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# Essay Reflections On Traditional African Cosmology

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fectured by a respected Black studies department.

Faculty members who recognized a need for gearing education to the kind of student served, according to Mingle, were also those most supportive of Black students. While faculty members who emphasized educational "universalism" and "professional neutrality" usually meant by that emphasis that they only found Black students equal when they came to college with the same preparation and nearly the same characteristics as traditional white students.

28 *An active supporter held particularistic values about the application of admissions and performance criteria, viewed the long-term impact of blacks on higher education in positive terms, preferred a separate institutional structure for black programs, and held liberal (or activist) views about the role of colleges in solving problems of racial injustice . . . .*

*When faculty believe that black students should meet the same "standards" as whites this tends to be translated into an unwillingness to alter traditional teaching styles or support institutional changes. (Mingle, pp. 211-213, 1978)*

Even if Black students overcome the occasional ideological differences which interfere with faculty rapport and make special efforts to communicate, they may run into disappointments. The faculty member may turn out to be, even with good intentions, ill at ease and relatively unresponsive.

In this case as before, the presence of Black faculty can be crucial in supporting a more equitable distribution of Black students. Black faculty in all departments, as well as in Black studies programs can provide the interracial communication and positive environment that would help the white faculty to become more responsive.

More important still, the behavior of all faculty in providing special and informal access to students should be considered an affirmative action domain. In the distribution of research and assistantship, faculty members traditionally function according to personal preference and rapport with students. While reliance of faculty preference need not, and probably should not, be treated, resulting selection practices should be carefully surveyed. Without some kind of accountability, an essential avenue for Black student redistribution will remain foreclosed.

The value of such accountability can be particularly important for Black gradu-

ate student mobility to faculty positions. References and recommendations from individual faculty to other faculty are also personal in nature, but the process is systematic. Professors promote the students they know best and have worked with the most. Unfortunately, Black graduate students are overwhelmingly excluded from these close contacts.

### Conclusion

Higher education involves a process of professionalization in which largely non-professional values serve to legitimize professional ones and to socialize students into the educational system. Black students' prior socialization makes them particularly vulnerable to faculty norms.

The faculty, on the other hand, are not sufficiently sensitive to their vulnerability. Their insensitivity across departments largely corresponds to their departments' or disciplines' remoteness from the historical interest of Blacks generally. As a result, Black student distribution among major fields of study has scarcely changed in spite of a decade of major upheavals in higher education. The most critical result is that the number of Black college students nearly tripled in the 1970s. But the career options available to them are only slightly more diverse and more equitable than those available to Black college graduates of the last generation. □

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## THE ARTS

### Essay

#### Reflections on Traditional African Cosmology

*By Sulayman S. Nyang*

Africa was, and still is, rich in cosmological ideas. Though the diversity of Africa's religious and cosmological heritage has been little known outside of the continent, the intensive researchers of Africanists around the world, and the growing global interest in the African world have combined to draw attention to what could be Africa's spiritual gift to humanity. This gift is less understood by many Africans, even much less by the greater majority of non-Africans.

Africa's traditional cosmology is diverse, but behind this diversity lies the core of shared beliefs which spread across the continent.<sup>1</sup> This essay does not plan to bring out the differences; rather, it seeks to construct a framework of analysis out of the body of ideas that researchers in the field have agreed upon as the common elements in the various cosmological systems among Africa's numerous ethnic groups.

#### I. The Traditional African Conception of Man

In the cosmological world of traditional African man, certain ideas have always held sway over men's minds. The ideas of a diety who rules over creation was accepted by many, if not most African peoples. In fact, African pioneers in the field of traditional African religion, including Professor John Mbiti, have noted that this African knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, prayers, names, stories, myths and religious ceremonies.<sup>2</sup>

Mbiti believes that a careful examination of these sources of African religious beliefs would bring out the unity in diversity which characterizes the traditional African world of religion. He



makes his point in the following passage:

*"It is remarkable that in spite of great distances separating the peoples of one region from those of another, there are sufficient elements of belief which make it possible for us to discuss African concepts of God as a unity and on a continental scale."*<sup>3</sup>

This Divine Creator is usually pictured as the Lord and Maker of mankind. In the numerous myths of African peoples, such as those of the Yoruba, the Ashanti and the Dogon, in the beginning, God was very close to mankind; but later as a result of man's provocation, error or folly, God withdrew and so man forfeited his privileges and benefits to be in close proximity to his Creator.

All these mythological ideas, from which we deduct the African conception of God and his relations to mankind, do help us in understanding the traditional African's definition of self vis-a-vis the Supreme Being. Judging from the accounts provided in the writings of students of African religion, there is a close and intimate relationship between man and the Supreme Being. According to this view, man is more than a spectator on the stage of life. Though he is a creature who is circumscribed within the parameters set by the spiritual ancestors and the evil spirits, man still exercises his own will on both the material and spiritual worlds. For man to function effectively in the material world, he must indeed learn to pursue his human needs and personal interests without antagonizing the spiritual forces above.

Man in traditional African cosmology is caught in a matrix of spiritual relationships. There is the unbreakable ties to the Supreme Being, who created the earth and everything therein for man and his progeny. These ties are unbreakable because man's existence is ontologically dependent upon his Creator.

Man also has to maintain correct relationship with the lesser entities within the spiritual kingdom. His day-to-day activities are not only designed to harmonize his relationship with the divinities and the departed ancestors, but they are also motivated by the fear that bad relations with these spiritual forces could certainly endanger the life and safety of his community.

This understanding of the triangular matrix of relationships between the individual and his community, on the one hand, and the spiritual kingdom, on the other, puts a premium on good behavior and obedience to communal customs and

practices. This sense of obedience and harmony hinges upon man's realization that the universe is a religious one, and everything within it dances to a cosmic music whose tunes and rhythm echo the words of the spiritual forces.

In other words, African traditional man learns to be obedient and religious at all times, simply because he knows that the cosmic order abhors those who disrespect religious commands and rituals. Life, according to this traditional African man, is a constant dialogue with the sacred, and each passing moment demands utmost devotion to the spiritual forces above, and to the words of religious communication issuing from their invisible lips. It is because of this constant dialogue with the spiritual world around him that the traditional African man conceives himself as the centerpiece of creation. John Mbiti captures this aspect of traditional Africa's ontology when he writes:

*"... African ontology is basically anthropocentric; man is at the very centre of existence, and African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance; it is as if God exists for the sake of man. The spirits are ontologically in the mode between God and man; they describe or explain the destiny of man after physical life."*<sup>4</sup>

This African conception of the *Homo/Deus* relationship is radically different from the orthodox Semitic beliefs wherein man is generally looked upon as an abject sinner who must submit to God in order to deserve his mercy in the hereafter. In fact, some segments within the Abrahamic tradition confidently believe that man is created only to serve God, and his acts of disobedience and unrighteousness will inevitably land him into hell.

Another point that deserves some emphasis here is the fact that traditional African man sees the universe as a hierarchy of vital forces, and man is that force which links the inanimate objects to the world of spiritual forces above him. This aspect of the traditional African conception of man makes man both a manipulator of spiritual power and a target of such power. Because of this understanding of reality, the traditional African's view of man, especially as characterized in Bantu philosophy, has been described as vitalistic; that is, it is based upon the belief that life is a vital unity and that the human being is only a

point on the cosmic circle of life. Vincent Mulago writes:

*The common factor which explains the solidarity of clan or tribe is not at all simple. It is not the life of the senses, nor the life of thought. Neither is it life in the multicolored diversity we find in newspapers or in the modern novel. It is life as it has been derived and received from the source of "power", as it turns toward power, is seized by it and seizes it. This life is not destroyed by death, although death may subject it to a change of condition.*<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of man, as described by Mulago, is very much related to Father Temples' formulations in his *Bantu Philosophy*. In this widely quoted but controversial work, Father Temples tried to give philosophical hearing to what seems to him as the simple and natural Bantu understanding of reality and the Supreme Being. He identifies the supreme value in African thought as vital force and he claims that the end of the whole range of African man's activities is "to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assume that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity."<sup>6</sup>

Mulago, in a paper for a consultation conference of Christian theologians in 1966, took the same line of reasoning as Father Temples. He contended that "For the Bantu, living is existence in community; it is participation in the sacred life (and all life is sacred) of the ancestors; it is an extension of the life of one's forefathers, and a preparation for one's own life to be carried on in one's descendants."<sup>7</sup>

Mulago's statement is generally accepted by students of African traditional religion as a standard belief among Africans. It is however, worthwhile to point out that Mulago's article has improved upon Father Temples' work. It added to the understanding of the Bantu view of man with this explanation: "The Bantu view of life may be seen in two ways: first, as a community of blood (the main primary factor); and secondly, as a community of property (the concomitant factor which makes life possible)."<sup>8</sup>

This view of man is a fairly adequate assessment of what the majority of traditional African religionists would accept. It does not only show that the African believes in the sacred perpetuation of the powers of procreation in his line of descent, but it also articulates the universal African belief that all the non-human elements in nature (trees, animals and inorganic



beings) are the extensions and means of life of those to whom they belong. This African view of life is the basis for the African fear of impotency among men and barrenness among women. Such human mishaps and existential woes are construed by the traditional African as the severing of the chain linking the living and the dead. In the view of traditional African man, the link between the ancestors and their present successors on earth comes from the unity of blood and the common life which circulates in the veins of all the members of the community.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the points mentioned above, one should also take note of Janheinz Jahn's efforts to reconstruct Bantu philosophy. In his interesting book, *MUNTU*, Jahn identified three elements which he felt are basic to African thought. The first and second of these basic elements in his list are similar to what was already learned from Father Temples and Mulago. Jahn's contribution to the understanding of the traditional African view of life and of man's role in the process of vital participation is the claim that one of the touchstones of traditional African culture is the "magic power of the word." Writing on this aspect of Jahn's formulation of Bantu thought, Claude Wauthier says:

*Jahn equates this (the word) with Nommo of Dogon Cosmogony, which is 'word, water, seed and blood' all at once, according to Ogotemeli, the sage whom Griaule questioned. In African metaphysics, as Jahn explains them, 'all transformations, creation and procreation is made by the word', which is also the life force and controlled only by the Muntu.*<sup>10</sup>

The truth about this formulation of Jahn is not widely disputed, for as Wauthier himself, noted, the word is all powerful in Africa. Indeed, we can also add that the traditional African religionists did not only take words seriously, but they also saw language both as the badge of man's spiritual superiority over the non-human elements in the universe, and as his shibboleth at the spiritual gates of the Supreme Being's invisible Kingdom.

This traditional African view of the magical power of words is evident in the many references by scholars to the African's use of incantations in his day-to-day living. This belief in the magical power of words gave rise to specialization in the execution of functions in many traditional African societies. The caste system, for example, emerged in certain societies in Africa

simply because the African people felt that such a division of labor could bring about good relationship with the spiritual world, and that human elements so chosen for such functions could execute their delicate and sensitive tasks without endangering the lives of others in the community.

Hampate Ba, in commenting on the nature of African arts, has argued that the African conception of art will not be intelligible to a person who is secularistic in his understanding of reality, for such an art is inspired by a world-view that is all embracing.

He further contends that in the old Africa, "Every act and every gesture were considered to bring into play the invisible forces of life. According to the tradition of the Bambara people of Mali, these forces are the multiple aspects of SE, or Great Creative Power, which is itself an aspect of the Supreme being Known as Maa Ngala."<sup>11</sup>

To return to Jahn's formulations of Bantu philosophy, we can now conclude with him that in African thought in general and Bantu thought in particular, "God is either a creator, a planner; or he is a universal begetter, the pure force of precreation, the primal phallus of a spermatoc religion, as Sartre affirms, or he is, as the philosophy itself would suggest, Ntu itself, and that would mean: that being which is at once force and mother, unseparated and undivided, sleeping primal force, yet without nommo, without 'life' ".<sup>12</sup>

## II. The African View of Man's Destiny

In the traditional African man's ontological system, the human being is given a definite destiny. Though the details about nature of this destiny vary from group to group, the fact remains that in old Africa, man was viewed as a cosmic traveler who is destined to cross the equator of death. This boundary line between the living and the departed is what gives meaning to life itself, for, just like the equator, it serves as a demarcation line between two inseparable portions of total reality. This is to say, death in view of old Africa is "not the ultimate reality but life itself. At death, the individual dissolves into collective immortality of the living-dead, that is, proclaims the great solidarity of life."<sup>13</sup>

For the traditional African religionist, death is the process and the condition by which the physical body of man is disintegrated. It is also the fragmentation of the unity of life: body and spirit.

From the above understanding one can concur with Mbiti's thesis that, "Death is conceived of as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of existence."<sup>14</sup>

This passing away of the soul from the physical world of man (or Muntu, to borrow a Bantu term), to the spiritual kingdom of the unseen, is a very complex and paradoxical matter. Indeed, it has given rise to different myths about its origins and significance.

E. G. Parrinder, for example, has written in connection with the soul and its destiny, that "the complexity of African ideas is so great that some peoples have beliefs in at least five distinguishable powers in man".<sup>15</sup>

Though Parrinder fails to list the five powers in man, we have learned from Father Temples that "the dead live on in a diminished condition of life, as lessened life forces, while retaining their higher, strengthening fathering life force."<sup>16</sup> This is to say that the departed, by going through the individualized agony of death, have gained in deeper knowledge of the mystery and the process of vital participation in the universe.

This paradoxical understanding of death has led many African peoples to explain death as the result of four causes. The most commonly cited is magic, sorcery and witchcraft. This cause is viewed by most Africans as a very dangerous one, for victims of such evil practices may turn out to be wandering ghosts whose souls will not be at rest.

The second is the curse. Many African societies teach their new members that a powerful curse brings immediate death to the accursed. Such a fate is widely feared in African traditional societies, and every precaution is usually taken not to violate taboos, customs and traditions.

The third is the living-dead. These departed souls may be dissatisfied with the life and activities of their survivors on earth and so decide to tell them to change their ways by visiting them with calamities. (There is little evidence that living-dead actually cause death.)

The fourth is God. This category is not rigid, however. The traditional African may accept God as the ultimate cause of death, but to satisfy his psychological and emotional needs, he still would insist on intermediate cause of death.

These four causes of death together could



affect the destiny of man, which in the event of death would remain unfulfilled. It is this fear of one's post mortem lot that drives many an African into the arms of the diviners and magicians. These mediators between fragile and vulnerable men and the spiritual powers are practitioners of great knowledge in the mystical arts and their ability to allay the fears of their clients and to subdue their real or imagined targets, has contributed a great deal to African social stability in the past. These qualities have also guaranteed the peaceful passage of man from the realm of humanness to the world of spirits.

### III. African Understanding of History

It has been said by John Mbiti that African ontology is a religious one and that "the key to our understanding of the basic religious and philosophical concepts, is the African concept of time." He went on to argue that "according to traditional African concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future."<sup>17</sup>

These formulations of Mbiti have given currency to the view that, to the old Africa, history consists of two parts, namely the *Sasa* and the *Zamani*. The former is composed of all the events which in Western or linear concept of time would be considered as the future. This concept, in the writings of Mbiti, is taken as that dimension which embraces all events that are about to occur or are in the process of occurring or have recently occurred. It is also understood as the most meaningful period of the individual.

The latter, on the other hand, is described by Mbiti as the macro-time which embraces all the past events that link the beginning of things to the present unfoldment of events in the universe. In his view, *Zamani* is more than the past; it is, as he suggests "the graveyard of time." *Zamani*, therefore, is not only the period of termination, but also the period of myth.

The conceptual scheme of Mbiti does help one understand the particularisms of African thought, but it certainly will not be the last point in the debate over the African concept of history.

Although I believe that Mbiti has done a good job in pointing out to the Western world—in a language it can understand—the intellectual and religious fruits of African's non-literate sages of yesteryears, I also think J.N.K. Mugambi was correct when he wrote in 1974, that Mbiti's

linguistic basis for his conclusions on the absence of indefinite future in African thought is too simplistic. Indeed, much research needs to be done on the matter, but we can agree here that Mugambi is quite correct in saying that: "To assert that Africans do not conceive of a future beyond two years—is to imply in the same assertion that Africans do not have any traditional means or principles by which they ensure a perpetuation of their communities."<sup>18</sup>

After presenting Mbiti's interpretation of the African conception of history, let me offer briefly an alternative conceptual scheme while drawing on the same findings of Mbiti and others in the field.

As suggested in our discussion on the nature of African traditional man, the African's view of the destiny of man is that of a gradual and peaceful transition from the human world to the spiritual world.

In my view, the key concept in traditional African thought is the cosmic schizophrenic tendencies of man. By this I mean that traditional African man sees himself as a citizen of three different worlds at the same time. This is to say that he lives in (a) the world of concrete reality, (b) the world of social values, and (c) the world of ineffable self-conscious.

The first world is that of man, trees, stars, inanimate objects and phenomena. The second is that of values governing the mental and spiritual processes of man and his community. The third is that of unreachable and inexpressible spiritual powers.

When analyzed carefully, the beliefs and thought patterns of the traditional African man could be fitted into the three major ontological categories. The tendency of the students of African religions to assert that Africans do not worship one God is due to this cosmic schizophrenic behavior in man.

In the African concept, traditional man places the High God in the world of ineffable self-conscious. Though he shuttles between this particular world and the other two, his ontological makeup seems to incline him more to the realms of concrete reality and social values respectively. This is to say that traditional African man's view of history is different from that of the ascetic religious traditions of the East, where man renounces this earthly life and devotes his entire life and being to the world of ineffable self-conscious.

The African view is also different from

the Western scientific view, which focuses almost completely on the world of concrete reality. The Western view, it should be added, is based on the dynamics of matter; its conception of time and history is bound to be affected by the changing paradigms in the scientific community of the West. As long as the Western man hankers after the mysteries of matter, his concept of time will be unilinear. In other words, the conception of time of a human group is determined more by the ontological focus of its members (that is, which of the three worlds they wish to choose) and less by an inherent racial or geographical factor.

The ontological focus of activities is the cause and the effect of the series of preferences associated with a particular society. A society conceives time in the manner of old Africa because in such a society the ontological focus is on the world of social values. This world, which is the sum of values governing the meanings, and interrelationships between ontological units, is paramount in African thought because all the other worlds of which man is a citizen are subject to the world of social values.

To put this another way, I would say that in traditional African thought, the need for harmony between man and God, man and man, and man and the non-human elements in the universe has led to an ontological emphasis on the world of social values. As a result of such an over-emphasis, traditional Africa held supreme the traditions of the ancients (ancestors). It is this over-emphasis on the sources of traditions and customs that misled Mbiti to deny the African a sense of indefinite future.

Contrary to Mbiti, I would argue that African traditional man indeed has a sense of the definite future, but that his ontological focus has been, not in revolutionizing the physical landscape around him, but on socializing the new members of society to anticipate their successful accession to fatherhood (which is a few years hence) and to refresh their memory of past event. This latter aspect of the African response to the ontological challenge put premium on the retrieval facilities of the mind and its memory. This ontological response, more than any other thing, is responsible for the African's late adoption of what Ali A. Mazrui calls "the technology of intellectual conservation."

The fact that Africans are not naturally inferior intellectually has been proven by the large number of students from Africa who came from non-literate families and



yet earned first class degrees from major Western universities, where the great-grandchildren of European literates had failed to make a better performance.

These African success stories are categorical denials of the racial inferiority usually associated with Africa's children.

My view is that the traditional African's conception of history, and his continent's material underdevelopment were the effects of his ontological response rather than the confirmations of his genetic deficiency.

32 In light of the above, I would now conclude that the traditional African man's concept of time is three-dimensional. This is to say that he believes in a past, a present and a future. Yet, in conceding this point, I need to add that the matter does not end with the three-dimensionality of time. The nature of such a conception needs further exploration; but because I do not have enough time nor space to explore these frontiers of African thought, I find it appropriate to make two observations concerning its nature.

First, it should be pointed out that the concept of unilinearity of time, as developed in Western history, is based on an illusion, which is detectable so long as man chases after the mirage of materiality. This illusion becomes exposed the moment the ontological response of a society shifts its focus from excessive love for materiality to excessive love for the social values and relationships between man and society.

To put this philosophical point over which African man differs substantially with his Western counterpart, in another way, I would like to argue that, whereas the Western theory of historical unilinearity is inspired by the matrix of causes and effects that govern the world of concrete reality, the African's conception of time is guided by his excessive concern for communal harmony in rituals, deeds and thoughts.

The idea of unilinearity of history is inspired by, and based on, the intercourse between the various elements in the hierarchy of ontological units in the universe. These two visions of history and life are very different indeed, and only a fool will absolutize the concept of unilinearity as developed out of one experience, and then try to impose it on the rest of mankind.

In summarizing the foregoing discussion, I think it is worth noting that the African's concept of the triangular relation-

ship between God, man and the non-human elements in the universe, is the key to the understanding of traditional African philosophy. This view not only sheds light on the self-image of African man, but also provides an intellectual map of the metaphysical world of the traditional African man.

Another conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing is that traditional African man sees himself as a party to an ontological and cosmological partnership and because of this understanding of his life on earth, he always sees harmony as the best form of human expression. To the traditional African man, life is chaotic so long as man's links with God and others in existence are shattered. Because of this fear of breaking the ontological bonds, traditional African man always prefers harmony and social order. □

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- <sup>12</sup> See his *Muntu — An Outline of the New African Culture*, translated by Marjorie Greene (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1961) p. 105.
- <sup>13</sup> K. C. Anyanwu, "African Religion as Experienced Reality," *Thought and Practice*, (The Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya), Vol. 2, No. 2, 1975, p. 156.
- <sup>14</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Op Cit.*, p. 205
- <sup>15</sup> See E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religions*, (3rd edn.), New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), p. 134.
- <sup>16</sup> This is a restatement of his position as presented by Janheinz Jahn in his *Muntu*, p. 106.
- <sup>17</sup> Mbiti, *Op Cit.*, p. 21.
- <sup>18</sup> See his "The African Experience of God," *Thought and Practice* (a Journal of the Kenyan Philosophical Society), Vol. No. 1, 1974, p. 21.



#### The Serpent

I may cringe in his presence  
but  
I am not unerringly afraid of the Serpent.  
His beauty is such that it circles to  
gross  
but I know the degrees of his beauty  
in between  
though I have only perceived these  
in the pitch dark  
and into the darkness I must return  
where he snakes and slithers  
within the deep  
recesses of my skull.

My hairs stand from my scalp  
resembling him.  
They dance as he dances  
They frighten others as he frightens me.  
I am not afraid of the Serpent  
but he fills me with the fear of him  
the way he winds himself up tightly  
in the hollow of my head  
uprooting memories of mysteries  
which I had forgotten  
which I had learned to believe  
had never existed

He undulates into the depths of my soul  
and when my body dies  
my captors will think that the Serpent  
sleeping  
in my skull is  
an ordinary brain  
until he rouses and crawls out  
to strangle their life from them  
speaking  
my blues poems as they beg us  
for mercy and forgiveness. . . .

I will not be able to answer them  
I will have left my mouth  
I will not be able to beg the Serpent to  
have mercy on my oppressors  
down here.

I am not afraid of  
but I have fear for the Serpent  
for he holds the history of my people.

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