

GOD AND MORALITY IN AFRICAN THOUGHT

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Abstract

The ideation of God, a basic human concept, due experiences and curiosity is universal and peculiar to various cultures and ages. African people like other peoples of the world have their unique conception of God, his nature and attributes. For them, God, despite his various names in different ethnicities, is the ultimate being, the source of being and all moral dictates. Notwithstanding the fact that Africans formed their concept of God from time immemorial, some thinkers are of contrary opinions. They argue that Africans had no such sophisticated reasoning capability until the coming of colonization and Christianization of Africa. Beyond this, there is a worrisome universal wave of neglect, religious indifference and abandonment of both God and moral laws. To Africans who are simply identical with their worship of God, this wave of religious indifference has started growing to a worrisome extent. Thus, this essay is concerned with demystifying God in the African context, his nature and prime of place in human affairs. The article will analytically interpret God from Afrocentric perspective. Who is God? What is his nature? Can Africa's retrogression be attributed to deviation from traditional ethical codes? To do this to this topic, the method of analysis and exposition will be adopted in this research. The finding of the essay reveals that God enjoys a privileged position as the Ultimate Being among Africans. Everything shares a spark of God - the life force.

Key words: God, ethnicities, Religious indifference, demystifying, Afrocentric perspective.

Introduction

From a historical perspective, Africans are known to be highly religious people who do nothing without involving God or the gods in their affairs. God in the African world occupies a central place in the scheme of things. His omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience make it impossible for the African to embark on any endeavour without beckoning on him for assistance and guidance. While African conception of God is passed through proverbs, religious rituals, songs, myths etc. and there is no sacred text in written form, the very idea of a supreme being leaves no room for atheists in the traditional African society (Islam & Islam, 2015, p. 1). Any attempt to dissociate oneself from his/her religion would imply self-strangulation. As John S. Mbiti (1969, p. 2, cited in Islam & Islam, 2015) rightly stated, "It is tough for a person to be detached from his/her religion, for to do so is to be severed from the roots, foundation, his context of security, his kinship and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence" (p. 2). Africans, he notes, eat and sing religiously. "They mention God while they are talking, walking, singing, praying, sleeping, working, dreaming, hoping good, wishing peace and anything they do. It is also for their personal

benefits and as because they love, respect and fear their God" (Islam & Islam, 2015, pp. 15-16). Metuh refers to this religiosity when he succinctly notes that:

One will not be too long in Igbo country to know the elaborate position of the Supreme Being in Igbo consciousness, and how frequently this Being features in their daily speech. In addition, one will not search for long to discover how meticulous and pertinacious the Igbo attach themselves to the Supreme Being" (Ezeugwu, pp. 27-28).

Despite the manifold nature of God's influence in the affairs of man, it is evident that lesser regard is had for God in this contemporary time. The situation is further engendered by scientific advancements and search for answers to human problems. But the problem remains whether God has become irrelevant or has he outlived his usefulness that he has to be totally abandoned like the dead God of Nietzsche.

Such religious indifference as is witnessed across the world and Africa in particular has resulted in a rise in the spate of moral decadence in our society which has continued without check. Disregard for God, religious and moral values made vices the order of the day as well as suffering is identical to Africans. Shall we continue to look the other way while our society plunges into total decay? This paper is focused on re-emphasizing God's prime place in morality and humanity from African perspective. Many philosophers and scholars have written about the conception of God in African thought. Thus, our focus here shall be on the role of God in sustaining moral values in Africa.

The conception of God in African thought

The notion of God has been approached by different philosophers of different ages, cultures and races from their different gamut of ideological, religious and philosophical leanings. Attempts have been made to describe the Supreme Being who is full of wonders. In the western philosophical tradition, God has been described in several ways. He has been referred to as:

The **Arche** of the pre-Socratics, the **Logos** of Heraclitus, the **Being** of Parmenides, the Number of Pythagoras, the Intellect of Anaxagoras, the **Good** of Plato, the **Thought of Thought** of Aristotle, the **One** of Plotinus, the **Nature** of the stoics...(Eze, 1999, p. 4).

Similar to the westerners, Africans from their unique experiences formed their concept of God, though based on their cultural group experiences but related in their similitude of experiences. God for the Africans is the absolute, the almighty, immanent and transcendence himself. Africans as very religious people see God in everything. They don't just see the world as opus Dei but also a reflection of God. God takes a prime position in all of their affairs. Affirming this point, Archibong (2018) asserts that:

In African worldview, it is difficult if not impossible to discuss being without beginning from God the supreme creator of the universe. Though a spirit, the Supreme Being is force personified and has power over every creature “matter” inclusive. In fact the force emanating from God it is believed animates or gives life to other creatures. This is perhaps the reason why Africans see ‘life force’ in everything both in the natural and supernatural (p. 5).

In what follows, we shall be perusing the idea of God among different African sub-groups, particularly the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Akan, and Bantu as a representative of other philosophies.

God in Igbo philosophy

Igbo people are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, west of Africa. They live the eastern part of Nigeria. Among the Igbo, Chi-Ukwu or Chukwu (the big, or high or great God) is considered the Supreme Being. He is the first principle of all things. He is the prime cause of all there is. He is the maker of both the visible and invisible worlds and all that inhabit them. He is the source of all things. In some parts of Igbo land, he is referred to as Chineke - "the God that creates." Chukwu as the maker of the cosmos is "an all-powerful, all-knowing divinity, the maker of ... all minor gods in Igbo pantheon" (p. 47). Igbo people believe that God resides in the sky. After creating the world, he moved to his abode in the sky, hence, he is called *olisa bi n'enu* (God or lord who lives in the sky). Because of his long distance from the earth, he created lower deities who he put in charge of different spheres of life, each having jurisdiction in its own area. Aní or Ala (the Earth goddess), for instance, is the custodian of morality. Hence, anyone who commits a taboo is said to have committed *nso aní* or *nso ala*. Equiano (1967) notes that the Igbo believe that this God who lives in the sky does not eat but smokes a pipe (p. 10). The cloudy sky with its movement is assumed to be God smoking his pipe.

Chukwu is believed to be so great that no one "can accurately describe Chukwu or have a thorough picture of him (and) that is why in all of Igbo land, there is no shrine where an image of Chukwu is carved or painted. In fact, in Igbo traditional religious system, it is a taboo to attempt producing an image of Chukwu" (Ojarigho, 2018, p.). The believe in the supremacy of Chukwu in Igbo traditional religion has however remained a subject of debate among Igbo scholars. Ezechwugo (1987) and Nwoga (1984) argued that the idea of a Supreme Being is, prior to the Christianisation of Igbo people, was alien to them. The adoption of Chukwu as the Supreme Being was consequent upon adoption of Christianity and the Anglican translation of the bible to Igbo language (Oguejiofor, 1996). Nze (1981) argues that the idea of a Supreme Being is an importation of foreign belief. The Igbo, he maintains has no God over which they have no control. The Igbo has no one supreme god but several gods which agrees with their egalitarian social and political arrangements (Nze, 1981; Oguejiofor, 1996). Ezeugwu (2018) attributed this misconceptions about Igbo thought on the Supreme Being to lack of documentation (p. 28). He further articulately observes that:

The supreme being could not have been alien to the Igbo because the matter of creation is a natural intuitive thought that is common to all peoples. It arises as the people ask basic questions about their existence, origin, vicissitudes of life and the author behind them. To deny the Igbo this level of basic human ingenuity is a gross underestimation of the humanness and intellectual capacity of the traditional Igbo people (Ezeugwu, 2018, p. 43).

The Yoruba people

The Yoruba believe that Olorun is the Supreme Being. He is an all powerful god who, like the Igbo Chukwu, resides in the sky. He is the creator of the world. Olorun is everywhere and yet far from the people, hence the Yoruba have various divinities that attend to their needs. They make sacrifices to these divinities. The Yoruba like their Igbo counterpart have no altar for Olorun. Other divinities besides Olorun derive their essence and existence from Olorun thus; they cannot exist independent of Olorun (Ojarigho, 2018, pp. 42-43). Divinities such as Orisha, Olodumare, Eleda are intermediaries between Olorun and man. The Yoruba offer sacrifices to these gods but not to Supreme Being. This is equally because of their belief that a father gives without expecting from the child.

The Akan people of Ghana

According to Akan people of Ghana, God - Onyame is both invisible and omnipresent. Onyame is an eternal, absolute being whose goodness extends beyond the Akan people (Ojarigho, p. 39). He is the ultimate source of life from where all other living things derive their sunsum (soul or spirit). Robert Owusu Agyarko remarks that:

The Akan people do not regard, and never have regarded, Onyame as their tribal god. Rather, Onyame is seen as the Supreme Being whose benevolence extends to all people. The creation of the universe is attributed to Onyame and he/she is regarded as the governing principle of the universe. According to the Akan belief, Onyame has sunsum and so do all forms of life, including human beings; the latter's sunsum (spirit or personality) emanates from the former's as sparks emanate from a fire (Agyarko, R.O. (2013)).

Beyond the anthropomorphic description of Onyame, Ojarigho (2018) writes that:

The Akan believe that Onyame is pure, just, and perfect, containing no evil. Onyame always stands behind the just and is the protector of all forms of life, both human and nonhuman. As the Akan adage puts it, Onyame na oka dei onibie asem ma no (God is the advocate of the vulnerable) (p. 41).

Bantu conception of God

Bantu conception of God is contained in Placcid Tempels' Bantu Philosophy. In Bantu Philosophy, the underlying substance of every existent, divinities, man, animals, vegetables and stones is vital force. For them, God is force and the giver of force. God is the Supreme Being, the One who possesses force in himself (Tempels, 1945, p. 22). The Bantu understanding of force is based on their essentially dependent on their worldview. Placcid Tempels emphasized this when he clearly avers that:

Anyone who wishes to study primitive people or Evolves must give up all idea of attaining valid scientific conclusion so long as he has not been able to understand their metaphysic. To declare on apriori grounds that primitive peoples have no ideas on the nature of beings, that they have no ontology and that they are completely lacking in logic, is simply to turn one's back to reality (Archibong, 2018, p. 2).

Force is the animating principle of all that exist both living and non-living. The understanding of force as a metaphysical reality with material expression is important for survival and the strengthening and weakening of vital force.

The unique thing about this force as subscribed by Africans is that they are metaphysical but with evidence in the physical or material realm. This suggests that "life force" or "vital force" has been enshrined in everything in creation by the supreme creator, God. To this end, there is force in everything in creation animate or inanimate. The understanding of the workings of this force is essential to the survival of the Bantu's as well as their unique knowledge of manipulating mind over matter (Archibong, 2018, p. 2).

He is omnipotent and omniscient. He is the mover of all other forces and at the same time knows everything and the cause of every event (Ojarigho, p. 46). The Bantu believe that God is the source of justice.

Characteristics of God in African religious system

A study of the idea of God reveals his nature and characteristics. These characteristics are not particular to a particular religion but peculiar to all religions. One of the common features of God in African philosophy is what Evans-Pritchard identifies to be both paradoxical and ambiguous. He says that it is a universal human experience that divinity is to man both a friend and a foe for whom man at the same time seeks union with and separation from (Metuh, 1985, p. 373). He says that God is both 'Deus remotus', a distant or hidden God, in the sky and 'Deus revelatus', revealed God. Africans believe in the hierarchy of being based on the degree of vital energy possessed. They tread with caution in their approach to beings of higher vital force to avoid being too close to beings endowed with so much force because it could be fatal. This accounts for why Africans pray and make sacrifices to deities and their ancestors who mediate between them and the supreme being. Francis Rakotsoane corroborates this when he wrote that:

A closer look at what has been said above about the fundamental beliefs in ATR reveals that the kind of God that is worshipped in traditional African communities is a transcendent one. In other words: traditional African communities do not actively worship or direct their prayers directly to this Supreme Being, but instead direct them to the ancestors and divinities. These are the direct objects of their regular sacrifices, offerings and prayers. The reason for doing this lies in what is believed to be the varying degree of the presence of the mystical power (spoken of earlier) in different beings or objects. The higher the being is in the hierarchy of beings, the stronger is the mysterious power or the vital force the being is believed to have. Going too close to a being that is believed to be endowed with a massive vital force is considered fatal. One has to keep a safe distance in order not to be crushed by the superimposing power of a higher being (Rakotsoane, 2010, p. 9-10).

God is too great to be encountered directly by man, this, in his manifold nature, he assigns to deities the role of interfacing between him and men in specific areas.

Notwithstanding God's transcendence and superimposing power, he is immanent. God is always near; he is everywhere just like the wind. God's immanence, presence and continuous revelation is made manifest through other subordinate beings, deities, divinities that inhabit places such as streams, hills, forests, trees, mountains and rocks etc. A sacrifice to any of these deities is considered a sacrifice to God. God's immanence is also proved by some names that are given to children, for instance Chinonso (God is near) and praise names and some sayings. The Akan people say that if you want to speak to God you should speak to the wind. They believe God is accessible to all.

Also, Africans have a monopantheistic conception of God. Africans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being alongside other functionaries (gods) with their designated functions. Some African philosophers such as Oguejiofor (1996) aver that Africa and Igbo people in particular do not practice monotheism (Igbo social structure lends credence to this) but rather have many different gods which implies polytheism. On the other hand, Islam and Islam (2015) maintain that Africa people traditionally practice fascinating monotheism. Although they see God in all things, they believe in one Supreme Being. In other words, they do not practice pantheism. Mbaegbu (2015) sees both monotheism and polytheism as two classical theories that fail to describe African theistic belief. He insists that without modification, monotheism and polytheism fail to qualify as the nature of God in African thought. This, he coined the term "monopolytheism" (p. 145) as the appropriate term that describes the nature of God. As Mbaegbu (2015) lucidly asserts:

The nature of God in Igbo Ontology is "Monopolytheism" "One and Many". The one is the ultimate, a unifying factor among the many gods. His nature is absolute, namely the principles of absoluteness, creation, and continued existence and dependence of the many gods that are subordinates and mediators; designated to

serve various needs in their areas of authority and power and influence. This concept is unique to the Igbo. It differs essentially from the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic thought-categories of pure Monotheism or Polytheism. And this concept alone, namely, Monopolytheism or one God that is served by many gods disapproves of the foreign nature of the concept of the one ultimate being in Igbo ontology. It is traditional, indigenous or natural. It is Igbo man's brand of theism (pp. 145-146).

While this is referential to the Igbo people, it remains a valid representation of the nature of God in other African subgroups such as the Yoruba, Akan, Zulu etc.

God and morality in Africa

Man is fundamentally a moral agent; he has the power of discernment. He has the ability to identify good from bad and the freewill to choose either good or bad. He is a responsible agent, thus, he is bound to face the consequences of the choices he makes. Strict adherence to the moral codes is necessary for the societal wellbeing. Africans believe that there is cosmological equilibrium in nature. Maintaining this harmony in nature is very crucial for peace and prosperity. Whenever this balance is destabilized, there are always some negative consequences. Maintenance of the natural order of things is paramount for a progressive society hence; everyone makes effort to live according to the laws of the land.

African ethics is largely communitarian. In other words, the goal of moral laws in Africa is the well-being of both the individual and the community. African philosophers and ethicists have thus depended largely on African moral culture or ethno-ethics, drawing resources from maxims, proverbs, adages, lived experiences, storytelling and community systemic structuring and organisation (Aribiah D. Attoe, 2022). According to Bewaji (2007), the wellspring of morality and ethics in African societies is the pursuit of a balance of individual, with communal wellbeing.

Among Africans, God is believed to be the prime source and giver of all moral laws. Being a perfect being, he observes the actions of the [people while imposing a sense of guilt on them. However, the enforcement of moral laws is the duties of some designated divinities. For Igbo people, the custodian of morality is the Earth goddess (Ani or Ala). A violation of taboos make the violator impure and filthy although it is considered an abomination against the Earth (nso ani or nso ala). This requires some propitiatory rites for cleansing the land and restoring harmony to avert any catastrophe. According to Odeleye (2020):

This means every transgression is of nature and renders a man filthy and unacceptable. It causes a strained relationship between him and the supersensible world. Sins are forgiven in ATR through purification, confession and reparation and sacrifice. This is to make a man acceptable to Deity and escape the punishment attached to sin (Odeleye, 2020, p. 10).

Although Ani ensures that moral values are upheld, by rewarding or punishing an offender, its power is limited to the indigenous people of its locality. In other words, Ani or Ala does not have jurisdiction over the whole of Igbo land. It is on this ground that Oguejiofor (1996) argues that the Igbo have no universal Supreme Being, but gods that aligns with their egalitarian sociopolitical nature. In Igbo land, sins are considered an offense against Ani rather than God. She is said to punish her offender, in extreme cases with death.

Some actions, such as violating taboos and social norms, are also believed to cause ancestors to curse the living through illnesses and hardships. Individuals found guilty of major ethical or legal violations in the Yoruba faith are often forced to undergo rituals as a means of purification and transformation (Edubirdie, 2022).

For the Akan people, no one can directly sin against God, but any sin or unjust treatment of both animate and inanimate objects are considered sins against God. This is "Because nature constitutes God's own being, any unnecessary hurt (oppression) against human and non-human forms of life constitute evil against God (Agyarko, 2013, p. 4). This proceeds from their conception of God's immediacy in all creatures through their sunsum (spirit). According to Agyarko (2013):

All human and non-human relations are affected by the belief that we all belong together in God. Onyame is immediately present to each creature through their sunsum (spirit). This view of the immediacy of God to creatures has consequences for the way the Akan, at least theoretically, value and treat one another and other creatures. Onyame nti (because of God or for the sake of God), one acts or refrains from acting against another person or nonhuman forms of life (p. 5).

African people's ethno-ethics is guided towards regulating social relations to ensure harmonious relationship that is essential for proper interpersonal relationship and societal development. African traditional morality is aimed at maintaining cordial relationship amongst both humans and nature since it is believed that a violation of moral laws would result to cosmological disequilibrium which brings about pain and suffering.

Moral Decadence and Retrogression in Contemporary Africa

Traversing the trajectories of development in Africa shows that the paradigm shift from the traditional values of the Africans such as honesty, mutual respect for one another and obedience to the moral dictates have left Africans in a sorry state of pain, anguish and retrogression. It is this moral bankruptcy and decency that have resulted in many unwarranted struggle for unnecessarily scarce resources. Riruako laments that:

Nowhere else in the world has there been more suffering than in Africa. Our children have seen and suffered more war than any other children in the world. It

is about time that we as people started to make changes. We should start to change the way we treat each other and be more tolerant of different cultures and traditions. We should learn to respect each other for what we are, for our differences. In fact, we should emulate the words of the late Mahatma Gandhi, who said that 'we should live the change that we want to see' (Riruako, 2008, p. 18).

The violations of taboos, sacred places, the abandonment of African traditional core values, community life and the pursuit of individualism and self-interest have impressed negatively on the development and progress of Africa. As viable and rich in both human and mineral resources as Africa is, Africans continue to grapple and beg for crumbs from the tables of the White imperialists. This cannot but be attributed to our negligence and indifference towards our beliefs in God and our moral sense.

Africans have always believed that a deviation from the norm comes with punishment of varying degrees - disease, famine, fire outbreak, retrogression or even death. To avoid such, traditional Africans observed the customs and traditions of the land, keeping it moral laws for a harmonious relationship among the living as well as the dead and other divinities.

Conclusion

The foregoing reveals that Africans are inherently religious people. They see God in and through all their endeavours, while they are singing, eating working, hoping, distressed and confused. God, called by different names by different African sub-groups, is the ultimate being, the maker, giver and sustainer of all that exist. He is believed to be great beyond human comprehension and description. He is a pure act, sufficient in himself. He is both transcendent and immanent. A God that is far away from man yet always around him to listen and answer when called upon. He is invisible yet made manifest in matter.

God for the Africans has functionaries who carry out his bidding in their areas of authority. Although he is the giver of all powers, he allows other divinities exercise their powers within their area of jurisdictions. He is equally the giver of all moral laws the violation of which attracts severe punishment from the custodian of morality such as Aní or Ala in Igbo cosmology. Punishment could be in the form of famine, flood, backwardness or even death. It is thus correct to say that Africa backwardness is not unconnected to their turning their back on their traditional belief system and gross negligence of their ethical codes which keeps the universe in balance.

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