

GOD AND GODLINGS IN AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

A study on the above theme definitely borders on African metaphysics. Metaphysics is "that which comes after physics" the latter being the study of nature in general. Thus the questions of metaphysics arise out of, but go beyond, factual or scientific questions about the world. ¹ William James defined metaphysics as "nothing but an unusually obstinate effort to think clearly".² Some would define that term as "anti-dialectic method in thought and cognition which considers things and phenomena final, immutable, independent of one another and free from internal contradiction."³ The term metaphysics covers a wide range of issues in philosophy. Metaphysical thinking is an attempt to understand clearly any object of thought whether physical, intentional or spiritual. "To think metaphysically is to think, without arbitrariness and dogmatism, on the most basic problems of existence."⁴ This piece is an attempt to bring metaphysical thinking to bear on African understanding of God and to put into proper perspective the vitiated and misleading thought that African culture is atheistic and polytheistic.

A discussion of this kind is about the nature of God and the way Africans understand it. There are several postulates concerning the nature of God. One of the views about the nature of God is theism which is the belief in the existence of "a supreme personal being—Distinct from the world and creator of the world"⁵. The opposite of this view is atheism which holds that there is not Supreme being or Creator of the Universe.

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There is also the view that God exists but that He has no power over the world and this is called Deism. There is again the view that the belief in God is a matter of faith and belief. This view is called Fideism. We have those who are called the Sceptics that is those who neither believe in the existence nor non-existence of God. Pantheism according to Chambers 20th Century Dictionary is "the doctrine that identifies God with the universe; the worship of all gods..."⁶. I wish to argue that African culture is close to Pantheism but is precisely panpsychic and theistic in character. Pantheism should not be construed as atheism as some people might think. I wish to delineate clear conception of African panpsychism and theism.

African World View: Pantheism or Panpsychism?

Pantheism is one of the philosophical and religious doctrines which attempts to explain the nature of God and how it is related to the universe. It is commonly understood as the identification of God with the universe. It is a doctrine that usually occurs in a religious and philosophical contexts in which there are already tolerably clear conceptions of God and the universe and the question has arisen of how these two conceptions are related"⁷. History of thought has shown that pantheistic understanding of the universe and God is discernible in the ancient Greek and Western philosophy generally. This is not to say that they have a monopoly of the thought. I shall show later that a similar concept (Panpsychism) is equally a feature of the ancient African philosophy. It seems of best to believe that the pantheistic and panpsychic views of the world are as old as man.

In the ancient Greek philosophy, some pantheistic views have been ascribed to the Eleatists and Xenophanes. Thales and Anaximanes identified the objects in the world with a divine

power of substance which conferred life and movement. In Indian thought, there is some element of pantheism. The notion of *Brahman* "is the single, infinite reality, indefinable and unchanging behind illusory changing world of perceived material object... our ordinary knowledge is such that knower and known, subject and object, are distinct... But to know *Brahman* would be for subject and object to become identical".⁸ This Indian thought tends to distinguish between ordinary knowledge and real knowledge. Ordinary knowledge is the knowledge of changing and distinct elements and entities while the real knowledge is to know that all is one or that there is a unity of all things in *Brahman*. Socrates and Plato's unchanging real world and the changing physical world have roughly the same pantheistic element. In Plato's *Republic*, the physical universe and all that it contains are imitations of the things in the real world. In other words there is a unity of all things in the real world controlled by Demiurge (or God.)

In Western philosophy, pantheism has been adopted, upheld and studied in various ways by various scholars. Among these philosophers were Scotus Erigena, Giordano Bruno, Jakob Boehme and so on. According to Scotus Erigena, "the whole nature is composed of four species of being: that which creates and is not created, that which is created and creates, that which is created and does not create and that which is not created and does not create".⁹ The first is God as the creator and the last is God again as that into which all created beings have returned. The second and third are created universe which is in the process of passing from God in His first form to God in the last form. The essence of Erigena's pantheism is that all flows from God and goes back into him. This doctrine is similar to Gnosticism and Indian *Brahmanism* which teach the doctrine of the development and re-unification of the soul to the ultimate or the great *Brahman*.

Another pantheist, of anti-christian kind, is Giordano Bruno. He "conceived God as the immanent cause or goal of nature, distinct from each finite particular only because he includes them all within his own being".¹⁰ It has been observed that Erigena and Bruno's pantheism portrays the universe as an all inclusive system. Another pantheist, Jakob Boehme, saw the foundation of everything in the divine. Boehme made no distinction between nature and spirit. He saw nature as entirely the manifestation of Spirits.

Another person whose doctrine of pantheism is very prominent in western philosophy is Spinoza. In his pantheism, he sought to discover the 'Supreme good independent of all the ordinary contingencies of chance and misfortune'. According to Richard Schacht, "only that which is capable of completely filling and occupying the mind can be the Supreme good in Spinoza's sense".¹¹ And the only knowledge which would satisfy these requirements would be that the mind is part of the total system of nature and is at one with it when recognising that everything is as it must be. Spinoza sees the whole universe as a single connective system. This portrays him as a determinist and of course he is one. He speaks of 'nature' 'Substance' and 'God' as interchangeable concepts. In a pantheistic sense he talks of the totality of universe as being synonymous with nature or substance or God. He, therefore, sees God as the totality of the universe which he calls substance or nature. Nature, according to Spinoza, is the cause of itself and its existence and characteristics follow from its essential nature. Spinoza's idea about the nature and properties of God is summed up in the following statements of his; "I have shown that he necessarily exists, that he is one : that he is; and acts, solely by the necessity of his own nature; that he is the free, cause of all things, and how he is so; that all things are in God, and so dependent on him;

lastly, that all things are pre-determined by God, not through his free will or absolute fiat but from the very nature of God".¹⁹ There are many other philosophers who have expressed pantheistic view about the universe and God. Schleiermacher and Fichte are among them. Pantheism primarily is about the identification of the universe with God or the explanation of the universe as one logically or necessarily interconnected system.

From the foregoing diversity of the meaning of pantheism, one will observe that Panpsychism and Pantheism have close relations in their meanings. Panpsychism according to Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, is "a theory that all nature has a psychic side." What one easily infers from this theory is the view that everything in nature is divine. In African culture, there is the view that every object or thing in the physical world has a divine substance. Similarly, we observe the same divine nature of things in Thales, Anaximanes, Socrates, Plato and Jacob Boehme's Pantheisms. While these thinkers are Pantheistic in the sense that they see the unity of the divine entities in God, they can be seen to be panpsychic in the sense that they postulate spiritual life in every observable phenomenon.

It is logically inferable that the concept of Pantheism is based on the concepts of theism and panpsychism. It is theistic in that it upholds the existence of God and Panpsychic in the sense that it maintains that there is life in every object or phenomenon. Pantheism might not after all be atheistic as some people might think.

The question, "Is African World-view Pantheistic or Panpsychic?", is very crucial. I have the inclination to think that in some senses, especially in the pantheistic senses of Jacob Boehme, Socrates, Thales and so on, African Culture is pantheistic. But Pantheism as the identification of the Supreme

being with the universe does not properly accord with the African cosmology. But there is no doubt that African culture is Panpsychic. Panpsychism is the fundamental basis of African religion and philosophy. On the other hand, while African ontology and cosmology is basically Panpsychic, it is equally Theistic in that its idea of God is transcendental, being separate from the universe it created. Therefore, Theism and Panpsychism are equally important features of African Ontology. In the Panpsychic or Ontological order of the Africans, the supreme being is at the head followed by divinities, gods, deified human beings, spirits, ancestors, plants, waters, phenomena and objects. Every one of these entities is believed to have a psychic dimension.

Theistic Panpsychism :

I believe that Africans have a Panpsychic and Theistic view of the universe. This is shown by their understanding of the relationships between the Supreme God and lesser gods or divinities, man and natural objects. African Panpsychism is the belief that everything in the universe is spiritual and that spirits, divinities, man, plants, animals, physical objects, rivers and waters are creatures of God, the Supreme being. In line with the thought of Bruno and Erigena, the Africans believe in the all inclusive universe created by one God. Just like Jacob Boehme and Spinoza they see the foundation of everything in the divine. Altogether, the Africans believe in the immanent God manifesting Himself in the things which He created.

Africans regard this universe as a religious one. God is believed to be immanent in every object and phenomena " It has been suggested that the Yoruba and other west-African groups think of God both as Creator and as ancestor. He transcends the world and humanity, acting upon them from without; but

he also is immanent, acting within and through nature and man".¹³ The pantheistic sense here is the idea of universal unity of being, manifested in the variety of the human and natural worlds.

In Africa, it is believed that divinities or gods are the personifications of God's activities and manifestations. God's activities and manifestations are also discernible in natural phenomena and objects, nature, spirits, deified heroes and mythological figures. "Divinities are on the whole thought to have been created by God, in the ontological category of the spirits. They are associated with Him, and often stand for His activities or manifestations either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of these major objects or phenomena of nature. Some of them are national heroes who have been elevated and deified, but this is rare, and when it does happen the heroes become associated with some function or form of nature".¹⁴ In African panpsychism, everything, whether spiritual or physical, flows from God. Things are either manifestation or personification of God. In other words, behind every object or phenomenon is a spiritual essence which is a part of God. The Ashanti of Ghana have a pantheon of divinities which are believed to be part of God. So do the Yoruba of Nigeria.

In trying to locate the importance and place of God in African Ontology one will invariably touch on the relations between God, pantheon and man. While pantheism is the doctrine that identifies God with the universe and the worship of all gods, pantheon has been defined as a temple of all gods. Pantheons and mythologies were common features of Babylonians, Greek, Roman, Egyptians and ancient African religions. There was a Rotunder created on the site of Agripa of 27BC, now the church of Santa Maria. This place was a burial place of great Italians and was a

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great pantheon of deities. It seems that the earliest belief of man's civilization is the belief in many gods. But Africans do not only believe in gods, they also believe in the existence of the Supreme deity who manifests Himself in the divinities and gods.

In African thought, a pantheon is capable of explaining a people's cosmology and ontology. In every African pantheon, there are the following forces at work; the Supreme Being, nature-gods, divinities, ancestors and deified heroes. There may be a sense in which these religions believe in angels, spirits and holy-ghosts all of which are the manifestation of God. But this sense is different from pantheism as the identification of God with the universe. It is a narrower conception of it, if at all it is accepted by Islam and Christianity.

African panpsychism is a philosophy of consolation and love. It is self-explanatory and empirical. It is empirical in the sense that the gods and divinities are believed to exist in the midst of the people while providing them with their needs, hopes, aspirations. These gods also check the unwanted and immoral behaviours of the people.

An average African temple or Pantheon is not a magnificent building like Western or Islamic Churches and Mosques respectively. It is a groove in the forest or a small house made from local-raw materials. Inside the pantheon or temples are symbols of different gods, divinities and spirits. Inside the temple one will find black and white chinks, some sacrificial animals like chicken, goat, cow and so on. It is not unusual to discover a body of rules and regulations governing the mode of worship, sacrifice and offering in a pantheon or temple. In a pantheon, while there are various images of different gods, Africans do not have a conceptual image of God. Though a conceptual image of

God was absent, the presence of God in all activities of life is very much felt.

There is a popular myth in Africa which says that there was a golden age when men walked with God. But a woman is blamed to have brought the 'dyllic state' to an end. One of the versions of these myths, is the one told by the Margi of Nigeria that in the past, the sky could be touched and there was no need to work because God filled men's calabashes without their working. Unfortunately, a woman put out a dirty calabash and infected the finger of one of the sky-children. God, out of anger, returned to a distant place. God, by this and other numerous actions, demonstrated His majesty. Africans came to hold God in high esteem and instead of approaching him directly, they approach him through the lesser gods and divinities. The traditional cosmological argument against the existence of God do not apply to African God. This is because whatever evil or misfortune that occurs in the world cannot be blamed on God. The blame goes to the lesser gods whom God has left the administration of the universe with. And the lesser gods themselves do not just cause misfortune or evil to befall man. They do so when the ontological equilibrium between man and gods is disturbed by man by flouting any of the moral code that binds the society together.

The supreme deity is understood as the creator, the giver of rain. He is omnipotent and omniscient. He is seen as father or mother. While some communities in Africa had a temple for God, other communities had not. The Ashanti of central Ghana had temple for the Supreme being which is served by the priests.

African God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. He is certain and real to the people of Africa. It is wrong for some people to say that God did not reveal himself to the African. There is

no anthropological and historical account to show that God did not reveal himself to the Africans. Again, the account that Africans once worshipped one God alone, and that they hence degenerated from monotheism to polytheism needs clarification. For one thing, Africans did not and never abandoned the worship of one God. What they did was the veneration or worship of lesser gods in addition to their worship of the Supreme God. The Supreme deity had retired to a distant place and they had to approach Him through the lesser gods. So the idea that the African are worshipping many gods or that they are polytheistic is rather a cultural advancement which recognises the existence of super-sensible forces and this makes their lives more meaningful. Under the worship of many gods, they fear and propitiate the gods. "Belief in the gods seems to have its roots in human desire and fears, particularly those associated with self-preservation. Like all other creatures human beings have a profound will to live, which is what mainly gives one's existence a meaning from one sun shine to the next".¹⁵ African belief in gods is an acknowledgement of the immediate and direct influence of gods on people's life. However, the power of God is supreme; everything flows from him and inheres in him. Godlings and ancestors are intermediaries; prayers and offerings made to them may be passed on to the source of all".¹⁶ The relation between God and the lesser gods is represented by a triangle. God is seen as being represented by the apex. The base is sometimes personified as earth goddess, the producer of food. Man lives on earth.

On one side of the triangle are ancestors, while on the other are gods and natural forces. This philosophy or the arrangement of forces is what I will call Theistic panpsychism. Some would call it philosophy of forces.

In the West Africans the pantheons of gods are the expression of the forces of nature which, "men fear or try to propitiate." These gods have their own temples and priests and they are ubiquitous and have numerous shrines. But these gods are neither imprisoned in or synonymous with shrines. Divinities according to J. Mbiti 'cover personifications of God's activities and manifestations of natural phenomena and objects, the so called 'nature spirits', deified heroes and mythological figures"¹⁷. Some believe that these divinities were created by God, while some would say that they are emanated by God. Whichever one is the case, they were the manifestations of God in African panpsychism. Each of the divinities have specific functions to perform.

It is said that the Ashanti of Ghana have a pantheon of divinities through whom God manifests Himself. The Yoruba people of Nigeria are believed to have the largest collection of divinities in Africa. 'Orisanla' is the Supreme divinity in the Yoruba country. He acts as God's earthly deputy in creative and executive functions. Most divinities are manifestations of natural forces. Let us look at some of these gods and divinities.

The Sun and the Moon Gods :

The cult of sun and moon are found in some parts of Africa. It is obtainable in Egyptian mythologies. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, God is called Nature. And He is personified by the Sun. According to Parrinder, He is symbolised by the four limbed cross, indicating the four points of the compass and by golden desks, scarabs and binds.

Some communities among the Ibos of Nigeria have cult of sun, who is a child of the Supreme God. The symbol of the god is a branch of a tree planted outside a dwelling hut and sometimes a dish in front of the house is said to represent the sun's

disk. The Ibos believe in the cult of the moon too. When an Ibo sees the new moon, he says, holding up his hand, "New moon! protect me as the last moon protected me." He asks the moon to bring for him good things and so on.

Storm God

Gods of storm are identifiable in many parts of Africa. The Ibos and Yorubas of Nigeria have high respect for god of storm, lightening and thunder. The Yoruba divinity of lightening is known as Shango. The people worship him. In his temples were ancient implements like stones that are believed to have come down from heaven when a house was struck by lightening. Shango is not only a storm god, it is also a deified hero, believed to have been the 4th King of Oyo, the ancient Yoruba Capital.

Mother Earth

The earth is constituted into a cult because it is the mother of plants, animals and men. African people revere it so much just like the ancient Greeks. The cultic nature of the earth arose from the belief of some African communities that it possesses a mystical power. The earth forbids blood-shed. There are earth shrines where social groups can go and worship. Among the Ibos of Nigeria, the earth deity is called ALA or ANI. It is said that this ANI is comparable to Egyptian Isis and Italian madonas. Ani is regarded as the owner of all men and she is responsible for public morality. Public sacrifice is made to ANI before sowing and planting the land and at harvest.

Water Gods

Water god is considered sacred by many cultures in the world. In Egypt as well as in Africa, water is used in many rites. Christians use water for baptism by immersion. Wells, springs, rivers, lakes and the sea are believed to have spirits dwelling in them. The Ashanti of Ghana have a river god called Tano.

Tano is the head of a pantheon comprising of his wives, sons, brothers who are other streams and watery places. The Yoruba of Nigeria have a sea god, OLOKUN. OLOKUN is represented by one of the famous Ife bronzes.

These divinities and gods are the forces or tentacles through which the African Supreme deity or God manifests His powers. An interesting analogy can be drawn between God and the Unified field theory and, between the divinities or gods and the forces of gravity, the force of electromagnetism, the force of weak nuclear interaction and the force of strong nuclear interaction. These four forces are components and aspects of the Unified field just as the divinities or gods are aspects or manifestations of the African God. That is why it seems to me that Einstein's theory of relativity is a Scientific model of African Panpsychism. The unified field and its forces are pantheistically related.

Conclusion

There are three major conceptions of the divine nature in Western tradition of philosophical and religious thought. (a) There is a conception of divine self transcending the world and interpreted in personal terms (b) the conception of God as an immanent order or power to which all finite reality is subject. (c) There is the monistic idea of God as the Absolute or all-embracing totality. The first of these conceptions is mostly found in Judeo-Christian tradition and Islamic thought. The second conception is found in the thoughts of philosophers like Spinoza and others of mystical tradition, while the third is found in the thought of Hegel and in modern absolute idealism.

African traditional belief in God is a peculiar one. It seems to be ironically a combination of the first and second concep-

tions. Africans often interpret God in personal terms and as transcending the world. They at the same time see God as an immanent power whose powers are observed in various aspects. Objects, men and phenomena have spiritual causes which are part of God and subject to him. This is African Panpsychism which is genetically related to pantheism.¹⁸

All postulates about God or Supreme being are culture-bound. Culture is a force that influences people's or individual beliefs; it moulds and refines people's beliefs. Besides that, an uncultured person can conceive the idea of a divine being. All in all, conceptions of God are as many as there are many cultures.

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NOTES

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17. Mbiti J. S.; *op. cit*, p. 98
18. Ever since the inception of the concept of Pantheism into the philosophical lexicon, some thinkers have suspiciously viewed it as being atheistic. In every sense of the term it *is* thiestic. It is analytically true because imputing atheism into pantheism is a contradiction. The difference between Pantheism and iheism border on the nature of the divine being. This paper is an attempt to clearly identify God in African Pantheism.

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