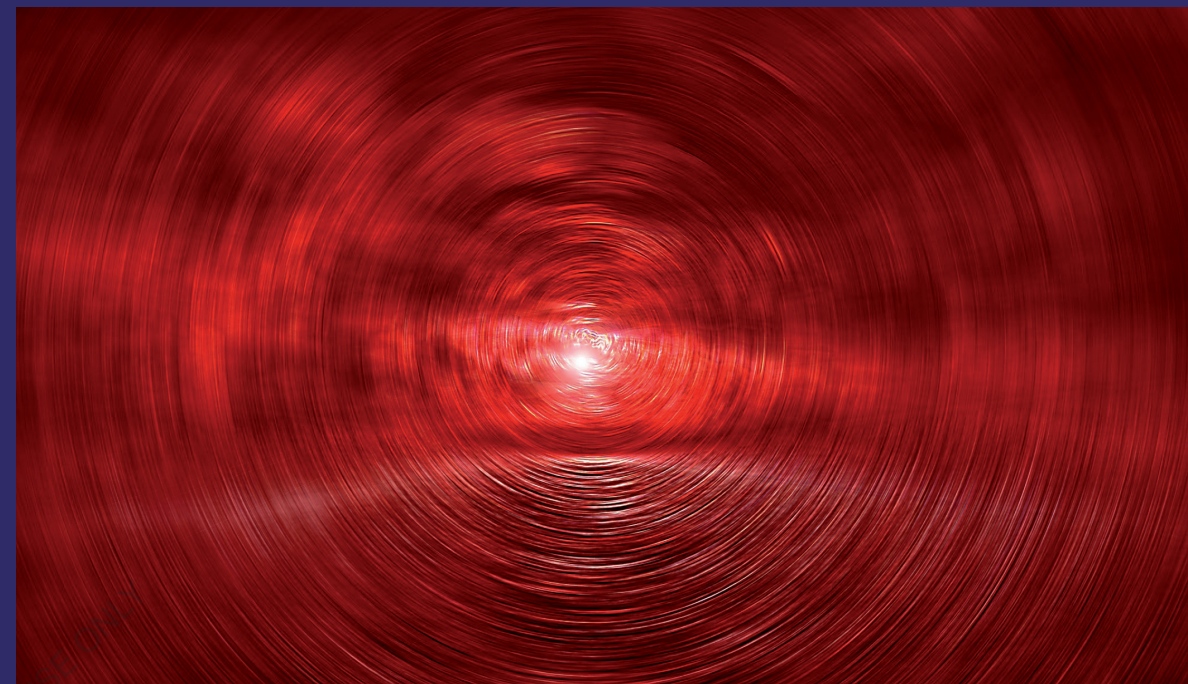
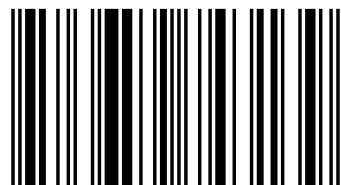


To be is not just to be in existence, it is to be in constant communicative mode with others. This communication involves exchange of our being or vital forces. Being is to the West what force is to Africa. It serves an important ontological basis for understanding the worldviews of both cultures. This book employs the notion of being or force as a means of finding a common basis for understanding humanity as against the antithesis created along cultural and racial lines. No matter how culturally diverse people might be, there always will be a modicum of similarity in their ways of life. Therefore, this text emphasises that if 'being' is equivalent to 'force' then Western and African ontologies are basically the same and it can be implied that humanity is one and the same. This text will serve a useful purpose in the hands of students of philosophy, social and cultural analysts and everyone who is interested in a unified view of humanity.



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Joseph Omokafe Fashola

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To

The fun memory of my father
whose demise taught me that, come what may,
there always will be an unset sunrise.

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PREFACE

To be is not just to be in existence, it is to be in constant communicative mode with others. This communication involves exchange of our being or vital forces. Being is to the West what force is to Africa and being, as equivalent to force serves an important ontological basis for understanding the worldviews of both Africa and the West. The identity of individuals is a measure of the force they wield and a function of their positions in the hierarchy of being. Personal identity in African thought system is essentially not personal but communal. Some factors responsible for this are culture and morality. Culture encompasses food, clothing, language, proverbs, folklores, which form the basis for individual identification and an individual's identity is ultimately subsumed into communal identity because the cultural elements by which the individual is identified are not personal but shared. Morality is the soul of any culture, when it is absent, such a practice becomes barbaric. If morality is determined by the society, this would mean that as the society evolves and people learn new ways of interpreting the world around them, previous approaches will either be modified or discarded. This implies that, what used to be considered immoral may put on morality and what was outlawed may become lawful and vice versa.

In some cultures in the Eastern part of Nigeria, it was lawful to kill twins, in fact, it was a taboo to let them live. But, that changed over time and the killing of twins in those communities today is considered an act of wickedness and murder. In the same vein, same-sex marriage is presently outlawed in Nigeria but one cannot guarantee how long this would remain so. If identity is hinged on morality then, when morals change or are modified, so would identity. Identity extends beyond class distinctions, religious inclinations, and nationalities. With the rising trend of societies becoming heterogeneous and individuals fast becoming multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious, and with individuals being able to obtain multiple citizenships and diverse social statuses, the identity of an individual person has become more problematic when viewed along lines of culture or race. Being in African and Western philosophies is

fundamentally and ontologically equivalent to inter-subjective existence. The African view of the cosmos is such that everything both animate and inanimate is full of life and reality is a circle of interacting forces. Force can be considered as the life of the cosmos, 'force is being and being is force.' If this is the case then, force and being are one and the same thing. The universe is an active force kept alive by the constant activities of beings or forces. These activities show that beings or forces do not exist in isolation; one needs the other to continue to exist.

This book employs the notion of being or force as a means of finding a common basis for an identification of humanity as against the antithesis created along cultural and racial lines. Cultural diversity is a phenomenon which is impossible to deny while at the same time, cultural universality is a debatable topic. It is also not impossible to note that no matter how culturally diverse people might be, there always will be a modicum of similarity in their ways of life. Therefore, this book does not deny the fact that there are ways in which people or races can be unique or different from others. It simply emphasises that if 'being' is equivalent to 'force' then Western and African ontologies are basically the same and it can be implied that humanity is one and the same.

This book shows that the culture of a person moulds that person's identity and because other individuals who belong to the same culture are also shaped after that culture, the identity of the cultural group becomes the identity of the various individuals. It also shows that morality is one of the core values of African cultures and emphasises that morality is at the heart of cultural practices. It shows that morality is the determining factor for the identity of an African person and this identity may well be described as communal identity. It makes an exposition on the concept and nature of force. It describes African cosmology as an active force kept alive by constant activities of forces, where forces experience either an increase or diminution. It also deals with the concept and nature of being in Western ontology, showing that being in Western thought system is fundamentally and ontologically equivalent to existence

such that to be is to be in existence. It also discovers that since God is the source of existence of other beings there must be some form of interactions between God and the rest of other beings. This is because it is this interaction that gives room for the communication of being from one reality to another and invariably, the reason for the continuous existence of beings. In the final analysis, an attempt is made to unify the notions of being in both Western and African worldviews by drawing out their areas of commensurability and attempting a synthesis of their ideas and concluding that, the concept of being is a general one.

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INTRODUCTION

The metaphysical content of 'Bantu Philosophy' is of important value in the understanding of African cosmology. Metaphysics, Aristotle and the medieval philosophers believe is the attempt to identify the first causes, in particular, God or the Unmoved Mover, they also conceived of metaphysics as the very general science of being *qua* being.¹ But how can one come to terms with the very essence of being? Metaphysical realities are a part of man's lived experiences and sense experiences are obviously inadequate in responding to the questions raised from these experiences. For instance, questions about identity, being and vital forces and the implications of the interaction of these forces in African world view.

Vital force is believed to "exhibit an ontological or metaphysical principle, which is the invisible cause of life and death as well as of all actions. This 'vital force' is a cardinal value in African thought upon which all things, both animate and inanimate, are founded and which is the creative force behind all human and non-human action."² Placide Tempels conceives of vital force as the reality which, though invisible, is supreme in man and man can renew his vital force by tapping into the strength of other creatures.³ For the Bantu, he said, force is a necessary element in being and the concept of force is inseparable from the definition of being. Without the element of force, Tempels said, being cannot be conceived. Force is more than a necessary attribute of being, it is the existential property which unites all beings. "Force is the nature of being, force is being, and being is force."⁴ This notion of force is what, according to Tempels defines the Bantu and this leads to the question of the identity of the Bantu and Africans generally.

This book is not a debate on the issue of whether or not there is a Bantu or an African philosophy. It does not address the question of the extent to which Tempel's

¹ Loux, M. J. 2006. *Metaphysics: A contemporary introduction*. USA and Canada: Routledge. p.1.

² Nel, P. J. 2008. Morality and Religion in African Thought. *Acta Theologica* Vol.2. p.40.

³ Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. Trans. Rev. Colin King. Paris: Presence Africaine. p.23.

⁴ Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.24.

‘Bantu Philosophy’ can be said to be philosophic because of the good number of works in African philosophy that has proved such a question to be unnecessary. It basically employs ‘Bantu Philosophy’ as baseline for the interrogation of Tempels’ conception of the identity of Africans. It does not deny the fact that there are ways in which individuals or groups can be different, unique or distinguished from others rather, it emphasises the fact that if being is equivalent to force then Western and African ontologies are basically the same.

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PERSONAL IDENTITY IN AFRICAN THOUGHT SYSTEM

Introduction

In 'Bantu Philosophy', Tempels made references to the notion of the increase of forces and the possibility of the diminution of these forces as a result of the mutual influences and interaction that exist between forces. Saying that, for the Bantu, the worst misfortune and the only misfortune is the diminution of this power.¹ This shows that vital force has a strong link with the 'beingness' of the Bantu or the African. So, in order to have knowledge of the elements that constitute the identity of the Bantu as conceived by Tempels, an understanding of the meaning of vital force is very important. This topic will consider the role of culture and morality in the determination of the identity of the African and conclude that identity for the African is not individualistic but shared or communal in nature.

Personal Identity

It is evident that the concept of identity is not an un-debatable one as several approaches have been applied to it both in African and Western metaphysics. For this reason, it is not uncommon when asked the question 'what is personal identity?' to hear anyone respond with the question 'what manner of identity are you talking about?' "Is it class, religious, national, or cultural?"² When one talks about personal identity in Africa, it is not impossible that it could raise the question of, 'how personal is personal identity?' This is because, "within Africa itself, a person's identity would generally derive from belonging to a particular people, culture, or language group."³ The identity of an individual is not in isolation from 'the other'. According to J.S Mbiti, in the absence of

¹Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. Trans. Rev. Colin King. Paris: Presence Africaine. p.22.

² Layewola, D. 1998. Identity and the Quest for Nationhood in Nigeria. *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* No. 8, Oct. p.23.

³ Hensbroek, P.B.V. 1998. *African Political Philosophy, 1860 -1995: An inquiry into families of discourse*. New York: Preager Publishers. p.49.

others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual's own standing as a person. The notion at work here he said, is the notion of an extended self.⁴ In other words, the personal identity of an individual is derived from that individual's beingness with others such that the individual considers himself to exist simply because he finds himself among the community of forces. As Mbiti would say, "I am because we are, since we are, therefore I am."⁵ Personal identity can as well be considered as the mirroring or the outer representation of an individual's inner qualities and these qualities are necessarily inherited from the individual's culture.

Personal identity extends beyond class distinction, religious inclination, and one's nationality and with the rising trend of societies becoming heterogeneous and individuals fast becoming multicultural, multilingual, multi-religious, and also with individuals being able to obtain multiple citizenships and diverse social statuses, the identity of an individual person has become more problematic when viewed along lines of culture. For this reason, personal identity may be conceived as "an interlocking set of views that an individual holds about himself."⁶ Considering these factors, it will be necessary at this point to take a look at the roles of some of them in the determination of the personal identity of an individual as conceived in African thought system.

Culture and Personal Identity

According to Pieter H. Coetzee in 'Morality in African Thought', "The preferred and most useful definition of culture in the context of African philosophy is one which treats culture as a resource. Culture is an open-ended resource of social meanings on which members of a community draw to mediate the contingencies of their everyday lives."⁷ He showed that the identity of an individual is culturally inculcated as the

⁴ Menkiti, I. A. 2004. On the Normative Conception of a Person. Kwasi Wiredu. Ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy*. USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. p.324.

⁵ Mbiti, J. S. 1989. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd Ed., London: Heinmann. p.106.

⁶ Diejomaoh & wa Karanja. 1998. D. Layewola. Identity and the Quest for Nationhood in Nigeria. *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* No.8. Oct. p.21.

⁷ Coetzee, P. H. 2003. Morality in African Thought. In Coetzee, P. H. & Roux, A. P. J. Eds. *The African Philosophy Reader*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge. p.322.

individual learns the mode of behaviour or social good of the people through dialogue with other members. He also noted that, the history of a person's life is the story of his or her transactions with the community's material and moral worlds, which, in effect, is the story of his or her relations with particular sets of social goods. He emphasised that goods acquire social meaning from actual patterns of distribution, and their meanings regulate social relations, which implies that the common life is a function of the distributive patterns and the social meanings of social goods.⁸

The family is basically the smallest unit of the society and the first point of contact and interaction of a child with the larger world. For S.I Radithalo "a child is held to be the property of the community, and it is the community who are going to see to it that the individual child becomes a significant member of the community, an asset to all."⁹ It is from the family that the child begins to learn the manner of behaviour of his people which he will later grow up to discover to be different from individuals from other cultural backgrounds. In Africa, as soon as a child is born, he or she begins the process of acculturation through imitation and series of initiation rites that are involved in naming, circumcision, and initiation to adulthood. He or she learns the culturally acceptable ways to relate with siblings and parents, peers and elders, nature and the sacred. These give the individual knowledge of how the world within his or her culturally privileged purview is interpreted. It is after the individual has fully undergone these rites that he or she acquires his or her identity as "a full person in the eyes of the community."¹⁰

The individual is necessarily influenced by the views of his or her culture. Culture is an important factor in the determination of the identity of an individual in

⁸ Coetzee, P. H. 2003. Morality in African Thought. In Coetzee, P. H. & Roux, A. P. J. Eds. *The African Philosophy Reader*. p.322.

⁹ Radithalo, S. I. 1996. 'Kenosi': I am alone; Philosophical imperatives of African names, in J. G. Malherbe Ed. *Decolonizing the mind. Proceedings of the second colloquium on African philosophy*. Pretoria: Department of Philosophy, Unisa. p.123

¹⁰ Menkiti, I. A. 1984. Person and Community in African Traditional Thought, R. A. Wright, Ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, 3d ed. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America. p. 176.

Africa. It is “the shared patterns of behaviours, values, and ways of thinking, interactions, and understandings that are learned through a process of socialisation among certain groups of people which in return shape their identities.”¹¹ Every individual derives his or her sense of identity from the cultural group in which he or she grew up and was socialised. For S. Gbadegesin, the influence of the community on the individual cannot be over emphasised and the individual is expected to make his meaningful contribution to the community in return. A person whose existence and personality is dependent on the community is expected in turn to contribute to the continued existence of the community. The meaning of one’s life is measured by one’s commitment to social ideals and communal existence¹²

The culture of a person moulds that person’s identity and because other individuals who belong to the same culture are also shaped after that culture, the identity of the cultural group becomes the identity of the individuals. The cloth an individual puts on speaks a lot about his social orientation and cultural background. From the way the African dresses his or her identity as an African is immediately revealed. Although, names distinguish one individual from another it is actually an expression of the individual’s interconnectedness with a community. C. Calhoun said, “We know of no people without names, no language or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made...”¹³ but such distinctions in Africa are not made outside one’s cultural boundaries. The name for instance is a very important link between the individual and the community he or she belongs to. Names according to D. A. Masolo, “give individual persons their specific positions within the ‘community’ of forces. By acquiring a name, every person becomes a link in the chain of forces linking the dead and the living genealogies. No

¹¹ Mohammed, A. 2012. Culture and personal identity. *Oman Daily Observer* Par. 1. <http://www.main.omanobserver.om/> Retrieved; 26th April 2013.

¹² Gbadegesin, S. 1991. Eniyan: The Yoruba concept of a person, in P. H. Coetzee and M. E. S. van den Berg. Eds. *An introduction to African philosophy*, Pretoria: Unisa. p.367.

¹³ Calhoun. C. 1994. *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell. p.10.

one is isolated. Every person makes part of that chain of forces in nature, both active and passive.”¹⁴

The kind of food an individual eats and the language he or she speaks says a lot not just about his or her culture and values but also about his or her identity as belonging to a particular culture. Through the language an individual speaks, one is able to discover the gamut of his or her beliefs and worldviews. This is because every cultural or linguistic group in Africa have a worldview or belief system whose actual meanings and interpretations are preserved in the people’s proverbs, idioms or ritual incantations that are meaningful only to those with the knowledge of the language. Pieter H. Coetzee noted that;

A linguistic community has a history and various traditions (of morality and reasoning) which inform the narratives of individuals’ lives and link them to those of their ancestors. Languages embody distinctive ways of experiencing the world and so play a crucial role in defining the experiences of a community as *their* particular experiences. Since language is a determinant of a particular outlook, it is one significant factor that shapes a way of life. Speakers communicate with one another about their common history and have access to the significance of events in it in a way not communicable to non-speakers, or in other languages.¹⁵

Not to understand a person’s language is not to understand the meanings that are inherent in that individual’s culture and as such, cannot discover the true identity of that individual. This is because in every language, there are unwritten and unspoken felicity conditions at work which can only be understood by one who is well acquainted with the particular language.

People who speak the same language share the same abstract philosophical concepts. These concepts for Kagame are both explicit and implicit in the proverbs, myths, legends, and social institutions. Thus as Imbo observed, implicit ontological ideas provide the glue for the habits and values that are transmitted from one generation to

¹⁴ Masolo, D. A. 1994. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. p.51.

¹⁵ Coetzee, P. H. 2003. Morality In African Thought. In Coetzee, P. H. & Roux, A. P. J. Eds. *The African Philosophy Reader*. p.324.

another. The perennial social creation and transmission of values cannot take place in the absence of underlying philosophical concepts that are discernible in the structure of ordinary language.¹⁶

Tempels finds language very important in the discovery of the Bantu ontology when he said that, “Many roads seem to lead to the discovery of such an ontological system. A profound knowledge of the language...can reveal it to us.”¹⁷ Language is a veritably means of penetrating into a people’s culture and as well the discovery of a people’s identity. This means that an individual person cannot be known outside his or her community. His or her assimilation into the core values and interaction with members of the community shapes the individual. For this reason, persons are defined by their relationships with others. Therefore, “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (a person is a person through persons).”¹⁸ And I. Menkiti stated that, “in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory.”¹⁹

Morality and Personal Identity

A society without moral codes can be likened to the Hobbesian state of nature. “Morality in the strictest sense is universal to human culture. Indeed, it is essential to all human culture. Any society without a modicum of morality must collapse...It is simply the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interests of the individual to those of others in society.”²⁰ Morality is one of the core values of African cultures and practices. It unifies and protects the society’s interests. Every member of the society serve as gadfly to moral values but most importantly, they are left in the

¹⁶ Ukwamedua, N. U. 2011. A Critical Review of Alexis Kagame’s Four Categories of African Philosophy. *Ogirisi: a new journal of African studies* Vol.8. p.258. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v8i1.13>. Retrieved; 22nd May 2013.

¹⁷ Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.10.

¹⁸ Lassiter, J. E. 1999. African Culture and Personality: Bad Social Science, Effective Social Activism, or a Call to Reinvent Ethnology? *African Studies Quarterly*. 3(2): 1. <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v3/v3i2a1.htm>. Retrieved; 26th April 2013.

¹⁹ Menkiti, I. A. 1984. Person and Community in African Traditional Thought. p.158.

²⁰ Coetzee, P. H. & Roux, A. P. J. Eds. 2003. *The African Philosophy Reader*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge. p.337

care of ancestors and deities who guide and deter individuals from violating moral norms. This is because immoral acts are believed to desecrate the sanctity of the communal soul- that which aids the continual existence of the community. As an act of violence disturbs the equilibrium or balance of the community, so does an indecent act destroys community life.²¹ This does not only call for the rebuke of the entire society but also from the ancestors who are also perceived as members of the community. It is for this reason that propitiations are made to revert the wrath of the ancestors when indecent or sacrilegious acts are committed. The involvement of the ancestors in maintaining the moral sanctity of the community is very important because the entire African society is composed of the living and the living-dead.

In other to protect this community life from which the individual life is not in isolation, it is from childhood that parents begin to inculcate in their children the very essence of moral behaviour. The child is consciously taught to be mindful of taboos, to understand the difference between, dos and don'ts; praise worthy and blame worthy acts through gestures, riddles, jokes, tales, and proverbs. The child grows up with a good knowledge of what manner of behaviour the society expects from him or her. It is for this reason that when a child behaves in a manner that does not conform to the accepted attitude or behaviour of the society, he or she is immediately corrected. For example, among the Ojah (Oza) people of Akoko-Edo area of Edo State in Nigeria, when a child behaves in an unbecoming manner he or she is rebuked for identifying with a community of outcasts. Children are taught that true sons and daughters of the community respect moral norms and to act immorally is an indication that one is losing one's identity with his or her community to an outlandish community. The Ojah people hold moral norms as sacred and children nurse the fear that they could be banished to the community of outcasts even though it has never been noted that anyone was so banished.

²¹ Nel, P. J. 2008. Morality and Religion in African Thought. *Acta Theologica* Vol.2. p.40.

Akintunde Akinyemi corroborated this from a Yoruba (a major tribe in Nigeria) perspective in his 'Yoruba Oral Literature and Indigenous Education for Children' noting that;

Different types of deterrence poetry, used during or after a display of unruly behaviour by a child, are employed in Yoruba society as effective means of censuring bad habits in their children. In other words, there are appropriate Yoruba songs to mock and discipline any child that violates a code of societal etiquette, be it stealing, lying or playing truant. During the performance of most of these songs, the children do not just sing or recite they also pinch, push or even beat up the culprit. The resultant over-whelming sense of shame not only compels the child involved to turn a new leaf, but also serves as deterrence to others.²²

Initiation to adulthood is a process that requires not just series of ritual practices, but it is also a time when the initiate must learn or be reminded of the need to adhere to strict moral conducts- as befitting his or her new status. Moral integrity in character and action is of great importance in Africa so much that taboos are instituted to guide human behaviours. For an adult to be guilty of any immoral conduct is considered an affront on the collective image of the society and must face stringent consequences which could lead to ostracism or death in extreme cases in time past. Moral uprightness is an un-negotiable requirement for acquiring for being identified as a person without which the individual is not a person. The statement 'he is a person,' is clearly a moral statement. It is a profound appreciation of the high standards of the morality of an individual's conduct that would draw the judgment 'he is truly a person' (oye onipa paa)...while children are actual human beings and are members of the community, they are persons only potentially and will achieve the status of personhood in the fullness of time when they are able to exercise their moral capacity.²³ So;

An individual's choice of way of life is a choice constrained by the community's pursuit of shared ends. This pursuit of the common good

²² Akinyemi, A. 2003. Yoruba Oral Literature: A Source of Indigenous Education for Children. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Special Issue. Dec. p.169. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Ltd. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3559467> .Accessed: 16/06/2012 09:05.

²³ Gyekye, K. 1997. Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience. p.50.

is the primary goal of the political community and always takes precedence over the pursuit of individually chosen ends. Communal ends cannot—all other things being equal—be overridden or vetoed because shared ends have much greater weight (value) in the life of the community than other ends... The common good, defines substantive conceptions about the good life—identified for application in specific social contexts. The good life for an individual is conceived of as coinciding with the good of the community, and a person's choice is highly or lowly ranked as it contributes to or detracts from the common good.²⁴

This goes to show that the actions of an individual whether good or bad determine the identity of that individual showing whether or not he or she belongs with the community.

Summary

Thus far in this topic, it has been shown that personal identity in African thought system is essentially communal based. Two factors- culture, and morality which play key roles in the determination of the personal identity of the African have been considered. Culture which encompasses food, clothing, language, proverbs, folklores have been noted to give an individual his or her identity and that individual identities are ultimately subsumed into communal identity as the cultural elements by which the individual could be identified are not personal but communal.

Personal identity as culture dependent draws one to the question of its fluidity. This means that as culture changes, so would the identity of the people, consequently the identity of the individual. V. B. Ojong and M. P. Sithole noted, "Before Africa's encounter with colonialism, composition of societies was fluid in nature and membership was not fixed but was readily permeable by non-members. People could move from one geographical location to another and join other groups and easily

²⁴ Coetzee, P. H. 2003. Morality In African Thought. In Coetzee, P. H. & Roux, A. P. J. Eds. *The African Philosophy Reader*. p.324.

acquired the identity of that location.”²⁵ With the advent of modern technology, the same is the case today; with the world now a global community it is easy for anyone to possess more than one culture. Transcultural and transnational marriages have made it possible for children to be able to claim and practice the cultures of both parents. So, with people easily becoming cosmopolitan, multicultural, and multilingual, it becomes difficult to rely on culture as a true determinant of personal identity. “...through interacting and living with people from different origins, new identities are created, socialisation process is renegotiated and meanings that people attach to places are re-visited.”²⁶ This shows that relying on culture as a proper means of personal identification does not yield the desired result. For this reason, Jose’ da Silva Horta is of the view that from a cultural perspective, “Identity has great fluidity and can be changed, within certain limits, according to the circumstances.”²⁷ Personal identity from this perspective would be “an unfolding story...continually recast in the course of experience.”²⁸ It is not what the individual is but a mask that can be put on and removed at will, it is so to say “an *artificial* distinction”²⁹ an extrinsic part of an individual. This idea does not lead us to a globally unifying source which is not elusive.

The idea of personal identity being enshrined in the moral behaviour of an individual raises a question as it undermines individual interest and autonomy denying the individual of the existential freedom to determine the course of his personal life and still retain his humanness or identity as a member of a global race. Although, Wiredu has argued that, “the interests of the individual are placed in a reciprocal

²⁵ Ojong. V. B. & Sithole. M. P. 2007. The Substance of Identity: Territoriality, Culture, Roots and the Politics of Belonging. *The African Anthropologist* Vol. 14, Nos. 1&2. p.93.

²⁶ Ojong. V. B. & Sithole. M. P. 2007. The Substance of Identity: Territoriality, Culture, Roots and the Politics of Belonging. p.92.

²⁷ Jose’ da Silva Horta. 2000. Evidence for a Luso-African Identity in ‘Portuguese’ Accounts on ‘Guinea of Cape Verde’ (Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries. *History in Africa* Vol.27. 2000. p.103.

²⁸ Richard, S. 2000. Street and Office: Two Sources of Identity. W. Hutton & A. Giddens Eds. *On the Edge, Living with Global Capitalism*. London: Jonathon Cape. p.176-177.

²⁹ Edmond, L. A. 1982. Defence of Mr. Locke’s Opinion concerning Personal Identity. R. C. Tennant. Ed. *Response to Locke on Personal Identity in Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. XLIII. No.1. Jan.-March. p.75.

adjustment with the interests of others in the community...”³⁰ But, if morality is determined by the society, this would mean that as the society evolves and people learn new ways of interpreting things around them, previous approaches will either be modified or discarded implying that, what used to be considered immoral may put on morality and that which was outlawed may become lawful and the other way round. In some cultures in the southern part of Nigeria it was lawful to kill twins, in fact, it was a taboo to let them live. But, that has changed over time as the killing of twins in those communities today is considered an act of wickedness and murder. In the same vein, same-sex marriage is presently outlawed in Nigeria but one cannot guarantee that this would remain so for too long. So, if personal identity is hinged on morality then, as morals are either changed or modified, so would personal identity.

In African communities, when one acts in accordance with the values, norms and custom of one’s cultural group or community, he or she is praised and described as a true son or daughter of that community bearing its true identity but when one goes contrary one faces rejection and can no longer identify with the communal group. If it is the case that to be moral means to obey the moral norms of a people in which case one is identifying oneself with the said people, it follows that there will be as many identities as there are many cultural groups in the world. This conclusion is a product of nurturedness and not naturedness. This shows that, from a more strictly traditional standpoint, ethical issues are more important than metaphysical or natural ones in the characterization of human personality in African thought system.³¹ It is an indication that we deal with the world the way we view the world and that our worldview and understanding of the nature of the human person will evidently be expressed in the way we talk about the world. It will also express itself in the way we judge human actions and inactions, the way we approbate or repudiate, praise or blame human behaviours as virtuous or vicious.

³⁰ Wiredu, K. 2004. Introduction: African Philosophy in Our Time. K. Wiredu. Ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy*. UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.p.18.

³¹ Wiredu, K. 2004. Introduction: African Philosophy in Our Time. p.17.

The identity of an individual should transcend cultural circles and embrace the whole of humanity just as Roderick Chisholm noted that “The identity of a person is perfect identity...it admits of no degrees; and it is impossible that a person should be in part the same, and in part different...For this cause, I have first considered personal identity, as that which is perfect in its kind, and the natural measure of that which is imperfect.”³² Personal identity from an African perspective as have been noted is based on culture and religion but the whole idea could be subsumed in the notion of morality. This is because cultural practices are based on morality; they serve as some regulatory measures in the society, to either promote or prevent acts that can advance or cause the deterioration of healthy communal life respectively. Laws have their roots in morality, metaphysical worldviews are geared towards morality, and morality is of prime significance as it is also the basis for religious engagements. The Bantu metaphysics as noted by Tempels involves the interaction of forces, a process which either leads to an increase or diminution of the forces of the agents involved. Tempels said;

We have set out the norms of good; conversely, the norms of evil run parallel to them. Every act, every detail of behaviour, every attitude, and every human custom which militates against vital force or against the increase of the hierarchy of the ‘muntu’ is bad. The destruction of life is a conspiracy against the Divine Plan; and the ‘muntu’ knows that such destruction is, above all else, ontological sacrilege: that it is for that reason immoral and therefore unjust.³³

The Bantu metaphysics has its grounds in morality as it deals with how vital forces can be utilised for either good or evil.

Concluding Remarks

As is evident from the foregoing, it is possible for anyone to assert that personal identity in African thought system is not individualistic but communalistic since the individual derives his or her identity from the community and his or her personal self and

³² Chisholm, R. M. 1976. *Person and Object*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. p89.

³³ Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.57.

idiosyncrasy is harmoniously subsumed in the 'other'. Wiredu describes this harmony as the product of "a frame of mind which facilitates the mind's ability to contemplate with equanimity the possible abridgement of one's own interests in deference to the interests of others."³⁴ And according to L. S. Senghor, "Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individuals, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society... collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals."³⁵ One can also say that morality is the determining factor for personal identity in Africa which can as well be described as 'communal identity'. The next topic will consider Tempels' notion of vital force as presented in 'Bantu Philosophy' in a view to unmasking the its 'scar of ontological mutilation'. It will show that vital force, although is interpreted differently, has its equivalent in the Western thought system

³⁴ Oladipo, O. 1995. *Kwasi Wiredu*. Ibadan: Hope Publications. p.36

³⁵ Senghor, L. S. 1964. *On African socialism*. Trans. Mercer Cook. New York: Praeger. pp.94, 49.

THE NOTION OF FORCE IN AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

Introduction

The African view of their cosmos is such that everything both animate and inanimate is full of life and reality is a constant circle of interacting forces. Force can be considered as the life of the cosmos, “force is being and being is force.”¹ If this is the case then, force and being are one and the same thing. The universe for the African is an active force kept alive by the constant activities of forces and, “the whole universe appears as an infinitely small and at the same time infinitely large, network of life forces...”² This network of forces shows that forces do not exist in isolation; one force needs another to continue to exist. Humans need the ancestors and the ancestors need humans, and humans need other humans to be truly humans. The source of man’s humanity is in his interaction with the ‘other’ and for J.S Mbiti, the African recognises the sources of his or her own humanity, and so realises, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding his own standing as a person.³ Force then is an underlying factor when considering human existence or the totality of the communal life.

Force as Being in African Ontology

An understanding of the essence of vital force is very crucial for the knowledge of the nature of beings. “Vital force’ is a cardinal value in African thought upon which all things, animate and inanimate, are founded and which is the creative force behind all human and non-human action.”⁴ It is understood as life, energy, power, dynamism, and

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1. Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine. p.35.
 2. Senghor. L. S. 1966. Negritude. *Optima* Vol.16. No.8. p.4.
 3. Menkiti, I. A. 2004. On the Normative Conception of a Person. In Kwasi Wiredu. Ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy*. USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. p.324.
 4. Nel, P. J. 2008. Morality and Religion in African Thought. *Acta Theologica*. Vol.2. p.40.

strength.⁵ Vital force according to Placide Tempels is “the reality which, though invisible, is supreme in man...”⁶ Force is the lifeblood of being and all beings are necessarily force embodied, force can be said to be the very meaning of being. Tempels pointed out that without the element of force being cannot be conceived and that force is the uniting element of all beings. In other words without force the existence of any being whatsoever cannot be imagined. Vital force as lifeblood pervades the African worldview; it supports, nourishes, and maintains life generally. J. E Lassiter well rehashed Augustine Shutte in saying that it is the most fundamental feature in traditional African world-views. Noting that it is moreover, a dynamic system in that the force of everything, at least all living things, is continuously being either strengthened or weakened. Human beings continuously influence each other, either directly or indirectly by way of sub-human forces or through the ancestors.⁷

In Tempels’ description of the Bantu, he conceives of vital force as underlying existence without which there is no Bantu. Force is the galvanising principle of being as such, to exist is to possess vital force. This goes to show that reality in African worldview is force dependent. Inanimate things like rocks, hills, valleys, rivers, and heavenly bodies like the sun, moon and stars or effects of nature like thunders, and lightning are real by virtue of vital force. Fauna and flora life are real in the extent to which they possess this force. Man, deities, ancestors, spirit, and God are real as a result of the galvanising principle of vital force. It must be noted after all that God is believed to be self-galvanising and is for this reason, the ultimate force. Tempels noted that, all being is force and exists only in that it is force, and that the category ‘force’ includes

5. Etim, F. 2013. African Metaphysics. *Journal of Asian Scientific Research* Vol.3. No.1.p.15. Retrieved; 15th May 2013. <http://aessweb.com/journal-detail.php?id=5003>

6. Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.33.

7. Lassiter, J. E. 1999. African Culture and Personality: Bad Social Science, Effective Social Activism, or a Call to Reinvent Ethnology? *African Studies Quarterly* Vol.3. No.2. Issue.1. <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v3/v3i2a1.htm> Retrieved; 26th April 2013.

of necessity all 'beings'; God, men both the living and the departed, animals, plants and minerals.⁸

Categories and Basic Elements of Force

Two main categories of force are distinguishable in most African cultures. There is God who is the uncreated and self-galvanising force who necessarily is force embodied. He is the self-existing force, the source of force and existence of all created forces. According to the Bantu, God is the Strong One, it is he who possesses force in himself. He is also the source of the force of every creature. God is the 'Dijina dikatampe', the great name, because he is the great force, the 'mukomo', the one who is stronger than all other.⁹ He is the great ocean of force whose source is unknown because he is without beginning or an ending. According to E. C. Ekeke and C. A. Ekeopara, the Yoruba of Nigeria call God 'Olorun', meaning 'the owner of heaven' or 'the Lord of heaven'. This presents God as the author of all things both visible and invisible. The Igbo of Nigeria call God 'Chukwu', meaning 'Source Being' which connotes 'the Great One from whom being originates'. They also call him 'Chineke', meaning, 'The Source Being Who creates all things'. The Edo of Nigeria knows God as 'Osanobua' or 'Osanobwa' which means 'the source of all beings who carries and sustains the world or universe'.¹⁰

The other category is made up of all created forces whose vital energies flow from God. They do not have independent existence or absolute existence, but derive their forces from the Supreme force. This means that since created forces derive their forces from the Supreme force, their potencies are subject to their proximity to the Supreme force. They are permanently dependent upon God their creator for existence and continuous survival. The created forces are further grouped into the visible and the

8. Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.36.

9. Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.31.

10. Ekeke, E. C & Ekeopara, C. A. 2010. God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology. *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* Vol. 1. No.2. p. 211. <http://www.scihub.org/AJSMS>. Retrieved; 7th May 2013.

invisible. The visible forces have corporeal nature and are visible to us. Such are people, plants, and animals and so on. The invisible forces do not have corporeal element, they are spirits.

From the Bantu ontology, one can easily deduce that the principal element of force (being) is force. Tempels noted that 'force' is a necessary element in 'being', and the concept of force is inseparable from the definition of being. That there is no idea among Bantu of being, divorced from the idea of force. Without force, being cannot be conceived.¹¹ Force and forces (beings) are important and only derive their meaningfulness within the community of forces. The Bantu hold that vital force is a necessary requirement for the actual existence of any force. Therefore, a being has to possess this vital force according to its nature before it can exist. As such, a being is that which exists by virtue of its possession of vital force. The place of any being in the community of forces is determined by the amount of vital force it wields. This is an indication that all forces do not possess vital force in the same degree. Spiritualised beings belong to a higher hierarchy, and participate to a certain degree in the divine Force.¹² For the Bantu, God is the source of vital force; or rather he is Vital force Himself. God is the living eternal force, the source of all forces both finite and infinite. He is the self-existing one whose force sustains the entire universe.

God possesses vital force essentially, and therefore exists essentially. Each created force at creation, received vital force from God according to its nature before it began to exist. This is why the total diminution of vital force signifies a total going out of existence. This is what is referred as death in the real sense. That is, to have no place in the community of forces, to be incapable of interacting with other forces. It follows that the basic elements of forces (beings) are force itself, existence and interaction with others.

11. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.34.

12. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.42.

The Hierarchy of Forces

Beings in African ontology are distinguished by the level of forces they wield and this gives them their positions in the hierarchy of forces. In descending order one can identify how Tempels captured these forces in Bantu (African) thought. It has God who is the ultimate at the apex of this hierarchy and then the first fathers of men, who also are the founders of the different clans.¹³ The dead of the tribe in order of their ancestry, the living humans in order of their vital forces, animal, vegetable and mineral also in order of their individual vital forces.

God is himself seen as a self-generating force, the inexhaustible ocean of force. Just as rivers and streams run dry when disconnected from their sources so do forces in nature cease to exist when they lose connection with God. God vitalises and sustains other forces in measure of the order of their hierarchy and proximity to him as the ultimate force. The next in hierarchy are the first fathers of men or the founders of different clans who are directly under the influence of God and are capable of communicating same to all other forces since they are the most important vertical link, the link between God and men. They are the dead that can best be described as living dead or spiritualised beings that now exist in a higher hierarchy, participating to a certain degree in divine force.¹⁴ Following directly after these first parents are the dead of the tribe;

Following their order of primogeniture. They form a chain, through the links of which the forces of the elders exercise their vitalising influence on the living generation. Those living on earth rank, in fact, after the dead. The living belong in turn to a hierarchy, not simply following legal status, but as ordered by their own being in accordance with primogeniture and their vital rank; that is to say, according to their vital power.¹⁵

13. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.41.

14. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.41.

15. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.42.

Directly below the forces at the spiritual realm are humans who live on the earth and are in fact the most important forces at this level beginning from the eldest of a group or of a clan who is for Bantu, by Divine law the sustaining link of life, binding ancestors and their descendants. It is he who 'reinforces' the life of his people and of all inferior forces; animal, vegetable and inorganic, that exist, grow, or live on the foundation which he provides for the welfare of his people.¹⁶

For the Bantu, the dead are not really dead just that their life, energy, or vital force is diminished. This shows that for the Africans, death does not really consist in the death of the physical body, death is simply a transition from *here* to *there*. Beyond this earth and the physical body is yet another life. To die an actual death is to lose link or interaction with those on earth; it is for vital force to suffer a complete diminution. The worse disaster for the Bantu is to suffer diminution of force while the worse disaster for the dead is to reach a zero diminution of energy, which becomes completely static through lack of faculty to employ its vital influence on behalf of the living.¹⁷ It is for this reason that the ancestors are believed to constantly seek to maintain relationship with those living on earth. Thus, their earthling relatives offer ritual sacrifices in form of prayers and libations. The gifts which an elder gives to the ancestors when an animal is sacrificed often seem to the unacquainted with the culture of the people to be direct offerings and wonders how spiritual beings could receive material gifts. But such offerings are nothing but the tributes symbolising the gifts which the departed elders would have received had they been alive, and which the living elders now receive. Charles Nyamiti noted, "The belief is widespread that the ancestor will continue to survive as ancestor only on condition that he is not forgotten, i.e. if his descendants will communicate regularly with him through prayer and ritual

16. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy* p.42.

17. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy* p.44.

offering. Hence, the African desires to have many children who will remember him and ritually communicate with him.”¹⁸

After human beings, the next in hierarchy are inferior forces; animal, plant, mineral which exist only, and by the will of God, to increase the vital force of men while they are on earth. Higher and lower forces, are thought of by the Bantu in relation to living human forces. In fact, even inferior beings, such as inanimate beings and minerals, are forces which by reason of their nature have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces, or of men’s vital forces.¹⁹

The Community of Forces

All beings from the ultimate to the least in hierarchy are entities which make up the community of forces. As individuals in a community interact and influence one another, their vital forces follow suit. The African world as a community of forces is a harmonious one and not a world of conflict between or among forces. This is because all these forces, even when they clash, they do so for the stability and harmony of the entire cosmos. According to Tempels the Bantu universe is not a chaotic tangle of unordered forces blindly struggling with one another. Nor must we believe that this theory of forces is the incoherent product of a savage imagination, or that the action of the same force can be now propitious and now pernicious, without a determining power to justify the fact. Doubtless there are force influences acting in this unforeseeable manner, but this assertion does not allow the conclusion that action occurs in a manner scientifically unpredictable, in a totally irrational mode.²⁰ There are laws governing African ontological system such that the interaction of forces is not an arbitrary engagement of forces without any principle of justice.

18. Nyamiti, C. Ancestor Veneration In Africa. Par.11. <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/html>. Retrieved; 7th May 2013.

19. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.44.

20. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.45.

The universe in African cosmology is not “understood as something discrete and individuated but rather, it is conceived of as a series of interactions and interconnections. This general cosmic vision is particularly applicable in coming to an understanding of the relationship between self and community.”²¹ This is why Tempels in his description of Bantu psychology stated that; Bantu psychology cannot conceive of man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationships with other living beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it. The Bantu cannot be a lone being, he feels and knows himself to be a vital force, at this very time to be in intimate and personal relationship with other forces acting above him and below him in the hierarchy of forces. He knows himself to be a vital force, even now influencing some forces, and being influenced by others. The human being, apart from the ontological hierarchy and the interaction of forces, has no existence in the conceptions of the Bantu.²²

Just as each individual in the community derives his meaningfulness or identity from the community, so do forces. Every force is sustained not in isolation but in its continual situatedness in what J. M Nyasani calls the cycle of unbroken chain of horizontal and vertical relationships. In this communal relationship, he said my own individual life-force is not mine by right or by nature but a gratuitous conferment from the *ex post facto* reality of those who already enjoyed it and who jealously safeguard it for purposes of continuity, social cohesion, social harmony, social and physical integrity and for the sake of realizing the teleological good of human existence in perpetual communion and perpetual vitality.²³

There is a mutual, continuous interconnection or interaction of forces in African worldview. This is a situation where man can possibly strengthen or weaken the vital

21. Kochalumchuvattil, T. 2010. The Crisis of Identity in Africa: A Call for Subjectivity. *Kritike* Vol.4. No.1. June. p.112. http://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_7/kochalumchuvattil_june2010.pdf. ISSN 1908-7330. Retrieved; 15th May 2013.

22. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. Pp.68-69.

23. Nyasani, J. M. 2013. *The Ontological Significance of "I" And "We" In African Philosophy*. www.galerie-inter.de/kimmerle/galerie.htm. Retrieved; 7th May 2013. p.19.

force of other men and that of forces inferior to him. There is also the possibility of rational beings influencing other rational beings by communicating their vital forces to inferior forces by way of enhancing the vital influence of the inferior forces to withstand or suppress an opposing rational being. For instance, it is believed that an individual could communicate his vital force to a cat or an owl thereby empowering it to act as an agent of malevolent acts to diminish the vital force of another human being. This is why Tempels said that, a rational being can act indirectly upon another rational being by communicating his vital influence to an inferior force being through the intermediacy of which it influences the rational being. In Bantu metaphysic, the lower force is excluded from exercising by its own initiative any vital action upon a higher force.²⁴

The identity of an individual in the community of forces is not only determined by his position in the hierarchy of forces but his name also has a role to play. D. A. Masolo opined that name;

Give individual persons their specific positions within the 'community' of forces. By acquiring a name, every person becomes a link in the chain of forces linking the dead and the living genealogies. No one is isolated. Every person makes part of that chain of forces in nature, both active and passive.²⁵

For Tempels, the first condition necessary for one's identity among the community of forces is the name. He said, "The name expresses the individual character of the being. The name is not a simple external courtesy; it is the very reality of the individual."²⁶ The individual is not a bearer of a particular name rather, the name is what the individual is, and he is an embodiment or personification of the name. For this reason Tempels said, "If one hesitates as to the name of a European and asks him, 'You are called Louis are you not?' he will reply 'Yes', or 'No'. If, however, you ask a 'muntu',

24. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.46

25. Masolo, D. A. 1994. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, & Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd. p.51.

26. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.70.

‘Are you called Ilunga?’ you will elicit one of the answers ‘Tata’ (Father) or ‘Bwana’ (Master) or ‘I’, or ‘Myself,’ or ‘Here I am’, or ‘It is I’; but he will not say ‘Eyo’ or ‘Ndio’ (Yes).”²⁷ This is because the name is not just what an individual is named, rather it is what he is, it expresses the individuality of the individual it is different from the names people simply pick up for themselves for instance among their peers or during Christian baptism. This name binds the individual ontologically with the community such that he is necessarily identified as a specific force within the community. For the Bantu, man never appears in fact as an isolated individual or an independent entity. Every man, every individual, forms a link in the chain of vital forces, a living link, active and passive, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry and sustaining below him the line of his descendants.²⁸

Forces are in a causal relationship with one another, playing one role or the other in the community. The essential point, however, is that the individual is at the centre of such causal relationships and operations of forces because it is believed that the nature and activities of these forces is either for the benefit or disadvantage of the individual; they either make or mar him or her.

Summary

Concerning the notion of the hierarchy of forces, G. O Ozumba noted the argument in some quarters that this hierarchy is not rigid. Because, events can cause a hitherto insignificant god or divinity to become so powerful that it assumes a central place of reverence in the life of the community more than the ancestors. Plants and animals can be habited by powerful forces which make them to become very prominent in the spiritual rating of the society.²⁹ But the Africans relate with inferior forces such as plants and animals as inferior forces even when greater forces inhabit or communicate

27. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.70.

28. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.71.

29. Ozumba, G. O. 2004. African Traditional Metaphysics. *Quodlibet Journal* Vol. 6 No. 3, July – September. Par. 21. www.quodlibet.net. Retrieved; 7th May 2013.

their forces to them. They are not by reason of their acquired force revered as superior rather; it is the individuality of the force that embodies them that is revered and not the inferior beings themselves. It is this misconception that has led the Westerners to refer to Africans as fetishists, animists, idolaters and the likes.

When the African who is a superior force confronts a tree or a rock and honours 'It' by pouring libations or offering sacrifices to 'It', he actually is not concerned with the inferior force that is there literally present rather, he recognises the superior force occupying it at that moment. It is more like the foreign religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the likes that pray through several symbols and images and recognise not the images themselves but the presence of the Supreme Being. It will be unacceptable to view the African as being fetish or the African world of forces as flexible and arbitrary based on this misconception, as this according to Ozumba will give the impression of a disordered universe of perennial strife among the forces. Admitting that, though there is, but this strife is controlled and regulated by the unseen hand of the creator.³⁰

Taking a look at the whole idea of forces in African ontology which was elaborately presented by Tempels in his 'Bantu Philosophy', one would notice some subliminal ideas in the work. Okot P'Bitek noticed this when he said, "the African, the Reverend Father tells us, is not what other ethnographers have imagined him to be; the African is a philosopher! Elsewhere in the book, this sugary description is completely contradicted..."³¹ Tempels believed that the Bantu is incapable of articulating their philosophical system but did not make it explicit whether he considered this an inherent disability or mere fact of historical circumstance. He stated that, "to declare on a priori grounds that primitive peoples have no idea 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 on

30. Ozumba, G. O. African Traditional Metaphysics. p.22.

31. Okot, P. Fr. Tempels' Bantu Philosophy. *Transition* No.50. Oct., 1975 – 1976. p.66. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org> May 24, 2007.

reality.”³² Yet, somewhere else in the book he claimed that Africans are not capable of formulating philosophical treatise. In his own words, he said, “We do not claim, of course that the Bantu are capable of formulating philosophical treatise complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is.”³³ He is here implying that to understand the Bantu one need be absorbed into their culture and that to judge them without doing this would be prejudice.

It should be noted however that, Tempels wrote ‘Bantu Philosophy’ primarily as a reply to and for the consumption of Western audience. He said the book “replies to the argument and criticisms of my colleagues”³⁴ Hountondji supports this position by saying that it is clear that it is not addressed to Africans but to Europeans, and particularly to two categories of Europeans: colonials and missionaries. Africans are, as usual, excluded from the discussion, and ‘Bantu philosophy’ is a mere pretext for learned disquisitions among Europeans. The black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject of a possible discourse.³⁵ Hountondji recognises this ascent in ‘Bantu Philosophy’ as it was aimed at paving the way for the colonisers and missionaries in achieving their goals of assimilating and indoctrinating the African and also, to maintain the eternal servitude of the African for their benefit.

Tempels tried to make claim for himself and his friends who were resident on African shores as the most qualified to speak on African rationality. Where he said, as a result of their interaction with the Bantu; “every day we are able to note that primitive peoples are by no means just children afflicted with a bizarre imagination.”³⁶ He tried

32. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.16.

33. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.25.

34. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.25.

35. Hountondji, P. J. 1983. An alienated literature. in *African philosophy: Myth and reality* Henri Evans. Trans. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. 34.

36. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.11.

to paint a positive picture of Africans but at the same time vaguely contradicts this position by saying that, it is as men and not as savages that we have learned to know them in their homes.³⁷ This is a very soothing or sugary statement but he went further to say that, “If, in fact, primitive peoples have a concrete conception of being and of the universe, this ‘ontology’ of theirs will give a special character...to their whole behaviour. It is even more true, I venture to think, that the Bantu, like primitive people in general, live more than we do by ideas and by following their own ideas.”³⁸

Concluding Remarks

It is evident from the foregoing that the universe for the African is an active force kept alive by the constant activities of forces and that vital force is a fundamental value in African thought upon which all things both animate and inanimate, are founded. Forces or beings in African ontology are distinguished by the level of forces they wield and this gives them their positions in the hierarchy of forces.

It was also shown that for the Africans, death does not really consist in the death of the physical body and that death is simply a transition from this world to the world beyond. Beyond this earth and the physical body is yet another life. To die an actual death is to lose link or interaction with those on earth; it is for vital force to suffer a complete diminution. The first condition necessary for one's identity among the community of forces is the name. In the next topic attention will be focused on the notion of being in Western philosophy.

37. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.16.

38. Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.17.

BEING IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

The origin of the concept of being in Western philosophy is traceable to the period when thinkers began to wonder about the basic stuff in the universe, when they observed the diversity of things in nature and could yet notice the continuity and uniformity in them. They came to the conclusion that the nature of reality is connected to this uniformity. Water, in Thales' view was "the first principle of life in the material world. Seeing that water could turn into both vapour by evaporation and a solid by freezing, that all life required and was supported by moisture, he postulated that it was the single causal principle behind the natural world."¹ Others believed it was air or fire and later attention was drifted to 'being' as the primary stuff, meaning that one thing that can be postulated as continuing in all things that has been opined to be the basic stuff of the universe is being (existence). This according to Parmenides makes 'being' the basic stuff of the universe, that which is, "the ontological correlate of the bare affirmation of a content."² He observed that if something changes, it becomes something else so, if being itself were to change, then it would become something different. But what is different from being is nonbeing, and nonbeing just plain isn't. Thus, he concluded, being does not change.³ He further said that being is one, eternal and unchanging, meaning that whatever changes is not being.

Plato agrees with Parmenides that reality is eternal and unchanging, believing that the world of experience is illusory and only that which is unchanging and eternal is real. He then submitted that there must be a realm of eternal unchanging forms that are the blueprints of the ephemeral phenomena we encounter through sense experience.⁴ The forms or reality do not participate in time, they are not subject to

¹ Stokes, P. 2002. *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*. London: Arcturus Publishing Ltd. p.9.

² Scolnicov, S. Trans. 2003. *Plato's Parmenides*. London: University of California Press, Ltd. p.18

³ Moore, B. N. & Bruner, K. 2011. *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc. p.27.

⁴ Stokes, P. 2002. *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*. p.23.

change because time itself connotes change. Plato however took a different turn from Parmenides when he argued that being is multiple rather than one; and they are the forms of things in the World of Forms. The ultimate source of all the forms, for Plato is the form of Good. It is the source of the being of other forms. Aristotle defines Metaphysics as the general science of being qua being⁵ and describes being as “the foundation and unity of all things”⁶ which he identifies with God.

Categories of Being

Plato is of the view that the world we perceive with our senses contains nothing except impermanence and ever changing objects. He believed that for our idea of the world to count as true knowledge and not just based on unreliable evidence, our minds need to make a conceptual leap from individual instances of things to general ideas. He concluded that there must be something permanent that lies behind and unites individual existences, and this he referred to as ‘essence.’ This essence is the distinguishing factor in the nature of God and created things. In his metaphor of the divided line he categorised being into the transcendent and the immanent. With the divine mind, forms, divinities, stars, planets in the category of transcendent beings and humans, animals, plants, and inorganic materials in the category of immanent beings. The subject of substance in philosophical discourse assumed an important position in the philosophy of Aristotle. According to S. M. Cohen, “Substance as we have it today is from a Latin word *substantia* which is a translation from the original Greek word *ousia* which was employed by Aristotle. In its original form of *ousia*, it means ‘reality’ or ‘fundamental being,’”⁷

Aristotle identified three categories of substance or being. These are: those that are sensible and perishable, those that are sensible but not perishable, and those that

⁵ Loux, M. J. 2006. *Metaphysics: A contemporary introduction*. USA and Canada: Routledge. p.1.

⁶ Kanu, I. A. 2012. The Problem of Being in Metaphysics. *African Research Review* Vol. 6 (2). Serial No. 25. p.114. Retrieved; 7th May 2013 <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v6i2.10>.

⁷ Cohen, S. M. 2009. Substance. G. Anagnostopoulos. Ed. *A Companion to Aristotle*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. p. 197.

are neither sensible nor perishable. The first class includes plants and animals, the second includes the heavenly bodies which Aristotle believed to undergo no change except motion, the third includes the rational soul in man, and also God.⁸ Aristotle regards it as an obvious fact that material entities like animals and plants, earth and water, the sun and the stars are substances which are beings in their own right. According to Avicenna, in all creatures, essence, and existence are distinct and not even the fullest investigation into what kind of thing a particular species is will show that any individual of that species exist. But God is quite different, in his case, and only in his case, essence entails existence. God is the only necessary being, and all others are contingent.⁹

Thomas Aquinas' description of being is that, "God is being while other creatures are beings in an analogical sense."¹⁰ His distinction of essence and existence is expressed in his distinction between what a thing is per se and what that thing is made of. Opining that;

Whatever [belongs to a thing and] is not part of the concept of an essence or quiddity is something that arrives from outside and is added to the essence; because no essence can be conceived without the elements which are parts of the essence. But every essence or quiddity can be conceived without anything being understood with respect to its existence; for I can understand what a human being is, or what a phoenix is, and yet be ignorant whether they have existence in the nature of things. Hence it is clear that existence is different from essence or quiddity . . .¹¹

Aquinas distinguished the essence of any creature from its existence. He is of the opinion that material substances exist contingently and they come into being and they go out of being. They are not essentially necessary beings and their existence is not

⁸ B. Russell. 1945. *The History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon and Shuster. p. 168.

⁹ Anthony, K. 2005. *A New History of Western Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. p.39.

¹⁰ Kanu, I. A. 2012. *The Problem of Being in Metaphysics*. p.114.

¹¹ Anthony, K. 2005. *A New History of Western Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*. p.199.

identical with their essence. This is because material things depend upon certain causes to exist.

Eleonore Stumpf, describes Aquinas' view of corporeal beings as composites of essence and existence. Only the first, uncreated cause, God, whose essence is existence, is absolutely simple.¹² This shows that everything existing potentially or actually is a being but it must be noted that being in Aquinas is ultimately God and all other beings simply depend on God as the foundation of the nature of their existence. It can be deduced from here that Aquinas distinguished two categories of being, which are, the infinite and finite beings. The infinite being is the ultimate being which he refers to as God, the self-existent and eternally existing being. The uncaused and unchangeable that simply is, because his essence is to exist and it is not distinguishable from his existence. According to Thomas Higgs, Aquinas expressed this identity from where God tells Moses that his name is 'I am Who I Am.'¹³ Showing that he is the necessarily subsistent being always in act and that, "God is a Being whose existence is self-explanatory, an absolutely perfect being, or pure actuality."¹⁴ God is Pure Act and he is "not a body, not composed of matter and form...God is the first mover; God is pure actuality; God is the first being; God is the most noble of beings."¹⁵

Descartes identification of three categories or fundamental degrees of perfection in a hierarchical order supports Aquinas' identification of God at the apex of the hierarchy when he noted that, "the highest degree is that of an infinite substance (God), which depends on nothing..."¹⁶ God is at the apex of reality from whom other beings, the finite beings derive their beings. These infinite beings necessarily depend on God as the foundation of their existence. They are finite, created beings who have a

¹² Eleonore, S. 2003. *Aquinas*. London: Routledge, Tailor & Francis Group. p.12.

¹³ Thomas Higgs. 2007. *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. p.108.

¹⁴ Eleonore, S. 2003. *Aquinas*. p.92.

¹⁵ Eleonore, S. 2003. *Aquinas*. p.94.

¹⁶ Craig, E. ed. 2005. *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. p.182.

beginning and an ending. Descartes puts it in a hierarchy of perfection where after God, “the next degree is that of a finite substance, an individual body or mind, which depends on God alone. The lowest is that of a mode, a property of a substance, which depends on the substance for its existence.”¹⁷ The essence of a created being is different from its existence as distinguished from God the all-sufficient one whose essence is his existence and is responsible for the existence of finite beings who simply participate in his existence. The finite beings are further grouped into spiritual and corporeal beings. While spiritual beings such as angels have no material element, corporeal beings possess material element. Yet, unlike the infinite being which does not change, all finite beings can change because they are composed and are in potency.

Basic Elements of Being

In Aquinas, there are two necessary elements in every being which are essence and existence. For Norris Clarke, the most fruitful contemporary path into Aquinas’s metaphysics is the experience of interpersonal dialogue, which involves conversation with another real being distinct from me in a common field of existence enveloping but transcending us both.¹⁸ According to Aquinas, we know and encounter things not just by their presence but by their activities; that is, their active presence and that this activity expresses not just its substance and existence but also its essence. This is why N. Clarke describes Aquinas’ ‘existence’ and ‘essence’ as the primary elements of being by saying that, since the action that flows out from a being is not simply an indeterminate surge of raw energy, but pours out from, and is self-expressive of, the whole unified inner being of the thing, its action cannot help but be essence-structured action revealing to any potential receiver both the actual existence and essence of the being from which the action originates.¹⁹

¹⁷ Craig, E. ed. 2005. *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. p.182.

¹⁸ Thomas Higgs. 2007. *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice*. p.43.

¹⁹ Norris, C. 1995. *Explorations in Metaphysics*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press. pp. 11&55.

The essence of a thing is that thing through which and in which a being has its act of existence. While existence is that which makes essence actual, essence makes a being what it is. Therefore, essence and existence are necessary and complementary elements of a being. Aquinas argues that although essence and existence constitute every being, they are not present in the same way in all beings. Aquinas maintains that in God there is no distinction between essence and existence. For example, God's affirmation of himself as, "I am Who I Am"²⁰ is an indication that God's essence is his existence. What makes God what he is, is the fact that he necessarily exist.

The Hierarchy of Beings

All existing entities find their place in the universe in order of hierarchy. This is in form of an imaginary vertical chain extending from the most supreme down to the least. An object's position is said to depend on the relative proportion of spirit and matter it contains, which implies that the less spirit, and the more matter an existing thing possess, the lower down its position in the hierarchy. At the bottom, for example, lie the various types of inanimate objects, such as metals, stones, air, water, fire. Higher up are various members of the vegetative class, like trees and flowers. Next are animals; then humans; and then divinities or angels. At the apex is God. This shows that Beings are differentiated by their positions in a hierarchical order according to the amount of spirit they possess or as the Africans would say, according to the amount of force they possess. According to Anthony Kenny;

Several Platonists had spoken of a threefold classification of rational beings: gods, men, and daimones (demons). Gods dwelt in heaven, men on earth, and demons in the air between. Demons were like gods in being immortal, but like men in being subject to passions. Many demons are bad, but some are good... Good demons... could be of service as intermediaries between men and gods.²¹

²⁰ Thomas Higgs. 2007. Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice. p.108

²¹ Anthony, K. 2005. *A New History of Western Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*. p.6.

Plato's list of the hierarchy of being runs in a descending order from the Divine Mind down to inorganic material. He divided this list into two realms, the anti-material, and the material realms. The entities or beings which occupy the upper or anti-material realm in their separate hierarchy he considered to be superior to the entities in the lower or material realm. Humans ultimately belong in the lower realm but given the bifurcation of the human being into Soul and Body, the Soul is exalted to the higher realm while the Body is trapped below the dividing line.

Plato believes that unrealised souls are capable of returning to the body after death in order to continue existence till they gain final liberation and return to the forms. Anthony Kenny noted that, "it is a common Platonic theme that souls after death may be forced to return into bodies (other human bodies, perhaps, or even animal bodies) as a punishment for sins in their previous life."²² Hierarchical organization of Being is also reflected in the hierarchical organisation of the mental faculties as Plato opined in his tripartite psychology, that reason is supreme and corresponds with the rulers or guardians of the society, then follows emotions corresponding with the defenders of the society and least is the appetites which correspond with the artisans. According to Anthony Kenny, Plato in his ideal state, "incorporates all the cardinal virtues: the virtue of wisdom resides in the guardians, fortitude in the auxiliaries, temperance in the working classes, and justice is rooted in the principle of the division of labour from which the city-state took its origin. In a just state every citizen and every class does that for which they are most suited, and there is harmony between the classes."²³ This hierarchy is believed to also reflect in the hierarchical order within the family, the state, and the forces of nature. Plato stated in his tripartite psychology that to have a perfect society, everyone must be engaged in his own specific function, saying that a thing's specific function "is that which it alone can do or which it can do better than anything

²² Anthony Kenny. 2005. *A New History of Western Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*. p.8.

²³ Anthony, K. 2004. *A New History of Western Philosophy: Ancient Philosophy*. Vol.1. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.58.

else.”²⁴ He believed that if the rulers, the guardians, and artisans are engaged in their specific functions that there will be justice and the society will be at peace. All existing things have their specific place and function in the universe, and to depart from one’s proper place is to betray one’s nature.

The universe is full of actual beings of which none exists by chance and without purpose. Aquinas holds that each finite being was purposefully brought into existence to perfect the universe. Any distortion of the purpose of any being consequently affects the entire universe. He opined that, “to take away from the perfection of created things is to detract from the perfection of divine power.”²⁵ He maintains that the criterion for the rank of beings is the amount of perfection and potentiality a being has in relation to God who is the most perfect and the purest act. The closer a being is to God, who is the purest act, the more perfect it is while the closer a being is to prime matter the more imperfect it is. God Aquinas believes is a “self-communicative love, and since all other real beings are in some way images, participating in the divine goodness, they all bear the mark within them, according to the nature of each, of this divine attribute.”²⁶

God is at the top of the hierarchy of being, after Him come the spiritual beings such as angels. These are pure spirits without any mark of materiality. They are perfectly in act, and have less potentiality compared to other created beings. Human beings follow after the spiritual beings. After human beings, come animals and then plants. Each being belongs to its own rank therefore making the universe perfectly organized. Since God possesses the essence of all perfection, and “whatever is highest in a certain order is the measure of all that falls under that order, possessing whatever perfection is included in that order. God, who is his own being, is the measure of all

²⁴ Plato. 1985. *The Republic*. London: W. W Norton & Company. p.51

²⁵ Thomas Higgs. 2007. *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice*. p.127.

²⁶ Norris, C. 2001. *The One and the Many*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. p.33.

beings; consequently, no perfection appropriate to this or that thing is lacking to Him.”²⁷ Created beings depend on God for their existence and means of survival.

The Community of beings

Thomas Aquinas identified the necessity of interaction or communication for the continuous existence of beings. He noted that beings participate and receive reality from the ultimate being in relation to their proximity to Him; that beings are in an inter-subjective relationship with each other and in that process they enhance or complete the being of others or they are as well enhanced or completed. This communal interaction of beings he believes sustains the universe and that it is the initiative of God to make it so since it is the very nature of God to be self-communicative love and since all other beings are in some way participating in the divine love, it is in their nature to extend this to other beings.

The real beings in our universe go out of themselves in action for two reasons: one, because they are poor, in that as limited and imperfect they are seeking completion of themselves from other beings; two, because they are rich, in that they actually exist and so possess some degree of actual perfection and have an intrinsic tendency to share this in some way with others. Why this should in fact be so is, or should indeed be, a source of wonder for the metaphysician. Without it, of course, there would be no universe. But it seems the ultimate reason is that it is the very nature of God himself to be self-communicative love.²⁸

Thomas Higgs corroborated this self-communicative, inter-subjective attribute of God which he extends to all other beings when he noted that, behind the account of virtues of dependent animal rationality is a metaphysics of participation and a theological teaching on the internal life of God as self-communicative love. The same teaching, though much neglected, provides the foundation for Aquinas’s account of the natural law, which he defines as ‘the participation of the rational creature in the eternal law.’²⁹

²⁷ Thomas Higgs. 2007. *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice*. p.124.

²⁸ Norris, C. 2001. *The One and the Many*. p.33.

²⁹ Thomas Higgs. 2007. *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice*. p.34.

Norris Clarke gives a clear picture of what this inter-subjective, self-communicative love really means. He explains that a conception of being in this manner “plunges us immediately into real being as a community of distinct but intercommunicating centres giving and receiving from each other across the bridge of self-expressive action. In a word, it reveals to us that to be is to be together, actively present to each other.”³⁰

Analysis

The quest for the meaning of being has been a historical and also an academic activity that has set the minds of thinkers wondering whether or not such an idea exists. It is noted that the Western world conceives of being in two categories; Thomas Aquinas gave these categories as the infinite and the finite. This shows that a being must be either finite or infinite. Plato is of this notion as well when he bifurcated being into different worlds of the spiritual and the corporeal. The divine mind in Plato corresponds to God in Aquinas whose essence is his existences and he is also the source of existence of other beings. For God to be the source of existence of other beings there must be some form of interactions between them and God. It is this interaction that is responsible for the continuous existences of beings and also gives room for the communication of being from one reality to another in their respective hierarchy. This communication also expresses another important factor in beings which is the fact that beings are interconnected or liked together in ‘brotherhood’. To deny the one its essence in the community of being is to break the chain linking the entire beings as being and consequently lead to oneself being-denial since, to be is to be together, actively present with each other.³¹

³⁰ Norris, C. 2001. *The One and the Many*. p.38.

³¹ Norris, C. 2001. *The One and the Many*. p.38.

Concluding Remarks

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that being in Western thought system is fundamentally and ontologically equivalent to existence. It is inherently the content of any existent in existence. To be therefore is to be in existence. Aristotle believes that being is the uniting factor of all existence. In other words, all realities, all existence have something in common and that is the fact that they are beings, they exist. It is also the case that there are two categories of being in Western thought system; the infinite, non-created being whose essence is his existence and the finite, created beings that derive their essences from the Supreme being. These finite beings are also believed to exist in different categories as spiritual and corporeal beings. Through this mode of distinction of being in Western thought system, one can come to the conclusion that to be, in other words, that which is described as being must possess either essence or existence. As in the case of God whose existence is essentially necessary and created beings that exist contingently in the measure of their proximity to the Supreme being by whose essence they have their being or existence.

In the hierarchy of being, God enjoys the topmost position and it is from him that the nature of being flow downwards in relative proportion through the spiritual to the corporeal beings down to the least inanimate object. This shows that beings are differentiated by their positions in the hierarchy according to the amount of spirit they possess or as the Africans would say, according to the amount of force they possess. This goes to show that in Western thought system created beings depend on God for their existence and means of survival which consequently means that a total disconnect from God would lead to death.

TOWARDS A UNIFIED CONCEPT OF BEING

Introduction

Cultural diversity is a phenomenon which is impossible to deny while at the same time, cultural universality is a debatable topic. It is also not impossible to note that no matter how culturally diverse people might be, there always will be a modicum of similarity in their ways of life. Several main issues about the commensurability of philosophical traditions make up the subject matter of comparative philosophy. One issue is methodological commensurability, whether and how comparisons between different philosophical traditions are to be conducted.¹ Some philosophers are sceptical about the meaningfulness of making comparisons between cultures and traditions, while others believe that the contents of cultures are to a large extent similar. It is based on this later claim that the notion of being is to be evaluated in both African and Western thought systems. It is also based on the assumption that a meaningful comparison of this kind is feasible and can achieve a reconciliation of the notion of personal identity in both thought systems.

This topic considers the areas these thought systems differ and in which areas they share common grounds with regards to the notion of being and personal identity. In doing this, references will be made to the second topic which looked into the notion of force in Bantu thought system and the third topic which considered the notion of being in Western thought system. They will provide the thesis and antithesis needed for a comparative analysis which would eventually yield a synthesis of both ideas in this topic. This work shall afterwards conclude with the affirmation that ‘force is being and being is force’ and that from this perspective, humanity is one and the same.

¹ Wong, D. 2009. Comparative Philosophy: Chinese and Western. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Thu. Oct.1. Retrieved on 07/08/2010 from; <http://www.comparative-philosophy-chinese-and-western/dwong.htm>.

Being and Cultural Uniqueness

The thoughts of thinkers are wittingly or unwittingly influenced by their social or cultural milieu. To divorce them from the prevailing circumstances of their time when considering the modes, objects and products of their thoughts would yield a distorted view of the meanings inherent in their thoughts. Placide Tempels' 'Bantu Philosophy' is a product of his own social milieu, it is a product of a synergy of his experiences within and around the African continent with influence from the prevailing Western hegemony. These necessarily play out idiosyncratically in the way he viewed and dealt with African issues. This suggests that since human experiences are different, our modes and objects of thoughts are necessarily different. It is also the case that a total isolation of one culture from the rest of the world is almost impracticable. Despite the differences in cultures or modes of thought, there are observable features which pervade cultures. Considering this view, one wonders if there are valid grounds for determining the uniqueness of any culture. According to Bentley Le Baron, "the insistence on uniqueness may be more likely to perpetrate antithesis than to promote synthesis."² With the reality of cultural relativism and universalism in a philosophical discourse such as this which borders on the notion of being and identity in two different cultures, in reaching a point of reconciliation between both, one would need to embark on a comparative study of African and Western conceptions of being in relation to personal identity.

Thomas Wren noted that the classic conceptualisations of a person's or thing's nature as something stable, unchanging, and so on were reminiscent of the etymology of the word 'identity'.³ This took its origin from the Latin word for 'same'. In contrast, 'person' is derived from the Latin word for something that is eminently changeable,

² Bentley Le Baron. 1966. Negritude: A Pan-African Ideal? *Ethics* Vol.76. No.4. July. p.269.

³ Thomas, W. 2002. *Cultural Identity and Personal Identity: Philosophical Reflections on the Identity Discourse of Social Psychology*. Par.7. <http://www.personalid/wren-identity.htm> Retrieved 17th May 2013.

namely a theatrical mask.⁴ The question of the identity of Africa and of Africans is necessarily as important as the question of the identity of any human person generally. This makes it important to question the opinions that personal identity is based on class, religion, race, geographical location, culture, or the intellectual capacity of an individual. Africans have for a long time been the ones that are expected to demonstrate what their identity is in relation to the rest of the world. This is as a result of the misrepresentation of Africans by other cultural worlds as culturally primitive. This misbranding has for a long time been responsible for the denial of Africans the ability to engage in any rational discourse. Thus, Western scholars and missionaries entrust themselves with the responsibility of educating and civilising Africans. In the process of doing this, their own standards were imposed in the assessment of Africans.

Philosophers held that metaphysics is concerned with an ultimate reality that exists in and for itself. Kant demolished this traditional metaphysics by showing that being or things-in-themselves are forever inaccessible to the human mind.⁵ This is as a result of the belief that it is impossible for finite human mind to comprehend the infinite. This is why positivists dismissed the idea as meaningless while some philosophers conclude that the science of being was impossible. But Heidegger in his 'Being and Time' resurrected the idea and responded to the question of the reality of being with one of Plato's quotations that, "you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression 'being'. We however who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed."⁶ Heidegger's response to this assertion was by raising the question,

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So, it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of 'being.' But are we nowadays

⁴ Thomas, W. 2002. *Cultural Identity and Personal Identity. Philosophical Reflections on the Identity Discourse of Social Psychology*. Par.11.

⁵ Jones, W. T. 1980. *The Twentieth Century to Quine and Derrida* 3Ed. Forth Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers. p.316.

⁶ Jones, W. T. 1980. *The Twentieth Century to Quine and Derrida*. p.308.

even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression 'being'? Not at all. So, first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question.⁷

In the process of doing this Heidegger discovered that one unique feature of man (Dasein) that distinguishes him from other creatures is that man is the only being capable of asking question about his being and the being of others.⁸ Man is the only being for whom the question of being is important, the being for whom being matters. Going by the notion of force in African ontology which shall here be shown to be equivalent to the notion of being in Western thought, one can reliably conclude that man generally is capable of conceiving being, formulating concepts and philosophical treatise. This shows that the ability to accomplish this task is not restricted to a particular race or culture since man generally, irrespective of nationality or geographical location is a being gifted with intellect and 'force'. The above position is what Franz Fanon tried to defend in his work 'Black Skin, White Mask' when he said that;

There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence. There are in every part of the world men who search. I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am a part of being.⁹

Human beings as forces are necessarily beings or forces of intellect occupying the same world, subject to the same laws of nature, change and time, able to confront their being (existence) and project themselves into inter-subjective activities with one another.

⁷ Jones, W. T. 1980. *The Twentieth Century to Quine and Derrida*. p.302.

⁸ Stumpf, S. E. 1971. *Philosophy, History & Problems*. 4ed. New York; McGraw-Hill Book Company. p.497.

⁹ Fanon, F. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. England: Pluto Press by Chase Publishing Services Ltd. p.179.

Continuities in Force and Being

That a being or force (entity) is constituted of principles which are very necessary for its actual existence is obviously a general concept in both African and Western thought systems. It is also believed that these constitutive principles are not present in the same measure or degree in all entities. This is as a result of the belief that the rank or position of an entity is determined by the measure of perfection and potentiality it has in relation to God who is the most perfect being and who is force himself. It is also noticed in both thought systems that the closer an entity is to God, the more perfect it is and the more force it wields, and this is as result of the level of its participation in the perfection of the Supreme being (God) who vitalises and sustains other entities in measure of the order of their hierarchy or proximity to himself. Both thought systems group forces or beings (entities) into categories of two where the second category is further grouped into two. The first group is referred to as the self-creating while the second is the created force or being. Both agree that God occupies the first class and he is the creator, he is infinite, eternal, he is uncaused and essentially or necessarily existing force or being. The second category is recognised as belonging to the finite and contingent beings that rely on God for their existence. The finite beings exist but not essentially, they receive their existence from an external source. They were caused to exist by God the being who exists necessarily. This indicates that cause is concerned with the finite beings' act of existing.

Generally, the notion of cause in Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics is connected with the existence of beings, that is, how and why beings come to exist. In this regard, cause has a transcendental character because it is concerned with the existence of all finite beings. For Thomas, cause is a very important aspect of being as it is through cause that a being manifests itself in its highest level of perfection, that is, existence. Since Aquinas is convinced that finite beings are caused in order to exist, he claims God is the first cause of being. In the Bantu thought it is believed that finite forces are created by God and that it was during creation that God put into existence finite forces

by giving them vital force. God is believed to regulate the actual existence of forces in accordance with their nature. It is evident in both thoughts that God is the first efficient cause of all finite entities. Both thoughts further categorise this group of finite beings into spiritual and corporeal where angels, divinities or deities (ancestors inclusive) are said to occupy the spiritual world while human beings (with an exception to the soul), animals, plants, minerals occupy the corporeal world. The soul does not belong to the corporeal world that is why at the death of the body, the soul is believed to return to the spiritual world which also is for the Africans the world of the ancestors. Aquinas believes that “the human soul, unlike the souls of plants and beasts, is subsistent: that it continues to exist after separating from the body in death.”¹⁰ Both thought systems in the final analysis agree that ‘to be’ (existence) is the vital constituent of force or being as the case may be even though the Western thought system identifies essence as a part of it. For a being to exist according to Western thought, it has to be composed of either essence or existence while for the Africans it has to be composed of force. God is believed to be the only essential being whose being or existence is his essence. In other words, God is essential and his essence is not distinguishable from his existence. Created beings exist and their existence flow from God’s existence (essence). The Africans simply recognise this essence or God’s existence as force and it is this same force which is supreme in God that is communicated down to all forces in a hierarchical order. When Aquinas opined that God’s essence is his existence he meant that God exists essentially (ultimately) and he caused other beings to exist approximately. In like manner the Bantu hold that God is the ultimate force from who force flows. So, they are both of the opinion that existence is the necessary constituent of God (the Supreme Being or force) while all other beings or forces possess existence or are beings (forces) in an analogical sense.

Africans and Westerners believe that force or being encompasses all of existence. Being, more than just ‘to be’, describes particular kinds of being. For

¹⁰ Eleonore Stumpf. 2003. *Aquinas*. London: Routledge, Tailor & Francis Group.p.16.

example; man as in John, bird as in ostrich, tree as in mango, animal as in goat are all beings. This being is convertible to a thing which is divided into categories. The Africans hold that all being is force; God, men, living and the departed, animals, plants, minerals are all forces.¹¹ To be endued with force means to be endued with life and force is used both in the universal and particular sense. Both thought systems believe that interaction takes place in the community of forces or community of beings and that this interaction sustains the universe, believing that all forces or beings are bound together in the sense that whatever affects the one correspondingly affects the others within the community. This is why Leopold Senghor is saying that “the whole universe is a network of life forces.”¹² Forces or beings go out of themselves to interact with others. When this happens, there is a sharing or a communication of vital energies one to another benevolently. Aquinas opined that when beings interact, they enhance or complete the being of others and they are as well enhanced or completed. This communal interaction of beings he believes sustains the universe and that it is the initiative of God to make it so since it is the very nature of God to be self-communicative love. The Africans although believe that this interaction of forces could lead either to a strengthening or to a weakening of force. In other words, some forces act malevolently. Rather than simply communicating their vital energies (forces) as in the case of fire lighting other sources and yet remains substantially the same, these malevolent forces extract the forces of their victims leading to a diminution. On the notion of the interaction of being, both thought systems believe that there is a sharing or communication of vital energies just that for the African this could also lead to diminution of force.

In Western thought, created beings depend on God for their existence and survival which consequently means that a total disconnect from God would lead to death. This is in consonance with African thought where vital force flows from the

¹¹ Tempels, P. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. Trans. Rev. Colin King. Paris: Presence Africaine. p.36.

¹² Senghor. L. S. 1966. *Negritude. Optima* Vol.16. No.8. p.4.

Supreme Being and to be totally removed from this hierarchy is to suffer a complete diminution of force which is considered the worst misfortune. The soul in Plato's conception is capable of returning or could be forced back into the body after death in order to continue its existence. This idea is prominent in African thought as well but the difference is that while Plato believes this to be some form of punishment for the soul until it gains liberation, the Africans do not conceive of it this way. For them spirits (souls) of the departed ancestors willingly return into either the body of another human or any other feature in nature in order to continue their existence. This is not considered punishment rather; it is a way of returning to accomplish that which was left unaccomplished or to intervene in the affairs of men in order to restore harmony.

Parmenides is of the opinion that being does not change, that being is one, eternal and unchanging which means that whatever changes is not being. In other words, God as the Supreme Being is God and cannot be or be described as anything else, man is man, and plant is plant and would not be anything else. Plato in his ideal state described a picture of how the entire cosmos should be organised by incorporating the notion of tripartite psychology. He noted that in a just society, every citizen belonging to a specific class does that for which he is best suited, resulting in harmony. Where there is disharmony or disorder in one class, it is correspondingly reflected in other classes. The cause of this is usually linked to the departure of a being from its specific function thereby betraying its nature. Aquinas, corroborating this claim opined that no being in the universe exists by chance and without purpose. He believed that beings exist in order for them to perfect the universe and a departure from the purpose of any being leads to chaos in the universe. On the other hand, the notion of ancestor in African ontology seems not to be in line with this Western claim of a being maintaining its position. This is because human beings occupy a realm different from the ancestors but it is humans who are elevated to that status after the death of the physical body. This is why it is not out of place to hear an aged African man use the phrase, 'when I join my

ancestors' or when a king dies, that 'he has joined his ancestors'. In this case, there is the possibility of change, change in position and consequently, change in functions.

Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing, it is obvious that force is being and being is force. That there are differences in cultural practices is not debatable but these differences do not make one person less of a human than the other. This is because despite the differences, there are instances of continuity. According to D. W Wallis, "every human society has its own particular culture and socio-cultural system which overlaps to some extent with others.' In fact, the differences between peoples are essentially differences in culture."¹³ And it should be noted in line with V. Y Mudimbe that culture is supra-individual as individuals are the carriers and transmitters and may modify it to suit their aspirations, but no individual creates a major portion of the culture in which he participates.¹⁴ This shows that concrete and metaphysical ideas are not a creation of a particular race or people but that they are common to all people in a culturally dependent manner.

From the analysis above, one can see that the concept of being is a general one and is not the exclusive preserve of a particular culture. The difference being that while the Westerners use the expression 'being', the Bantu (Africans) use the expression 'force'. Both peoples are influenced by their culture but they definitely referred to the same concept. That force is being and being is force is a clear indication that the one is identical with the other. Force and being are simply synonymous linguistic terms that are used in different parlances. What 'water' is to the everyday English reader is what 'H₂O' is to the scientist. Whether it is water or H₂O, it is one and the same thing that is being referred to. Tempels agrees that, force is the nature of being, force is being and being is force. And that when they think in terms of the concept 'being', Africans use the concept 'force'. Where they see concrete beings, Africans see concrete forces.

¹³ Wallis, D. W. 1930. Culture and progress. New York: McGraw-hill books. p. 32.

¹⁴ Mudimbe, V.Y. 1941. *The invention of Africa. Gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge*. London. Indiana university press. p. xi.

When they say that, beings are differentiated by their essence or nature; Bantu or Africans say that forces differ in their essence or nature.¹⁵ This shows that there are different conceptions or different ways of talking about a particular thing, that we form opinions about the world the way it appears to us culturally.

The Bantu believe that “there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, vegetable, and even material or mineral forces.”¹⁶ The concept of being in Western thought encompasses individual persons, existence, essential nature, and living supernatural things. In this manner, the Westerners would say that there is the divine being, celestial or terrestrial beings, human beings, and other beings like animals and vegetables. Force for the Bantu is referred to as the potent life or vital energy; it is the lifeblood or precisely, the very life of the individual. It is said that the Bantu does not speak of the ‘force of life’ because they believe that “life and force are one and the same thing.”¹⁷ In this same manner, the Westerner does not conceive of life without being in other words, life is necessarily being. According to Francis Etim, “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. Tempels technically referred to in his *Bantu Philosophy* as vital force. Whatever exist, from the lowest to the highest being has a force.”¹⁸ Force in African ontology has its equivalent in Western ontology. According to Tempels, “in contradistinction to our definition of being as ‘that which is’ or ‘the thing insofar as it is’, the Bantu definition reads, ‘that which is force’, or ‘the thing insofar as it is force’, or ‘an existent force’. We must insist once again that ‘force’ is not for Bantu a necessary, irreducible attribute of being: no, the notion ‘force’ takes for them the place

¹⁵ Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.35.

¹⁶ Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.35.

¹⁷ Tempels, P. *Bantu Philosophy*. p.33.

¹⁸ Etim, F. 2013. African Metaphysics. p.15.

of the notion ‘being’ in our philosophy. Just as we have, so have they a transcendental, elemental, simple concept: with them force, with us being”¹⁹

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¹⁹ Tempels. p.35

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