3
AFRICAN RELIGIONS
Kwasi Wiredu

Time was when the African mind was considered too elementary for so sublime a conception as that of a Supreme Being to whom the cosmos is due. Not any longer. African peoples now have a reputation for religiosity barely short of spirit-intoxication. Conceptual issues are deeply implicated in this evolution of perception. But let us start with the basic essentials of the worldview entertained in most parts of Africa.

The African worldview: conceptions and misconceptions

Typically, in African thought, there is belief in a hierarchy of beings and entities at the top of which is a Supreme Being. All the beings on the lower rungs of the hierarchy down to the bottom are direct or indirect outcomes of the creative activity of the Supreme Being. Of these, the ones next to the Supreme Being – for terminological convenience, let us call this being God – are an assortment of spirits, some good, some bad, others indifferent, with, roughly speaking, a corresponding unevenness of ability. Especially important among these spirits are those that are associated with physical objects, such as remarkable trees, mountains, or rivers and those that are thought of as our ancestors. Then comes the category of human beings, conceived as embodied spirits, and, below them, non-human animals, vegetation, and inanimate objects.

The obvious question is, ‘What elements of this ontology have a religious significance?’ The conventional answer is, in effect, ‘Every one of them.’ Or one might, following John Mbiti to the same effect, characterize the entire ontology as ‘a religious ontology’ (Mbiti 1990: 15). A certain way of seeing the relations between human beings and the extra-human spirits of the second rung of the hierarchy accounts for this characterization. The more exalted among the spirits are seen by both African and foreign students of African culture as objects of worship. People address supplications to these spirits in the expectation that they will be protected against evil spirits and other dangers. The spirits are numerous, and their preoccupations various. Some are cultivated in the interests of just a single household, but others may have spiritual sway over a whole people. These latter have been called lesser deities or gods (small ‘g’). There are many procedures in African life, often called ‘rituals’ in English-speaking accounts, which are aimed at establishing or sustaining good relations with these spirits. Earlier European visitors to Africa called them ‘fetishes’ and their
functionaries ‘fetish priests.’ Many of these ‘gods’ are thought to reside in various parts of our environment or are patrons thereof.

Of equal importance in African life is the role of the spirits of the departed ancestors in the pursuit of human well-being. In Africa in general what death means is the departure of the animating spirit from the bodily frame. To the spirit itself, therefore, the death of a person, by definition, has no terrors. It leaves the body and betakes itself to a territory adjacent to the earth or underneath it where, in the capacity of an ancestor, it dedicates itself to a single objective, namely, the promotion of the well-being of the living.

Perhaps, the use of ‘it’ in reference to the ancestors here is somewhat of an affront to their dignity, for in African discourse they are not only spoken of as ‘persons,’ but also as beings possessed of a moral maturity and spiritual power superior to that of mortals. Their manner of interacting with the living betokens these moral and spiritual qualities: they are widely believed to reward good conduct and punish bad conduct. Punishment may take the form of illness resistant to all the best medicines known in the culture and may require the remedial services of spiritual ‘specialists.’ But whether they bless or punish, the ancestors, as a rule, retain the reverence of the living. In the eyes of a great many students of African religions, this revering of the ancestors has all the marks of religious devotion. Indeed, the early foreign students of African religions called this attitude ‘ancestor worship,’ and saw it as the essence of African religion. Nor is that all. The presumed likes and dislikes of the ancestors were taken to constitute the foundation of morals in African thought.

Clarifications must now begin. Traditional Africans do, indeed, believe in a whole host of spirits. But these ‘spirits’ are not conceived of as spiritual entities in the Cartesian sense. By this last phrase is meant here an entity that is non-extended, non-spatial, immaterial, as opposed to extended, spatial, material. This was, perhaps, the most fundamental distinction in Descartes’s ontology. Mind, soul, or spirit is an entity that belongs to the first category, body to the second. The point now is that this distinction does not cohere with the conceptual framework of any well-known African system of thought. The fundamental reason for this conceptual dissonance is that in these thought systems existence is spatial: to exist is to be in space.

According to Alexis Kagame, the late Rwandan philosopher, poet, priest, and scientific linguist, existence is expressed in the Bantu languages, which are spoken in a great many areas of south and central Africa, as liho or baho, each of which means ‘is there, at some place’ (1976). The Akans, a West African people, express the notion of existence in the same manner, almost to the word. To exist, for them, is to wo ho, to be there at some place. Note the identical adverb of spatiality ho in both cases.

The afterlife

The consequences of the spatial conception of existence are widespread in African thinking. One major consequence is that notions of Cartesian spirituality fail in meaning or, at least in consistency: if to exist is to be in space, a non-spatial entity, such as a Cartesian spirit, is a nullity. What, then, do we have in mind when we
ascribe belief in great numbers of spirits to Africans? This will emerge from a short examination of the African idea of the afterlife. Consider its location. As hinted above, some say it is besides our earth; some that it is beneath it. What, next, of its inhabitants? By all accounts, they are thought to be very much like ourselves. Thus Okot p’Bitek, also a philosopher and a creative writer, speaking of the conception of the ancestors held by his ethnic group, the Luo of Uganda, insists that

they were not spirits but the ancestors as they were known before death; their voices could be ‘recognised’ as they spoke through the diviner, they ‘felt’ hungry and cold, and ‘understood’ and ‘enjoyed’ jokes and being teased, etc. They were thought of as whole beings, not dismembered parts of man, i.e., spirits divorced from bodies. (p’Bitek 1971: 104)

Note that the sense of ‘spirits’ in which p’Bitek is denying that the ancestors are spirits is the Cartesian one.

This similarity between the afterlife, as conceived by Africans, and the present life, as lived by them, seems striking to some foreign students of African culture. The British anthropologist Kenneth Little notes that in the afterlife as conceived by the Mende of Sierra Leone,

the conditions of this world are apparently continued in the hereafter, and the life led by the ancestral spirits seems to be similar in many respects to that of the people on earth. Some informants described them as cultivating rice farms, building towns, &c. It also seems that the spirits retain an anthropomorphic character and much of their earthly temperament and disposition. (Little 1954: 116)

In the belief of some African peoples, such as the Akans of West Africa, the ancestors are more staid than those described by p’Bitek, and there is far less detail on their careers than Little seems to have learned from his ‘informants.’ But the empirical nature of the descriptions is constant. However, though constant, it is not complete. The ancestors are, in terms of imagery, like mortal persons, but they are not perceivable to the naked eye and are conceived to be exempt from the ordinary laws of motion.

Ontologically, all the entities or forces referred to above as spirits are of this kind: they are physical in image, but not subject to all the laws of the ordinary world. Let us call them, for convenience, quasi-physical. Then it would follow from our earlier considerations that spirits are admissible in an African ontology only in a quasi-physical sense. The place of the dead would thus be a quasi-physical environment.

The idea of quasi-physical entities, let it be noted, is not peculiar to African thought. Orthodox Christian discourse is full of references to such entities. Angels, for example, are a privileged class of such entities. Again, the resurrection of the dead is anticipated as a quasi-physical process in which Cartesian souls will be combined with the quasi-physically reconstructed remains of bodies, long united with earth, to form persons exempt from the constraints of physical law. The difference between African
traditional thought and that of some very influential modes of thought in the West, such as Christian teaching, is that spiritual entities in both the Cartesian and the quasi-physical senses are accommodated on the Christian side while, on the African side, spirits are countenanced only in the quasi-physical sense. The slight touch of paradox in the notion that some spirits are not spiritual (in the Cartesian sense) is, perhaps, responsible for the neglect of the underlying distinction. Whatever the cause, its neglect has led to an exaggerated view of African religiosity.

As noted earlier on, the whole point of the African afterlife is the pursuit of the well-being of the living. The other world is thus a this-worldly institution. This is in deep contrast with the deliverances of some ‘world’ religions according to which this world is only a preparation for the next, which will be a scene of eternal bliss or blight, depending on a candidate’s merits or demerits. The contrasting this-worldliness of the African afterlife is of a piece with its quasi-physicality and suggests doubts regarding the religious significance of the afterlife.

Actually, the idea of an afterlife does not, in itself, have any religious implications. This is illustrated in western philosophy by the example of the British philosopher John Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925), who both believed in immortality and disbelieved in God. In the African context the point is even clearer. There is no such thing as salvific eschatology in African thought about the postmortem destiny of humankind. Thus the work of the ancestors looks rather like ‘business as usual,’ the business being the promotion of the well-being of their living lineages of which they remain members and the enforcement of their morals. This qualification is important. The ancestors are not the enforcers of general morality. That is left to reason and persuasion. What are supposed to engage the ancestors, as well as the living elders, are the norms of behavior that are directly relevant to the fortunes of their lineages.

The ancestors, then, are a species of elders, and everybody hopes to become an ancestor in due time. If the ancestors were routinely seen as gods and as beings to be worshiped, that would bespeak a general hankering after self-apotheosis difficult to imagine.

This trend of thought must induce skepticism regarding the notion that the African mind is given to ancestor worship, and that African morality derives from the will of the ancestors. It should already be apparent that ancestor worship is a misnomer for ancestor veneration. But the ascription of an ancestor-command conception of morals to Africans requires more comment. What needs to be noted is not just that the concern of the ancestors is limited to the affairs of their lineages. Indeed, if an ancestor is a ruler, his concerns extend to all the lineages in his town or kingdom. The important consideration is that the rules of conduct that the ancestors are believed to help in enforcing are the same rules that the ancestors themselves lived by, or were expected to live by, when they lived. The justification of those rules must therefore transcend the transitory likes and dislikes of particular ancestors.

Meanwhile, similar doubts emerge concerning the religious status of the variety of spirits spoken of in African ontologies besides the ancestors. It should be easy now to understand that these beings are as creaturely as any creature walking the earth. It is true that some of them are reputed to have extra-human powers that can be tapped
for the benefit of human beings. But the procedures that have been called rituals and worship in connection with these ‘gods’ are, in fact, ways of establishing good relations with them with an eye to their services. These include protection against bad spirits, as hinted above, and the promotion of their more ordinary interests.

Of particular importance is the fact that, although these ‘gods’ are approached with respect and circumspection, they are not venerated in blind faith. The reference to bad ‘gods,’ for example, should alert one to the fact that the ‘gods’ are open to moral review. Their efficiency too is not taken for granted. Danquah (1952: 6) and Busia (1954: 205) made this last point very categorically. The former remarks that ‘the general tendency is to sneer at and ridicule the fetish and its priest.’ And the latter explains, ‘The gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt, if they fail. … Attitudes to the [gods] depend upon their success, and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt.’ A worse fate can overtake an under-achieving ‘god’; he can be killed. The total withholding of respect from such ‘gods,’ still more, the directing of scornful attention, can drain them of all vitality. Nor are all the causes of death human-made. For example, if a river dries up, the river ‘god’ is no more. This is not to say that all the ‘gods’ end up this way, but ontologically, they can. If the ‘gods’ can be at all vulnerable, they can hardly be made the foundation of a religion.

The attributes of the African God: an Akan example

So what remains of African religions? The answer is simple: belief and trust in God. But its interpretation is complex. The following many-faceted question immediately arises. Is the being we are calling God here, like the Christian God, the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, transcendent creator of the universe out of nothing? This is a deeply conceptual question. To answer it I will take into particularistic account the language of the Akans, an African language of which I have a native, first-hand, understanding.

That the Akans ascribe omniscience to their God is reasonably clear. The similarity between this attribute and the corresponding Christian one is also equally clear. God is described as Brekyirihunuade, and this strongly affirms that he knows everything. Similarity shrinks, however, when we come to omnipotence. In the Akan language, or more simply, Akan, the word Otumfuor is used in reference to the Supreme Being to indicate that his powers are limitless. He can do all things. But does this include creating a figure which is at the same time a triangle and not a triangle? Although most Christian philosophers would say no, some, such as Descartes, have said yes. On the other hand, even at the level of popular discourse, the Akan response is decidedly negative. The alleged project involves a contradiction, and, according to a communal saying, truths do not conflict (Nokware mu mni abra). Hence no well-defined project has been cited that the Supreme Being is unable to accomplish. From this standpoint, then, God’s omnipotence consists in his ability to accomplish any well-defined project.

What sorts of projects, then, are or are not considered well-defined? The easiest approach will be by examples, and a most instructive example is the following.
Consider the question whether a law of nature can be violated. At least one Akan answer is that since the law was established by an omniscient being, it does not make sense to suggest that it might need changing. Violating a law of nature therefore is not a well-defined enterprise. Therefore, God cannot be said to be capable of doing it, and yet this implies no diminution of his omnipotence.

Some of the deepest metaphysical reflections of the Akans are in the form of riddles rendered on ‘talking’ drums. One such riddle, in my interpretation, expresses just the consideration rehearsed in the last paragraph. It says, ‘The creator created death, and death killed him.’ Not even the creator can evade the cosmic dialectic of life and death. The metaphor – a riddle is a metaphor – does not only affirm the primacy of law in the workings of phenomena; it also insists on its indefeasibility. It might be of interest to note that this thought excludes the possibility of miracles, if a miracle is conceived as involving the violation of a law of ‘nature.’ The idea of the supernatural is similarly excluded, which is why I have encumbered ‘nature,’ its complementary, with quotation marks. If the idea of the supernatural is faulty, then so is that of nature, since the latter presupposes the intelligibility of the former.

Indefeasible law is what defines cosmic order for the Akan metaphysician or metaphysicians responsible for the drum text discussed above. In another drum text, when an Akan metaphysician inquires what the creator created, his answer is that the creator created order, knowledge, and death (Danquah 1968: 70). Order comes first. Omnipotence inaugurates order; but it cannot displace it.

On this account, the Akan notion of omnipotence has some similarities and some differences with Christian doctrine. However, when we come to transcendence, not even basic intelligibility is to hand. The transcendent is that which transcends space and time. In ontologies such as African ones, in which to exist is to be in space, nothing existent can transcend space and time. The Akan God, therefore, cannot be called transcendent. The contrary has been supposed on the strength of a famous myth probably shared by all African peoples. Here is a simplified form of one Akan version: in very, very, ancient times God lived accessibly close above us. But an old woman, hard of correction, kept pelting him with the butt of the pestle with which she pounded plantain to prepare a favorite Akan dish. In disgust God moved himself up inaccessibly high in the sky and has remained there ever since.

This inaccessibility is what has been interpreted as transcendence. But this interpretation is not unavoidable. Nor is it in consonance with the locative conception of existence embedded in Akan and many African languages. If God exists, He will be in space, and therefore not transcendent, but he could still be quasi-physically inaccessible. In any case, a more plausible interpretation is available. The distance that is held now to separate us from God might be interpreted morally. Then the idea would be that it is our wrong-headedness that separates us from God.

The question of creation

By far the most interesting issue in the interpretation of the Akan concept of God is whether he is conceived as the ex nihilo creator of the universe. What has already been
said suggests a negative answer. Not unexpectedly, the ground of this rejection is the locative conception of existence. From this premise, we can easily see that ‘nothing’ presupposes ‘something’; it presupposes, in fact, a whole world. The idea of nothing here is that of there not being anything of the sort defined by a given universe of discourse at some particular place. Suppose someone asks another, ‘What is there?’ and the latter replies, ‘Nothing.’ The conversation will have to have been about some items of interest. They are, perhaps, talking about furniture, and the remark informs of the absence of any such items in the given location. This conceptualization of nothingness is in terms of the epistemic and other interests of beings in this world. Such a relative notion could not possibly underpin a doctrine of creation from (absolute) nothingness.

Relevant here is an Akan aphorism, which, like the drum texts, speaks in riddles and paradoxes. In it the creator is likened unto a bagworm, and it is queried whether he wove the bag before getting into it or got into it before weaving it. I have argued elsewhere that the ‘corresponding cosmogonic paradox is this: Either the creator was somewhere before creating everywhere or he was nowhere while creating everywhere’ (Wiredu 1996: 121). That either disjunct is contradictory goes without saying, given a locative conception of existence.

To return to the talking drums, we have a drum text that takes aim at the assumption that creation can be conceived on the model of a motivated action. It runs as follows:

Who gave word?
Who gave word?
Who gave word?
Who gave word to Hearing?
For Hearing to have told the Spider,
For the Spider to have told the Creator,
For the Creator to have created things?

(Danquah 1968: 44)

‘Hearing’ here stands for the understanding and the Spider for creative ingenuity. The Akans are extremely intrigued by the creative genius of the spider as evidenced in the artistry of the spider’s web effortlessly woven. In fact, one of the Akan descriptions for God is Ananse Kokroko, the Stupendous Spider. Now, then, what is the message? It seems to be the following. A motivated action is one with reasons. But a reason already presupposes the interplay of facts, events, ideas and intentions. If the reason concerns the origin of the entire universe, then, since it cannot have any basis in fact or even fiction, it could itself be met with a request for the reason of that reason and so on ad infinitum.

The African mind, as shown in the Akan instance, has been occupied with logical and conceptual issues regarding creation. It has been concerned also with narratives of creation. A most dramatic such narrative comes from the Yoruba. In one version creation is said to have begun in what is now the city of Ile-Ife in Nigeria. The place
was then a watery marsh and God (Olodumare) sent an agent called Orisa-nla to go and spray some dry soil upon the area to firm it up for human habitation. Coming, before all else, upon some palm wine and being thirsty, he drank of it, became drunk and fell asleep re infecta. Then God sent another agent, Oduduwa, who accomplished the task (Idowu 1962: 22). Contrary to the usual practice of interpreting this story as a message of ex nihilo creation, it is transparently a demiurgic metaphor.

A remarkable aspect of this account of the ‘beginning’ is the bringing into play of human foibles in the cosmological process itself. This is even more glaring in Dogon cosmology, possibly the most sophisticated in Africa, in which the world is the result of the precipitate breaking of a primordial egg by its male component (Griaule and Dieterlen 1954). On this showing, the history of the world is the process of remediying the consequences of this act of willfulness.

The problem of evil

One can detect no doctrine of original sin in traditional African theology, but this portrayal of the cosmos suggests the notion that the interplay of good and evil forces is intrinsic to the world order. This brings us to one approach to what in western philosophy is called the problem of evil. The problem is, ‘How is it that a creator who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent seems to have created a world containing evil?’ It seems to be suggested that if evil is intrinsic to reality, then no one is to blame except the specific perpetrator of a specific act of mischief. However, neither in this nor in any other attempted solution to the problem of evil has there been any consensus among African peoples or their thinkers.

Among the Akans alone quite a few different proposals are known, although almost all of them are related in subtle ways. The first is identical with the cosmologically oriented one just noted (Minkus 1984: 116) to the effect that good and evil are both intrinsic to reality. Closely related to it is the popular Akan saying that if something does not go wrong, something does not go right. There is also the contention that evil is to be blamed not on God, but on the ‘gods,’ that is, the refractory ones (Busia 1965: 20). Even more interestingly, there is the argument that God cannot be said to have created evil, because it is the result of the free choices of human beings. God created human beings and gave them freedom of choice. For him to guarantee that they will make only the right choices would be to take away that incomparably precious gift (Gyekye 1995: 127–8). Behold a free will defense, or, if you like, a free will excuse!

In a favorite Akan literary device in which wise sayings are credited to animals, we have: ‘The Hawk says, “All that God created is good.”’ The thought underlying this saying is one that would have warmed the heart of Leibniz. Close to this is also the saying that if God gives the disease, he gives the cure. But, throwing all theodicy to the winds, Danquah (1968: 88–9) claimed that the Akan view (which he seems to have supported) is that, far from God being omnipotent, he, as the ‘Nana,’ is himself a participant in the struggle to overcome ‘physical pain and evil.’ All these ideas about evil require evaluation in the appropriate place (see Wiredu 1996). But here let us take up the question of the basis of the distinction itself between good and evil.
African communalism and morality

Because of the communalistic character of African society, there are widespread affinities in African attitudes to morality. African communalism is a kind of social formation in which kinship relations are of the last consequence. Everyone is brought up to develop a sense of solidarity with large groups of kith and kin. What this bonding means in practice is that one understands that one has obligations to a large number of people on grounds of kinship. Since this applies to everybody, it follows mathematically that each individual is the recipient of a corresponding multitude of rights coming to him as the converse of his obligations. Amid this reciprocity, it becomes clear that the principle of these social relations is the adjustment of the interests of the individual to that of the kinship group and vice versa. This, then, is a principle of the harmonization of interests to the advantage of all the individuals of the kinship group. But since one does not live in this world with relatives alone, it becomes clear also that there is need for a principle for harmonizing interests based not on the kinship standing of the other but simply on his humanity. This is the supreme principle of morality recognized in African society. Among the Akans it says, ‘If you don’t want it to be done to you, don’t do it to others,’ which is, recognizably, the contrapositive of what in Christian discourse is called the Golden Rule.

This last is the principle to which a traditional Akan would appeal in moral discussion concerning the rightness or wrongness of an action. Moral justification in terms of the will of authorities, human or divine, is left to children and infantile adults. One of the things most often said about God in Akan society is that God dislikes evil. If the Akans defined good and evil as what God likes and what he dislikes, this saying would reduce to the unenlightening tautology that God dislikes what he dislikes.

The African mind has been exercised by more problems about the nature of God and his relations with humankind than we have mentioned. A particularly difficult one concerns predestination and human freedom or responsibility. Questions raised are familiar in other cultures. For example, if every choice and act of ours is predestined, in what sense are we free? Are some given good destinies and others bad ones? And what would be the justice of that? Can a bad destiny be changed? (See Abraham 1962: ch. 2; Idowu 1962: ch. 13; Gyekye 1995: ch. 7; Wiredu 2001.)

On the above showing, African religions begin and end with belief and trust in God. This mind-set is not joined to any institution of God-worship or moral exhortation. There is nothing like a church of which one may or may not be a member, and so there are no dogmas. In consequence, in traditional Africa there was no drive to proselytism. Moreover, the trust in God is not in expectation of any special dispensation in the afterlife. This is enough to show that traditional African religions are religions only in the minimal sense of a habitual state of mind linked to the idea of a superhuman being or power or principle having control over human destiny. In this regard, more may not necessarily mean better.
See also Christianity (Chapter 6), Truth in religion (Chapter 20), Non-theistic conceptions of God (Chapter 25), Omniscience (Chapter 28), Omnipotence (Chapter 29), Omnipresence (Chapter 30), Creation and divine action (Chapter 35), The problem of evil (Chapter 42), Phenomenology of religion (Chapter 67), Religious experience (Chapter 70).

References


Further reading


Sawyer, H. (1970) *God: Ancestor or Creator?* London: Longman. (A discussion by a Sierra Leonian of Danquah’s claim in his *Akan Doctrine of God* (1968) that, for the Akans, God is not an omnipotent being but rather a participant, as ‘Nana,’ in the struggle against evil.)
