), protecting and strengthening him at the time of his temptations and crucifixion. They minister also to believers (Acts 12:7) and even to unbelievers (Acts 12:23). The Bible nowhere teaches that angels are intermediaries between God and man. They are God's agent in dealing with men. As such, they are not to be worshipped or propitiated through sacrifices.

The Bible also speaks of evil spirits, called 'demons', who are agents of the devil.

Actual communication with unseen spirits, their influence on nations, and demon-possession are taught clearly and unmistakably in both the Old and New testaments. The Bible recognizes not only the material world, but a spiritual world intimately connected with it, and spiritual beings, both good and bad, who have access to, and influence for good or ill, the world's inhabitants.

Jesus himself dealt with numerous cases of demon possession during his earthly ministry. The effectiveness of Jesus' power to exorcise caused people to marvel and therefore to reflect on who he was. The gospel writers portray Christ not only as one who healed many demon-possessed people but also as one who was frequently accused by his enemies of being demon-possessed himself. In John 7:20, when those who were trying to kill him realized that he knew their plan, they retorted that he must have a demon in him. After healing the man born blind (John 10), there was a sharp difference of opinion among the witnesses, as some concluded he was demon-possessed and others, judging by the evidence rather than their prejudices, admitted that neither his words nor actions were those of a person possessed by demon. On occasions, Jesus confronted people who were allowing themselves to be used as instruments of the devil. Judas and the Pharisees both came into this category. Some of his parables clearly depict the destructive work of the devil.

Africans know that to deny the existence of the devil, evil spirit and demon-possession is to deny reality. Some people have witnessed demon activities in predominantly non-Christian parts of Nigeria. This is one of the major areas where African traditional beliefs identify more naturally with the biblical worldview than do Western ideas, where scientific knowledge has often led people to categorize belief in spiritual powers as ignorant and superstitious.

### **Some Theories of the Origin of Spirits in Africa**

#### **Tylor's Animism:**

In 1871, Tylor published his historic book, *Primitive Culture*, which projects the doctrine of soul (Latin – *anima*) as the explanation for the evolution of spirit in human thought. For Tylor, 'the idea of soul was suggested to man by the poorly understood spectacle of the double life that he normally leads... while asleep' (quoted by Durkheim, 1995, p. 47). In other words, the image of oneself in dreams may have struck primitive man as 'another self' with equal realness as the physical one. The dream-self replicates all the features of the physical person; therefore, it is supposed to be somewhat of a material kind, only it is a special form of matter – more subtle and ethereal. It is also more mobile than its physical counterpart since it can travel beyond the scope of physical bodies. Tylor calls this other self or double a soul, and goes on to equate it with principle of life of the living being. For him images of other human beings dead or alive as well

as other creatures such as animals and trees, which one encounters in dreams may also have appealed to the ancients as the souls of those others.

The soul is capable of momentarily leaving the body it animates, but at death the soul is supposed to gain complete freedom from the body. Tylor sees in death the transformation or metamorphosis of souls into spirits. And once the spirit evolves, it is worshipped and cited explanation for various issues in human life.

Durkheim opined that the soul turned spirit 'has gone from being merely a life principle animating a human body to being a spirit, a good or evil genie, and even a deity, depending on the scope of the effects imputed to it' (p.49). Animism generally implies that every animate and inanimate object has a soul or indwelling spirit. This assumption has characterized the views of earlier scholars about African religions, as Sawyerr(1970) observes: 'most of the works on African religion thought-forms start on the assumption that the African... believes that inanimate objects like trees and stones have its own spirit which he worships'(p. 1).

By so thinking, Tylor and other promoters of animism insinuate that that the traditional African mind is incapable of conceiving a real distinction between human and non-human creatures. Yet, even the underdeveloped mind of an infant is able to distinguish between a fellow infant and a toy in human shape. As already noted, Africans do not say that material objects have souls or spirits, but they believe that material things can be inhabited by spirits.

### **Muller's naturism:**

Muller assumes that spirits or gods in primitive societies are no more than personified natural phenomena – sun, sky, rivers, and rocks. Muller is struck by the fact that gods in most traditional religions are associated with elements of nature by name or function. Thus, he speculates that it is nature that sparked off the initial sense of religion in man. In his work on *Physical Religion*, Muller writes that,

At the first glance men cast upon the world, nothing appeared less unnatural to them than nature. Nature was for them the great surprise and the great fear; it was a permanent marvel and a permanent miracle... It is this vast domain open to feelings of surprise and fear, this marvel, this miracle, this immense unknown opposed to what is known... that provided the first impulse to religious language, ( Durkheim, 1995,).

For instance, man is wont to describe nature in terms of his own behaviour or that of other living things within his field of experience. But because language is made up of human elements that describe human conditions, it could not be applied to nature without transfiguring it. When a term that should apply to a living thing is used for non-living things, they are certainly used only metaphorically. Muller seems however to say that metaphors of this kind, especially because the primitive man is supposed to take them literally, tend naturally to assume a personality like those of human or other living beings.

The importance of Muller's naturist theory lies probably in seeing spirits as originating from something substantive – real natural phenomena – and not from some imaginary objects of dreams as Tylor suggests. Yet, by viewing the spirit as an erroneous construct imposed on the mind by language, Muller also suggests that the spirit world is an illusion. Surprisingly, belief in spirits has persisted throughout the history of human civilization. Illusion or error ought not to last for so long to be debunked, except – of course – if it serves a practical purpose; or as Durkheim (1995) puts

it, if it proves to be practically true. That is, 'while not giving us a correct theoretical idea of the things to which it is related, it expresses correctly enough the manner in which those things affect us, for better or for worse' (p. 77). Cultural evidences and scholarship jointly point to the fact that belief in spirits has practical benefits in our cultural development. At least they provide people with the explanation of many mysteries found in their universe (Mbiti, 1991), or help the survival of society through moral control (Kalu, 2003).

### **Tempels 'Theory of 'Vital Force**

The lack of clarification between a natural force or energy and the spirit is the bane of the philosophy of Tempels (1969) whose concept of 'vital force' is probably the first philosophical articulation of the African belief in spiritual forces. Tempels recognizes in African thought a belief in forces, and suggests that 'the concept of force is bound with the concept of being... being is force and force is being' (p. 21). The force is understood as life, energy, strength, or power (Iroegbu, 1995), although Parrinder (1974) also relates it to Smith's dynamism or mysterious potency. It is the life or energy in man, which may decrease with weakness or sickness, and even terminate completely with death. The force may also be enhanced in various ways. For example, one may appeal to God or the ancestors, or to the use of medicine, to increase one's life-force. Thus, for Tempels, man is a living force or energy. Indeed, everything is force or has life-force – God, humans, animals, vegetables, and minerals.

Tempels is criticized for dressing up an ancient theory of magic in the name of African philosophy of forces (Okere, 1983). It is equally curious that he confuses a man's natural life-force or energy with the idea of spiritual potency. Thus he seems to hold the fallacy that spirits are the same as the energy that exudes from natural things. Parrinder specifies that spirits are other than the material forces or energy in natural things. For him, 'forces of nature' refer to:

The powers behind storm, rain, rivers, seas, lakes, wells, hills, rocks. They are not just the water or the rock, for they are spiritual powers capable of manifesting themselves in many places (pp. 23-24).

Parrinder sees in the traditional African mind a capacity for abstraction, which makes it possible to distinguish between natural elements such as the sun or earth or trees, and the power or personality behind those elements.

In appreciating the African capacity to conceive a mysterious and extraneous potency behind physical elements, Parrinder tends to understand the 'forces of nature' in African religions no longer as the material energy that is a natural principle of animation in things, but as the supernatural agent that can inhabit any natural element. His analysis therefore shifts scholarship from equating spirits with natural elements, to seeing them as supernatural forces or personages that merely inhabit those elements. Now, to distinguish between natural elements or energy and the spirits or forces of nature, he observes that 'all trees are thought to have souls of their own, and some are regarded as the dwelling-places of other powerful spirits which take up temporary abode in them' (p. 52). Among traditional Africans, spirits are still thought to inhabit trees, rocks, hills, and water bodies (Idowu, 1973; Quarcoopome, 1987; Sawyerr, 1970). When Idowu speaks of spirits of trees, he simply refers to the spirits that inhabit trees.

### **The Nature of the Spirits**

Among the traditional Igbo/Africa spirits are believed to be creatures of God. God is the source of everything. However, spirits have a different mode of existence from other creatures of God. They have divine nature like God. In fact, some categories of spirits are believed to be derivatives of God (Idowu 1973). This means for Idowu that, apart from the fact that their names reflect the attributes of God, these spirits have no absolute existence – they are in being only in consequence of the being of deity. In clear terms, the derivation theory also implies that such category of spirit is animation of the Supreme Deity, not merely as creatures but as extensions of his power in the aspect of the universe. For this reason perhaps, Metuh (1999) describes the category as personification of God's power and as God's agents, helping him to shepherd different sections of his creation.

Part of the consequences of the divine nature attributed to spirits is that they are characterized by invisibility (Durkheim, 1995, Mbiti, 2011) as well as ubiquity (Idowu, 1973). The spiritual world is immaterial and supersensible, therefore it does not affect the human senses in the same way that the material world does. An instance is that man cannot see or touch the spirits as he can see or touch material objects or bodies. But their presence or existence is not altogether inaccessible to man. In the words of Mbiti,

Spirits are invisible but they are may make themselves visible to human beings... They are seen in the corporate belief in their existence. Yet people experience their activities and many folk stories tell of spirits described in human form, activities and personalities, even if an element of exaggeration is an essential part of that description (2011).

And because they are invisible, he says, spirits are thought to be ubiquitous so that a person is never sure where they are or not. Idowu affirms that spirits can be everywhere:

Spirits, according to African belief, are ubiquitous; there is no area of the earth, no object or creature, which has not a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Thus, there are spirits of trees, that is, spirits which inhabit trees. There are special trees which are considered sacred by Africans and these are believed to be special residences of spirits. The Yoruba *Akoko*, also called by the Igbo *Ogilisi* or *Ogirisi* (*Newboldia Laevis*, according to R. C. Abraham) is a sacred tree which is an emblem to several divinities; it is also reputed to be a residence to certain nondescript spirits which congregate and charter like birds among its leaves in the middle of the night (p. 174).

By manifesting in or inhabiting material objects, spirits generally become 'visible' and, as it were, localized. The inhabited objects become veritable shrines for the spirits. Through them, they become easily accessible to man. When a spirit makes itself visible to man, it can take up a variety of forms. Those who have reportedly seen spirits in the forest, Hackett observes, 'describe them as immoderate in appearance, as either hideous or beautiful, and often with feet turned backwards' (p. 57). Thus they appear in human form or the shape of the objects they inhabit. As Idowu puts it, spirits are as abstract as shades or vapours, and are so constituted that,

They can assume various dimensions whenever they wish to be 'seen' – they may be either abnormally small or abnormally tall, fat or thin. It is believed that especially when they appear beside the natural object which is their resident, they may appear in the form or shape or dimensions of the object (p. 174).

The material world is always the medium of interaction or point of contact between spirits and man.

### **The Relevance/Importance of Spirits in Africa**

In Africa, there are two major categories of spirits—the good or bad. That is the benevolent and malevolent spirits. Africans believe in the reality of the spirit world. The ardent desire to engage with it for the purposes of human survival, health, fruitfulness and longevity represent the aspect of positive or good spirit. Not only are spirits real, but also evil is hyperactive and much religious activity and energy goes into restraining sources of supernatural evil and their influence on human life.

In African beliefs, the source of impersonal or (mystical) mysterious power is not always known, but it is usually attributed to the activities of higher mysterious powers (spirits), whether personal or impersonal that either generates or deposits such powers in things or objects. The potency, efficacy, and the durability of such inhabited impersonal powers vary from object to object. Some objects are said to be inherently more power induces or imputed than others, that is, they are more naturally endowed with powers than others are. The manifestation and the use of the impersonal powers (spirits) are related to practices of medicine men and women, diviners and seers who use natural objects, plants and animals for medicine, magic, charms and amulets. Some specialists believe that mysterious powers and spirits embedded in things or objects can be extracted for specific uses – good or bad use. Mystical and mysterious powers can be transmitted through certain object media or by pure spiritual means. Mystical powers can be sent to specific destinations for an intended good or evil. Mystical powers can be contagious by contact with objects carrying or mediating such powers. The impersonal powers (spirits) can be used for both good and evil. The life of a traditional African with this belief in the personal powers is at the mercy of the benevolent or wicked users of the mystical powers at their disposal. This belief is very much reflected in the traditional religious practices and behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

The Igbo/African believes that the spiritual world can assume physicality as the physical can shed its materiality. Edeh (1985) recognizes in Igbo perception a functional unity of the physical, utilitarian world with the deified, unchanging world that has shed its materiality. The invisible world of spirits differs radically from the human world. But since the Igbo/Africans are more inclined to be practical than speculative, Edeh goes on to note that they tend to make the two worlds equally real, as if both were material. This perhaps, is the foundation of Igbo/African tendency to express abstract and spiritual concepts relating to the invisible world in the mode of physicality, that is, through the use of material representations or images. Through this means, historic beings of the traditional world view are made historical, while ontological phenomena of thought, action and nature also gain materiality. In other words, the Igbo/African perceives the intangible through the optics of tangibility. The same picture is painted by Mbiti (2011) on a larger African canvas, in the following words:

The invisible world is symbolized or manifested by the visible and concrete phenomena and objects of nature. The invisible world presses hard upon the visible one: speaks of the

other, and the African peoples 'see' that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world (p. 57).

Igbo/African people's natural process of knowledge observes the rule of symbolization or representation in which case an unknown object is brought to the perception of the knower by aid of an already known object.

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