

**African Approaches to God, Death and the Problem of Evil: Some Anthropological lessons towards an Intercultural Philosophy of Religion**

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Pius MOSIMA

University of Bamenda

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3442-463X>

Email: [piusmosima@yahoo.com](mailto:piusmosima@yahoo.com)

**Abstract**

In this paper, I make a case for an intercultural philosophy of religion from an African perspective. I focus on the philosophical underpinnings of the various meaningful religious practices and beliefs that give rise to the concepts of God, death and the problem of evil. A philosophical study of African traditional religions, based on anthropological findings across African cultural orientations, gives us a good starting point in understanding African worldviews and religious experiences. It also reveals that the various world religions may all be seen as offering different perspectives on the same reality. Specifically, I argue that traditional African conceptions of God, death and the problem of evil could make significant contributions to global discourses in the philosophy of religion. First, I articulate points of convergence and divergence between African traditional religions with Saint Aquinas' proofs for God's existence; Second, I question the phenomenon of death and one's life's meaning. And third, I approach the problem of evil and attempt an African solution to the Epicurean dilemma.

**Keywords:** African Philosophy of Religion, Death, Evil, God, Vital force

**Introduction**

In African traditional thought systems, religious ideas influence people's thinking about the world and the nature of reality. These ideas are fundamental and are grounded on the African worldview in which the spiritual is widely perceived to exist and to influence the material world. These worldviews, beyond just a materialist analysis, are central in African traditional thought systems in which the notion of religion is conceived as a belief in the existence of an invisible world, which is distinct but not separate from the visible one. Reality, therefore, consists not only of what can be observed in the material world but includes experiences of the invisible world. The belief in God who created the entire universe and all life in it prevails across the African continent and forms the basis of the religious dimension of its cultures. This belief in, and understanding of, God requires utmost attention and reverence for a successful life on earth. Even though God cannot be defined by the human intellect, a close look at traditional African beliefs and practices steeped in African thought systems enables us to develop critical perspectives on God's existence, his nature, his relationship with the world, the notion of death and the problem of evil. When I say "traditional beliefs steeped in the thought systems", I mean those beliefs that belong to the long-held thought systems of pre-colonial African societies, which have been handed down orally and through rituals from one generation to the other. Even though these cultural data have been derived from the lived cultural patterns in African societies, we

must not deny the complex intercultural interactions and influences from other world religions like Islam and Christianity. In this paper, I attempt to give a philosophical evaluation of African conceptions of God in African traditional religion and thought and how these conceptions relate to the two other notions linked to it: death and evil. In other words, I attempt to bring out knowledge of God as conceived in African traditional societies and to see how this cognition influences the life of the community in relation to death and evil. I attempt answers to the following questions: what type of philosophical principles underpins the African notions of God? What are those basic philosophical principles that give meaning to people's thoughts and actions toward God? How can these traditional African beliefs enrich our intercultural understanding?

### **The Notion of God in African traditional Religion and Thought Systems: Some Anthropological and Philosophical Justifications**

An old pillar in African religious life is the belief in God's existence. It is the center of African traditional religion and thought systems. The notion of God is very important because it forms the basis of people's lives, and their relationship with God largely depends on their knowledge of him. In every cultural orientation, people have always asked questions pertaining to who is responsible for the existence of humankind, the entire universe, and the meaning of human existence. These people, essentially agricultural rural people and hunter-gatherers, who saw storms, rain, drought, lightning, and the vast, orderly, universe, thought that there must be someone who originated this ordered whole, whom they thought to be God. It is concluded that God is the Supreme Being, the originator, Sustainer and Controller of life. Life, therefore, is the starting point of human knowledge of God. God is a living, active, and Supreme Being, who created human beings, the universe and its contents. This is the most common definition we find in most cultural orientations across the continent.<sup>1</sup> The names and human images every African people have of God adequately show this meaning and what they think about God, what He does and how He is approached by humans. These names and views of God are diverse but it is possible to identify similarities in worldviews and ritual processes across geographic and ethnic boundaries. From a closer view, we can identify metaphysical and religious experiences and how they shape the way Africans conceive of God.

### **Metaphysical and Religious Experiences**

#### *Ontology of Living Forces and the Hierarchy of Beings*

One major idea in African metaphysics that allows for a belief in the existence of God is the notion of being in African thought. The metaphysical and religious experiences in African thought revolve around the topic of being. The ideas of life,

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<sup>1</sup> Some names of African supreme beings as creator across geographical settings: Amma (Dogon Mali); Chukwu, Chineke (Igbo Nigeria); Kwoth (Nuer Sudan); Mulungu (Bantu and Sudanese of East Africa); Ngewo (Mende Sierra Leone); Nhialic (Southern Sudan); Ngai (East Africa); Nyame, Onyankopon, Onyame (Akan Ghana); Nzambi (Congo); Olodumare, Olorun (Yoruba Nigeria); Osanobwa (Edo Nigeria); UNnkulunkulu, Inkosi, (South Africa) Tata Lohwe, Zambe (Cameroon).

activity and creation are crucial trends of thought and culture that influence the way human beings know about the reality of God. These metaphysical and religious experiences also permit humans to ground some principles and concepts upon which their cultural orientations and worldviews are structured and which constitute their philosophy of existence into which these concepts are born and nurtured. God is not a mere intellectual concept but the foundation of all activities. The idea or experience of life suggests a force making life possible. This is what African religions as well as other religions have called God; an active living Person who reveals himself to human beings through various manifestations in life. That is why He is spoken of as God of this and that activity. Hence God is involved in each activity of the life of most Africans. Since humans cannot adequately describe God, they call Him Father. This conception of God as a living being helps to explain the life of each individual person and eventually the meaning of human existence. The idea of activity suggests that He is the master of all activities, the one empowering human beings.

In the metaphysical experience, there is the awareness of the contingent being that lacks the ground of its “to be, being”, yet “it is” and participates in being. People experience the dynamism and vitality of being in the world. This explains why they constantly search for the ultimate ground of his being. Therefore, by use of his natural reason, they try to provide experiential arguments from which they can validly conclude that there is a Supreme Being who is responsible for the world and human experience. The knowledge of the origin of the world and life on it could be explained by using the philosophical principle of causality. The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, whose categories are still used by philosophers even today, developed a theory of causality, which is commonly known as the doctrine of the four causes.<sup>2</sup> For him, a firm grasp of what a cause is, and how many kinds of causes there are, is essential for a successful investigation of the world around us. Causality is a genetic connection of phenomena through which one thing (the cause) under certain conditions gives rise to something else (the effect). The essence of causality is the determination of one phenomenon by another. In other words, to cause something to be, a person must be higher in the hierarchy of being either in reality or in intentionality. In terms of the European philosophical tradition, and largely appropriated in traditional African thought, belief in God has been explained through the metaphysical theory of causality (TEMPELS 1958; KAGAME 1956, 1971). Causality is understood as an interaction of both the spiritual and physical realities at the same time. This interaction emphasizes activity as the essential characteristic of the cause to which Rwandan theologian Alexis Kagame adds anteriority (l’anteriorite), that is to say, being there before, as a prerequisite for any causality. Without the being there before, there is no cause, for there cannot be an effect, which is externally another being and/or event thereafter (KAGAME 1956).

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<sup>2</sup> The four causes or four explanations are, in Aristotelian thought, four fundamental types of answers to the question “why?” in analysis of change or movement in nature. They include; the material cause, the formal cause, the efficient cause, and the final cause.

According to Placide Tempels, the most fundamental and basic concept in Bantu thought that defines life, activity and creation is that of vital force (*Ntu*).<sup>3</sup> This is the all-pervading force that gives life or energy to the entire universe. For the Bantu force is the essence of being, and is radically opposed to the Western notion of being. He describes the vitality of being and how being relates to its force as opposed to the Western notion of being which is static in these words:

We can conceive the transcendental notion of 'being' by separating it from its attribute, 'force', but the Bantu cannot. 'Force' in his thought is a necessary element in 'being', and the concept 'force' is inseparable from the definition of 'being'. There is no idea among Bantu of 'being' divorced from the idea of 'force'. (TEMPELS 1959, 50-51)

He goes on to explain that Bantu ontology in its specificity implies that being, as understood in the Western tradition, signifies force in Bantu tradition, and therefore one can state that being is force (being = force):

Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality, force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force. (TEMPELS 1959, 51)

God is perceived as the one "...who possesses Force in himself. He is... the source of Force in every creature" (TEMPELS 1959,46). In fact, as a consequence of God's creative Force, everything on earth, that is, human, animal, vegetable and mineral has been endowed, essentially, with a vital force. The interrelationship of forces is seen in a hierarchy of beings running down from God (the origin of the vital force), through man (including the dead ancestors and the living community of humans), to the animal and inanimate world. The dynamic relationship of the vital force in every being can be permanently sustained, decreased, or simply brought to an end. The force grows or diminishes during the passage from one stage of being to another. With these interactions of forces, beings are neither tied to themselves nor are they passive, but they are involved in what Tempels describes as a 'principle of activity' (ibid. 51); and this 'dynamic dialectic of energy' (MUDIMBE 1988, 139) forms the basis of what Tempels depicts as the 'general laws of vital causality'; that is to say:

(a) A human being (living or deceased) can directly reinforce or diminish the being of another human being;

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<sup>3</sup> *Ntu* entails the concept of vital force which is present in all beings. This is similar to the vital *pneuma* which is connected with the soul as the principle of life as described by Aristotle. For him, the soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive (412a27). In an attempt to distinguish kinds of soul and forms of life, Aristotle affirms that the soul is attributed to whatever displays life. The human soul which is rational, according to Aristotle, includes all the lower powers of the soul, namely nutrition and perception on its own power of thought. Hence the soul, the source of life from a Supreme Life which makes all have life, can be seen from the daily lives.

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- (b) The vital human force can directly influence inferior force-beings (animal, vegetable, or mineral) in their being;
- (c) A rational being (spirit or the living) can act indirectly upon another rational being by communicating his / her vital force to an inferior force (animal, vegetable, or mineral) through the intermediacy of which it influences the rational being (TEMPELS 1959, 67–68)

Rephrasing Tempels, the founder of the *négritude* movement, Leopold Sedar Senghor, says the vital force is a living matter capable of increasing its energy or losing it, of strengthening or weakening itself (SENGHOR 1975), and Kagame defines life by the union of the body and the vital principle of animality, a union whose dissolution automatically leads to death. This is why living is to be distinguished from existing-- the dead exist but do not live (KAGAME 1956; 1976). Kagame goes further to demonstrate this notion of being with four ontological categories in his native language Kinyarwanda. These include: *muntu*, being with intelligence; *kintu*, being without intelligence, or thing; *hantu*, expresses the time and place; *kuntu*, indicates modality and thus centralizes all the notions related to modifications of the being in itself or vis-à-vis other beings. Bantu ontology is clearly seen through the interrelationship between these four categories, which all come from the same root, *ntu*, and which refer to being or essence and also the idea of force. Kagame asserts that the Bantu equivalent of *to be* is strictly and only a copula. It links the subject class with the predicate and determines the quality of the proposition. By enunciating *muntu*, *kintu* (the essence of something) is signified and the notion of existence is not necessarily present (KAGAME 1971, 602).

However, for Kagame, God does not belong in any way to the categories of *ntu* because he is pre-existent and at their origin as the first cause.<sup>4</sup> Janheinz Jahn (1961) also qualifies *Ntu* as the universal cosmic force which, according to Bantu metaphysics, is present in the various ontological categories of being (JAHN 1961) and Congolese theologian Francois Marie Lufuluabo considers life and activity as the expression of the dynamism that characterizes Bantu ontology. For him, the Bantu ideal is to achieve the greatest possible intensity of life (LUFULUABO 1964). Life and activity are expressions of this vital unity (*l'union vitale*), which is the principle for community cohesion (MULAGO 1965).<sup>5</sup> Cameroonian theologian Martin Nkafu Nkemkia (1999, 11) uses the term African vitality to describe the unified vision of reality that encompasses the invisible world. We find similar views of a complementary conception of reality in many

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<sup>4</sup> However, in an attempt to compare African and Western philosophy through consideration of the philosophical ideas of one African language group, the Fanti of Ghana, Benjamin Oguah believes he identifies in the Fanti the notion of a being greater than one can think of, a formula that he associates with the Proslogion of Saint Anselm, a kind of ontological proof for God's existence. God is called the one who is greater than one can conceive (Babur - a- abur- adze – ado). If he did not exist, he would not be the greatest being that one can conceive. Oguah also believes that he identifies among the Fanti the cosmological argument and the teleological argument for the existence of God (OGUAH 1984).

African(ist) philosophers, like Teffo and Roux, who describe this ontology around a number of principles and laws, which control the interaction of forces, that is between God and humankind, and material things. These forces are hierarchically placed and form a chain of beings (TEFFO & ROUX 1998, 138). It is one in which beings are in a harmonious and complementary relationship, where everything that exists serves as a missing link of reality (ASOUZU 2007a; 2007b). They constitute one indivisible reality - Ubuntu (Ramosé 2009) - which manifests itself as both physical and non-physical and in functional perfection of mutual complementarity (CHIMAKONAM 2012). This is what Chris Ijioma describes as harmonious monism (IJIOMA 2014).

#### **Elements of religious worldview: God and the ancestors**

When people explain the universe as having been created by God, they are automatically looking at the universe in a religious way. We can say, therefore, that African views of the universe are profoundly and notoriously religious (MBITI 1969). In all cultural orientations across the continent, scholars have, based on their research, come to similar conclusions through long experience, observation and reflection on the rituals, proverbs and worldviews of their communities (BOLAJI 1962; 1973; MBITI 1969; 1970; GYEKYE 1995). These scholars present God in the monotheistic sense as an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being who cannot be the cause of evil in the universe.<sup>6</sup> However, some scholars, arguing from the Akan (in Ghana), the Yoruba and the Igbo (of Nigeria) worldviews, have argued that the problem of omnipotence and evil does not arise in African philosophy of religion because in traditional African thought God is considered as a powerful but limited deity.<sup>7</sup> He is not conceived of as the all-powerful, all-knowing and benevolent God, which Christian theology, for example, believes in. This is because most traditional African societies conceive God as so remote that lesser deities become worthy intermediaries deserving reverence since these lesser deities directly influence human life via their interaction with God (ACHEBE 1994). If God is a *Deus absconditus*, or hidden God, and the lesser deities efficiently deputize for him, it is reasonable to think that God must be limited, either in power as a result of being preceded by pre-existing matter (WIREDU 1998) or in knowledge since he relies on the wisdom

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<sup>5</sup> See Eboussi-Boulaga (1968) on this Tempelsian 'dogma' of assimilating force and life. Moreover, Innocent Asouzu (2007b) also thinks that even though Tempels projects a dynamic notion of being he ends up reducing it to something that is fixed as he projects force to an object and freezes it to a substance. It is this substance that he converts to Bantu being, one that is static in nature but remaining dynamic. Consequently, his ontology of vital force has nothing elevating except magic and superstition and leaves Africans as idol worshippers.

<sup>6</sup> For more critical discussion on this transcendence and limitedness of the notion of God, see Ada Agada (2022).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Sogolo (1993), Bewaji (1998), Wiredu (1998), Oladipo (2004), Balogun (2009), Fayemi (2012).

of the lesser deities (BEWAJI 1998), or in both power and knowledge as he is neither all-powerful nor wholly good (FAYEMI 2012).<sup>8</sup> Since this is the case, God is incapable of stopping the evil in the world and, in fact, capable of evil since a deity limited in knowledge can make mistakes that cause harm (AGADA 2022). For Fayemi, God is a powerful being indeed, but as a co-creator he is limited when he argues that “*Olodumare...is seen by the Yoruba as the ultimate cause of all visible processes in the world. By being the creator, it does not mean that He unilaterally creates everything without the support of and consultation with other divinities*” (FAYEMI 2012, 7).

Another Nigerian scholar, Amara Esther Chimakonam (2022), invokes an Igbo worldview based on Ejima (twins) to argue that the evidential problem of evil might not be a problem in African philosophy of religion after all. She makes the following plausible claims:

- (a) There is a complementary being in whom good and evil co-exist as complements;
- (b) Such a complementary being is powerful, knowledgeable and morally good;
- (c) There are instances of evil in the world, which a complementary being could allow;
- (d) A complementary being would allow those instances of evil since both good and evil inevitably and harmoniously co-exist as modes of his being;
- (e) Therefore, there can exist a complementary being called God whose existence is not vitiated by the evidence of evil in the universe.

Among the Bakuta of Congo Brazzaville, God is called Nzambi, whose divine function par excellence is creation. The Bakuta recognize in God two aspects; God from below (Nzambi Wamutsele) and God from above (Nzambi Watanda), who is properly God the creator. God is the necessary being, the final cause, who created the world out of nothing.

Even though the theory of God as creator exists as sketched above; the act of creation was not done *ex nihilo* as in some African theologies (Imbo 2004; Gbadegehin 1991) but as a demiurge that shapes a pre-existing material rather than creates it. Kwasi Wiredu, for example, does not admit the notion of creation *ex nihilo*. He underlines the meaning of the Akan verb *bo*, which means ‘to create’ and he argues that to *bo* or create something is to fashion out a product; and actually, it is closer to the Akan to describe the Supreme Being as a cosmic architect rather than a creator. Consequently, if to create is to cause something to come into existence, then absolute nothingness must be a logically immovable impediment (Wiredu 1998). Some scholars have endorsed Wiredu’s opinion. Germaine Dieterlen (1951) mentions a sort of primordial void prior to all creation and, at the same time, the principle of universal movement and resurrection. Alassane Ndaw (1983) talks of fabrication rather than the creation of the world;

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<sup>8</sup> However, for African scholars argue against this idea of a reclusive God, see for example, Bolaji (1962; 1973), Mbiti (1969; 1970) and Gyekye (1995).

Cheikh Moctar Ba (2007) talks of modelage (making a representation of pre-existing materials) and Olusegun Oladipo (2004) emphasizes that God made the world from pre-existing materials. However, the Dogon sage, Ogotemmel shows that the spiritual and physical interpenetrate (JAHN 1961,105). In the creation myth of the Dogon, Amma, the only God created the earth as a woman, and then married her. His seed, Nommo, is water and fire and blood and word. Nommo is the physical-spiritual life force that awakens all sleeping forces and gives physical and spiritual life.

Religious experience recognizes a Supreme Being as that to be worshipped, adored and the One on whom everything depends for its life and existence. This explains the idea of prayers, worship, libation, and sacrifice (especially animal sacrifice). Worship and prayers could be done by individuals or the entire community for various reasons like good health, protection, fertility, rain, etc. They give the human being a spiritual outlook of life and remind him/her that s/he is bi-composite of body and some spiritual component, with the need to look after both to have full flourishing. This usually involves sacrifices, offerings, singing and dancing and the pouring of libation, which are seen as a way of approaching, appeasing and establishing a concrete rapport with the Supreme Being. They strengthen the belief in God among the traditional worshippers and create harmony in life with others in the community.

From these experiences, people have come up with various names for God. These names show us how they think of him, what he does, and how the people relate to their creator. These names and attributes show God creator of all things, the sustainer of life and the ruler of all creation. Through names, we also see God as father, mother or parent, and attribute characteristics such as goodness, mercy, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, immutable, spirit, etc. Among the Akan of Ghana, God (Onyame) is at the same time the Supreme Being (Onyankopon), Infinite Being (Odomankoma) and demiurge of all things (Boade) (Danquah 1968). Hence the knowledge of God is practical knowledge gotten from God, who is the active being who reveals himself to human beings in their environment and eventualities of life.

In most Cameroonian tribes, for example, the element of order in the universe links the origin of the universe to an intelligent being and a mystery. Consequently, the names given to God acknowledge this belief and reflect these metaphysical and religious experiences. Among the Bafut, everything is sacred and ultimately comes from God (Nwi). The Kom conceive of God as Mbom, and life as Afumbom (God's gift). Similar names exist among the Nso who refer to God as Nyuy (meaning God). Hence, Bomnyuy (It is God who has created); Mbomnyuy (God's creation). The world is seen as Fomnyuy (God's gift) and Nsaidzenyuy (the world is in God's hands). Among the Ngie God is referred to as Nyue, the living force and Supreme Being, creator of the universe, in Batie the Se (The Supreme Being), Se Boum Yok (our creator), Tata Lohwe in Bakweri. The Ejagham have a twofold figure, which embodies Ata Obasi, the celestial god (Father God), and Mma Obasi (Mother God), the earth goddess. Although perceived as being two different deities, they nevertheless form an indivisible unit and are always invoked together in prayer.

From these names and images, we see that God is not an object of observation which is scientifically verifiable, but a personal presence from which the primacy of being over abstract thinking could be inferred. Humans do not only think about God but live with God in a continuous existential dialogue. In this way, humans interpret certain universal experiences from different cultural contexts, metaphors, rituals which constitute the base from which to project their belief in God. Consequently, even though much of African philosophy of religion has, in its concepts and logic, been heavily influenced by Christian-influenced Western philosophy, we can still argue that African religious beliefs point to experiences of God as creator, etc., and also claim that this outlook is originally part and parcel of the African outlook on life.

The point that God is creator of all things is no credit to Christianity because before Christianity people knew that God made them and the rest of the universe. We can rather say that some of the ideas we find in Christian and Islamic teachings were already intuited by traditional African religions. African oral traditions are also rooted in experience-based original theologies like those of other world religions. The Christian tradition that goes back to Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle are experienced-based theological interpretations of the world and human experience as created and influenced by Divine force.

Moreover, all these images are just ways human beings try to describe God but none of them adequately captures who God is. It is this recognition of the spiritual bases of nature, one's existence and that of the universe in the various African worldviews that make it possible to discuss realities such as death and evil. African religious ideas are largely about relationships between the human being and the spirit world, which is inhabited by ancestral spirits, spirits of the land, water, forest and so on. The philosophical underpinning and implications of this ontology point to the fact that the reality of beings and forces, constitute a mutually complementary whole. Reality consists of the complementary rapport between material and spiritual existence. This explains Kwame Appiah's judgment that because of their belief in these invisible forces and beings, many Africans cannot fully accept those scientific theories that are inconsistent with that belief (APPIAH 1992, 135). This dynamic interrelationship of forces at all levels of existence, between the visible and invisible worlds, informs my understanding and interpretation of the link between God, death and evil in African traditional thought and belief systems.

#### **Death and the afterlife**

Death is one of the most mysterious phenomenon that continues to confound human thinkers. It is universal, imminent, inevitable and feared in some places and some people, and yet the uncertainty of what happens after constitutes the real mystery. We must all die but what are the main beliefs, practices and significance of death across the African continent? Many African peoples believe that there is some sort of existence after death since for them death is only regarded as a transition from one mode of existence to another. The visible part of man changes into the spiritualized man, (a muntu) a concept which signifies the human person.

This concept also embraces the living and dead ancestors (JAHN 1961, 18) who will never die again but belong to a higher hierarchy, participating to a certain degree in the divine Force (Tempels 1959, 30).<sup>9</sup> God has granted the ancestors a more powerful life force over their descendants and they must be respected (MAGESA 1997, 47). They are the living dead (TEMPELS 1959; MBITI 1969, OLADIPO 2004). There is no distinction between the physical world and the spiritual world; the afterlife is regarded as simply a continuation of life on earth. Death is regarded as part of man's destiny, a departure in which the physical body decays but the spirit moves on to another state of existence. So, what really happens at death? How do Africans conceive of life after death?

*Causes and significance of death*

There are several myths about the origin of death and in some ethnic groups people have even tried to refer to death in personal terms as a monster, an animal, or a kind of evil spirit. These myths give the impression that there are no natural causes of death. This explains why each time death occurs in a family, clan or village; the survivors consult diviners to know the cause of the death. It is only when the cause of the death is revealed by the diviner that the survivors determine the type of burial rite appropriate for the deceased. The general belief is that the negligence of an appropriate burial rite, if merited, is provocative to the departed member who may retaliate by sending some disaster to the surviving members. This is also because, in most traditional societies, there is the belief in the existence of evil or malevolent forces which could be tapped for the practice of negative witchcraft. It could also be caused by curses, broken taboos or oaths or by spirits that hold a grudge against members of the family. Apart from death at old age, most people see death as caused by mystical, evil forces that could cause revenge.

Hence in traditional African belief systems, people are never at rest until they find an explanation that they think is sufficient for the cause of a specific death. Their philosophy of life and death is founded on what they believe and their experiences, and these beliefs are strengthened by the diviners they consult for the explanations that escape their immediate perception. This explains why divination is of great importance in the village community. It is diviners who mediate between God, the spirits and the people by naming the reasons for death, suffering, and misfortune, and by also advising the people on how to rid themselves of them.

When a person dies the body, which is mortal, departs or separates from the soul, which is immortal and the real essence of the human person. The spiritual does not undergo decomposition or corruption because of its simplicity. The corpse is called a 'lifeless body' in several languages as the soul continues the journey to the departed members of the family and ancestors who are living in another form of life in the world of the living dead. The reason is that biological and spiritual life meets in the human being. In a concrete human life, neither the one nor the other can be present alone. When a person dies, his biological life

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<sup>9</sup> However, see Menkiti(2004) and Mbiti(1969) who suggest that in most communities, they do die a second death.

is in fact over and his spiritual life also ceases but something remains, namely the 'life force' Nommo (JAHN 1961, 107) which formed his 'personality', what Tempels calls the 'genuine Muntu'. In this case, a living human being becomes a human being without life (KAGAME 1956, 179). The living dead, according to Mbiti, are the spirits of those who died up to four or five generations back. Heads of families, adults and married people are remembered in this way longer than babies, children and the unmarried (MBITI 1969). The living dead are ancestors who are physically dead but continue living in another realm, in the abode of the dead which is spiritual in nature. The ancestral cult, which forms the basis of African traditional religion, points to the fact that a person survives after death and 'goes back home' or 'joins the ancestors' as is commonly sung in dirges when a person dies. When they 'join their ancestors' they become spirits or spiritual entities which survive in the next world. The dead, following Tempels' ontological principle of vital force and hierarchical ordering of forces, continue to live on in a diminished condition of life, as lessened forces, while nevertheless retaining their higher status, strengthening fathering life force (TEMPELS 1959, 44). Hence death is a diminishing of life force but following their profound knowledge of the forces and life the ancestors are still very important in exercising their vitalizing influence on the living generation. This is because the living person has the wish to live forever. Unfortunately, death is inevitable, and so the individual prolongs his existence as a living person through his descendants.

#### *Where do Ancestors Abide?*

Concerning the dwelling place of the dead, most people hold that even though they are unseen, the dead are not far away from the living. They can be anywhere they want to be since they are no longer bound by space and time. So it is usually said the dead see us but we cannot see them with our ordinary eyes. They live in the spiritual world since they no longer live physically so they exist as ancestral spirits. In some tribes, people hold that ancestors live in natural phenomena like trees, rocks or lakes.

#### *The Relationship between the living and the living dead*

It can be asserted that in order to appreciate and better understand traditional African beliefs, it is necessary to examine the covenant they have with their ancestors. They are believed to exercise a constant influence upon people's lives as they are still part of the community of the living. The fundamental principle is that a society united in peace, harmony and cooperation and in which ancestors hold a central and respected position represents the highest social value and can be understood as one of the essential elements of African religious philosophy. The relationship with the ancestors, which could be good or bad, is so strong that Africans always remember them by pouring libation on their graves or by the door side to address them. Moreover, most people are buried in their villages beside their ancestors, and during the mourning lamentations, people express certain wishes and prayers that the deceased is supposed to convey to those who have already gone ahead. The fact that people are buried with some of their personal belongings to be using shows that the future life is nearly like the present one. This

explains why they have to continue with their daily activities such as farming, eating, hunting etc. This explains why in some villages, some yams, vegetables, and drinks are reserved for the dead. These examples show the strong link between the spiritual and physical worlds and that the deceased is still active and present when called by the survivors. The ancestors play such a profound and indispensable role in the life of an African that no serious celebration or decision in the family, clan or tribe can be carried out without first consulting them. In many parts of Africa, adult members of the family put food and pour drinks on their graves or on the ground for the spirits of the family. This could be during a family celebration, when one is suffering from a major illness when children are named after the dead (often when reincarnation is perceived) or when a major decision is to be made. It is also the custom in some parts of Africa to mention the names of departed relatives when one is praying to God. These departed members of the family are believed to relay the prayers to God, who is always named first in prayers to the ancestors. The ancestors also come in dreams to enquire about the family, give instructions to the living and also protect the family. They also make requests for things to be done or given to them and at times threaten to punish family members for neglecting them. However, in some villages when a certain departed continues to punish the living, a diviner is called to cast them out of the lives of the living and send the spirit far away. Most people see misfortunes as a sign of ancestral displeasure and it is interpreted as a warning that the persons should look closely into their conduct towards relatives and the spirits themselves.

Summarily, from the African conception of death, we see that there is life after death, that man has both body and soul; that the body is mortal but the soul is immortal, and that the spirit world exists and is accessible to human appeals. One of such appeals could be solutions to the problem of evil in their daily lives.

#### **God and the problem of evil**

The problem of evil is crucial in our understanding of God and African philosophy of religion because evil spoils the plan of God, disrupts the vital force and greatly affects African communitarian ethics (TEMPELS 1959, 64ff). However as we have discussed above God is a limited deity, a demiurge and a deified ancestor. If God is limited, then the problem of evil, as a metaphysical problem, does not arise. Yet there is the interplay between good and evil forces in the world. In western philosophy, the problem of evil is generally couched in the following form: 'How is it that a creator who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent seems to have created a world containing evil?' What does the reality of evil tell us about the nature of God who created the universe? Is God to be seen as a limited being as a result of the evidence of evil?

Indeed, the ancient philosopher, Epicurus, stated the problem of evil in the form of a dilemma:

God either wishes to take away evils or is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in

accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them? (KONSTAN 2018,28)

In traditional African thought, moral evil is thought of as originating from certain acts by free rational beings such as murder, lies, stealing etc., and natural evil is often seen as consequences of bad deeds perpetrated by a free agent that affect nature such as natural disasters, floods, earthquake's etc.

In most cultural orientations, people are never satisfied with any evil occurrences until they get an ultimate explanation of what has occurred. Hence, the vital question people ask is not whether evil exists or not but whether we can give a plausible explanation for evil in the universe. In their religious beliefs and practices, they want to know "why" an evil thing should happen *only* at a particular time and place to a particular person. Science sometimes asks why questions but the African response to evil is radically different from that of the typical scientist. This is because most traditional Africans seek a religious rather than a scientific explanation. It does not mean that the scientific explanations are unimportant but in the African context, causality goes beyond the realm of natural science. The point is that scientific explanations do not satisfy the traditional African belief system and so they require a causal explanation (Efficient Cause and Final Cause) in cases of evil. They think that the world is considered orderly and just, and so evil is connected with other causes, which include witches, ancestors and mystical powers. This explains why people interpret evil in direct and personal terms in the way they relate to others and God. Most often, it is believed that evil is seen when people act against the divine plan of God and he decides to withdraw from those that violate the cosmic unity. Hence, when most traditional Africans want to bring out the causal explanation of evil, the aim is to know what to do about such misfortune. They see the hand of their ancestors or witches in the evil that befalls them and have the satisfaction of knowing that there is at least something they can do to avoid it. They agree that the ancestors and witches produce such unpleasant circumstances of life for a purpose and from one incident guard against future misfortune by making sacrifices. This explains why most traditional Africans are more interested in the why and how of any evil event. Thus, the concern is not with mere secondary causal explanations (hows), the concern is actually with primary causal explanations (whys).

Among the Batié of the Western Region of Cameroon, evil (Cepon) is not from God who is almighty (Cyepo Se) and good (Se Foyoussic). Evil comes from other beings – for instance, the bad god (Se Cepon), who is also created by God and human beings (MBITI 1969). Moreover, evil can proceed from the wrath of ancestors (m'pfe ba yok) and human beings (especially those who are witches and wizards), who are people with mysterious powers capable of eating the vital force of other people (m'gang sie) by causing sickness and death. Everything which deviates from the normal order of things both in the natural and in the social order

order is regarded as a manifestation of witchcraft. Hence evil is usually seen as having its origin, not from God, but from other beings, humans or spiritual, that can exercise free will (MBITI 1969).

Among the Kom evil comes from a cosmic force (meso), which produces good or evil actions or states. This notion is evident in the royal rituals of the Kom people (NKWI 1976). The traditional leader presides over the ritual and invokes the spirits of the good meso to bring fertility to the land and its people, health, prosperity and peace throughout the kingdom. On the other hand, a person could acquire the evil meso in return for a great price/sacrifice. A person, for example, could invoke the meso and ask for money by offering to the spirits the fertility of the crops and the fertility of women, thus provoking failure in harvests and a decrease in childbirths. Or the person could accept riches by offering up a member of the family whose life the spirits would claim. Hence, one of the traditional explanations of suffering is that it emanates from the cosmic force, which produces both good and evil, a cosmic force that is capable of acting according to the circumstance, either for man's welfare or man's woes. This view is contrasted with the gnostic idea that good and evil are two entirely separate forces and shows that the principle of good meets with the principle of good.

If a person shows abnormal physical characteristics or behaves in a way that is in striking contrast to the norms or customs of the society, the person can readily be addressed as a witch. So the old problem of evil in the world, which is particularly acute when there is the belief in the existence of a being that is omnipotent and infinitely good, has been partly solved by putting the responsibility for much of the evil and suffering on agents (witches, ancestors and other mystical powers) other than God. These agents are mostly human personalities either living or dead.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, I have examined the problem of God, death and evil. My main argument has been that African ontologies are similar to Aristotelian categories such as first cause and later Christian ones such as creation *ex nihilo* and still conceptualize religious experience in a different manner. These concepts, God, death and evil, can also foster our intercultural understanding. The whole universe is seen as a system, an ordered whole that is full of forces, which come from God. In face of evil and good, the spontaneous and highest reaction of an African is to offer sacrifices to the God of our ancestors. I have made references to some anthropological data from which we can infer that African cultures share some basic theological and philosophical beliefs, which could ground an African philosophy of religion. We also realize that the African conception of God is much more fluid than the Christian conception of God. Consequently, what we see as rituals are meant to foster our understanding as acts of appeasement, healing and fanning off evil. The African conception is linked to this creative force that carries within itself the ambiguous touch of good and evil, life and death, etc. Further research into these topics is certainly needed since African traditional thought is an important part of a global philosophy of religion.

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