

**Rethinking God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in Light of the
COVID-19 Pandemic: An African Perspective**

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Abstract

The reality and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic question God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence. Two questions that stare us in the face are a) is God omnibenevolent given the current reality? b) is God omnipotent? This paper addresses these questions from the African place using the African theory of duality and its underlying logic, Ezumezu. We argue that the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and its adverse effects (such as death, hardship and social isolation) do not negate God's benevolence and powerfulness. We assert that while the current reality cannot sustain a defence of the traditional theistic qualities of omnipotence and omnibenevolence, the notions of a powerful and benevolent God are not necessarily undermined by the reality of Covid-19. In the light of the African theory of duality and Ezumezu logic, we contend that the COVID-19 pandemic brings out the argument that inherent in God's benevolence is wickedness and inherent in God's powerfulness is weakness.

Keywords: God, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, COVID-19, evil

Introduction

COVID-19 is wreaking havoc the world over, causing untold social, political and economic disruptions. Since the advent of the pandemic, hundreds of millions of people have fallen sick and millions have lost their lives, leaving relatives and friends suffering from the pain of losing loved ones. The grim state of affairs caused by the pandemic inevitably leads to the questioning of the conception of God as omnipotent and omnibenevolent. This paper argues that while the magnitude of pain

and suffering caused by the pandemic puts the traditional theistic notions of omnibenevolence and omnipotence in question, the current state of affairs does not necessarily imply that God is neither benevolent nor powerful.

Scholars of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African philosophers are divided when it comes to reconciling the fact of evil in the world with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God. We have African philosophers who promote theistic perspectives that present God as all-knowing, all-good and all-powerful (DANQUAH 1944; MBITI 1969, IDOWU 1973; AWOLALU AND DOPAMU 1979; METUH 1981; GYEKYE 1995; ODUWOLE 2007). In this COVID-19 period, the theistic scholars will be faced with the task of answering the questions: Is God able to prevent COVID-19 but is unwilling to do so? If this is the case, then he is not all-good but may be both good and wicked. Or is he willing to stop the pandemic but cannot do so? If this is the case, then he is not all-powerful but, in fact, possesses weakness. A second group of scholars and philosophers influenced by the decolonization movement¹ in African humanities have argued that the problem of omnipotence and evil does not arise in ATR and traditional African religious thought because Africans traditionally conceive God as a being limited in power and knowledge, one that is capable of doing both good and evil (see KATO 1975; SOGOLO 1993; BEWAJI 1998; WIREDU 1998; ABIMBOLA 2006; BALOGUN 2009; P'BITEK 2011; FAYEMI 2012; AGADA 2022a).

In this paper we argue that God remains benevolent and powerful even in the face of COVID-19. In defence of the idea of a partly benevolent God who is capable of evil, we argue that if this was not the case, God would be either thoroughly benevolent (all-good) or thoroughly wicked (all-evil). If he was thoroughly benevolent there would be no COVID-19 crisis since a God possessing the perfection of all-goodness would also possess the perfection of all-powerfulness and, therefore, be able to prevent COVID-19 from happening. If he was thoroughly evil, the category of all-evilness would be a negative perfection belonging to an all-powerful being that, having caused the COVID-19 pandemic, would never let it end, so that its harm would be perpetually maximized. In defence of the idea of a powerful, but not all-powerful, God we draw from the insights supplied by African philosophers who assert that God is a creator-deity even if a limited one. Only a powerful being could have created a world in which COVID-19 happened. If God

¹The decolonization movement in African humanities is part of a broader intellectual awakening in the Global South that seeks the reassessment of assumptions and paradigms believed to be tainted by biased Western perspectives. In African philosophy, decolonization takes the route of conceptual analysis aimed at identifying invalid or inapplicable conceptual schemes imported from Western philosophy. Scholars like Wiredu (1998) and p'Bitek (2011) urge African philosophers of religion to undertake the work of eliminating inapplicable Western categories from African philosophy of religion and ATR. We thank Dr Ada Agada for drawing our attention to the decolonization trend.

was powerless there would be no world at all and no one would be here to talk about the pandemic.

We go beyond the group of scholars who believe that God is limited by grounding our argument in the African duality theory and its undergirding background Ezumezu three-valued logic. In that spirit, we argue that the African theory of duality which states that reality is dual or two-sided allows us to talk about a benevolent and powerful God even in the face of COVID-19. The theory is anchored on the trivalent logic as opposed to the bivalent Aristotelian logic. This trivalent logic helps us harmonize the conception of God as a powerful and benevolent being with the reality of the suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the goal of this paper, we take a look at the arguments of the theistic African philosophers and scholars who believe that God is unlimited and the submissions of those that believe that God is limited. We discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and the implication for belief in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. Finally, we explore the African theory of duality and its background logic of Ezumezu and argue for the compatibility of belief in a powerful and good God who is yet weak and able to do evil and the reality of COVID-19.

God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the African Religious Scheme

Mbiti (1969) famously noted that Africans are very religious and that the religious consciousness pervades every aspect of traditional African life. Mbiti is certainly referring to traditional African societies. Like most human societies, African communities have been intrigued by the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent creator of the world from time immemorial. As Africans do not have a written religious book like the Bible or the Koran, ATR scholars and philosophers of religion have depended heavily on oral sources like orature (oral literature), linguistic phenomena like wise sayings, proverbs and riddles, names for God and the general worldviews of traditional African societies as embedded in African languages. These sources have produced conflicting results about authentic African conceptions of God. For a while the transcendental view of God as omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent dominated the ATR literature. The transcendental perspective was championed by ATR scholars like Mbiti, Idowu, Dopamu and Awolalu. Later decolonization scholars challenged the established view. The decolonization camp reached the conclusion that Africans traditionally conceive God as a limited being after analyzing the orally transmitted resources that the theistic scholars depended on to reach their conclusion. The decolonization camp include philosophers like Wiredu and ATR scholars like p'Bitek. Both conflicting stances have been defended by African philosophers, with Gyekye (1995) and Metz and Molefe (2021) notably making a case for a traditional monotheistic interpretation of ATR.

This section will explore the notions of omnibenevolence and omnipotence as they apply to God. According to Mbiti, Africans hold that God is omnibenevolence – all-good, kind, and well-meaning. God's benevolence is within the context of his being and disposition towards all other existent realities that he

created. Africans come to this notion of God's benevolence by observing God's deeds and care for humans and other created things in the universe. About the views of God's benevolence prevalent in some African societies, Mbiti writes:

For example, some of the people of Zaire say, 'Rejoice, God never does wrong to people!' And in Liberia they say, 'God causes rain to pour down on our fields, and the sun to shine. Because we see these things of his, we say that he is good!' In Ghana people look at the works of God and proclaim, 'God is good, because he has never withdrawn from us the good things which he gave us!' (MBITI 1975, 49)

Elsewhere, Mbiti posits that the Vugusu assert that material prosperity is from God; and the Nandi pray to God daily to grant fertility to women, cattle, and fields; while the Langi hold that only God grants rich harvests (MBITI 1969, 37). All these are evidence of God's goodness. In the same manner, the Ewe people strongly opine that "He (God) is good, for He (God) has never withdrawn the good things from us which He gave us" (WESTERMANN 1912, 197).

It is believed that God is absolutely good and the foundation and source of all goodness. Therefore, all good things emanate and flow from God to other creatures that manifest divine goodness. Emmanuel Edeh reinforces this point when he suggests that human capacity for goodness may not be simply innate but can be regarded as a reflection of God's goodness which he communicates to all created things. According to him, although humans express goodness, the human being is not the ultimate source of this goodness. God is the source of goodness, while humans express it in the world (EDEH 1985, 100-101; CHIMAKONAM and OGBONNAYA 2015).

It is believed that God's goodness is eternal. It has no end. God is never tired of doing good. This implies that God's benevolence is not limited by space and time. Although it is manifested in this temporal world, it transcends temporality and passes into eternity. Therefore, God's benevolence is ever-present. This means that it is in God's nature to be good. In saying that God is benevolent, Africans say that God is also merciful, kind, generous, and a provider (ISLAM AND ISLAM 2015, 6). In this light, Shafiul Islam and Didarul Islam writes: "In times of personal and natural problems or difficulties, people feel the need of His urgent help and feel Him as Merciful. God causes rain during drought, provides fertility to all animals and averts calamities" (2015, 6). If this is the case then, God cannot be associated with misfortunes and ill-happenings. Bolaji Idowu makes this point when he asserts that for the Yoruba, "God is the pure King...who is without blemish" (1994, 47).

Gyekye (1995, 114) defends the view that God is utterly good while analyzing Akan notions of free will and determinism. He suggests that the Akan subscribe to a moderate kind of theological determinism that God imposes on humans. Theological determinism in African philosophical discourse is often labelled predestination. The African idea of predestination is different from the Christian idea as there are no African references to eschatological concepts like

salvation, eternal damnation, hell, etc. Predestination in the African context simply references the belief that God gives every human being their destiny before their birth, which then conditions the course of events in a person's life from birth to death. Gyekye proposes that there is no rigid conditioning and that since God is good, the destinies he awards to humans are always good destinies. He attributes evil in the world to human malevolence rather than divine agency.

There is evidence that Africans conceive God as omnipotent. The word omnipotent is synonymous with all-powerfulness. That is, God transcends all and everything in power. Nothing is beyond God's ability. God is capable of doing all things, and there is absolutely nothing that God cannot do. However, Mbiti cautions that when it is asserted that God is all-powerful there is no commitment to the view that God can act capriciously in the exercise of his unlimited power. Commitment to the transcendental conception of God does not involve God being capable of evil. Instead, there is a commitment to the view that God can only do good in accordance with his goodness. In Mbiti's words, "it must be remembered that he (God) can only do what is good and right, and what is consistent with his own nature" (1975, 56). According to this perspective, God is all-powerful only within the context of doing good and hating evil.

Mbiti notes that the attribute of omnipotence is inferred by individuals in traditional societies from African linguistic and cultural phenomena. God's all-powerfulness comes out in wise sayings such as "Everything is possible with God", "God is the Master of all things" (MBITI 1991, 56). Since God created everything, God governs and controls everything. The point is that God created all that there is, including humans.

Gyekye reaches Mbiti's conclusion based on his critical interrogation of Akan linguistic and cultural phenomena. He notes the significance of worship incantations that reference God's omnipotence and special titles that indicate belief in a transcendent God. Such names include *Onyankopōn* (the only great being, the supreme being), *Ōbōadeē* (creator), *Ōdomankoma* (the absolute, the eternal), *Brekyirihumuade* (the omniscient), *Enyiasombea* (the omnipotent), *Otumfo* (the powerful being), *Atoapem* (the unsurpassable, the ultimate one). These superlatives obviously describe the traditional theistic God who is omnipotent and omniscient. Without mincing words, Gyekye writes:

Onyame is the Absolute Reality, the origin of all things, the absolute ground, the sole and whole explanation of the universe, the source of all existence...Onyame transcends time and is thus free from the limitation of time, an eternity without beginning, without an end...While containing space, Onyame is not held to be spatial. He is not bound or limited to any particular region of space. He is omnipresent (*enyiasombea*), all-pervading. (1995, 70)

If a being with the unlimited powers invoked by Gyekye exists, why is there so much moral and physical evil in the world? The question is a legitimate one since Gyekye's God is a benevolent deity. Gyekye half-heartedly responds to the question in two ways. Firstly, God does not rigidly condition the course of events in the lives of individuals; instead, he allows them freedom to decide minute details which are not affected by the broader context of a conditioned life (1995, 114). Secondly, evil, at least the moral variety, can be attributed to wickedness on the part of human beings and the lesser deities created by God. One may object that as an omnipotent being, God could have created humans in such a way that they would not negatively express their free will in the performance of evil deeds. In this same manner, it should be possible for the perfect being described by Gyekye to create lesser deities that are not given to mischief. Gyekye agrees that the omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God is at the top of the hierarchy of being and sustains all other beings below him, including the ubiquitous lesser deities.

Idowu's ultimacy thesis buttresses Gyekye's claim that the ubiquitous deities do not pose any threat to God's supremacy:

I do not know of any place in Africa where the ultimacy is not accorded to God...the religion (ATR) can only be adequately described as monotheistic. I modify the 'monotheism' by the adjective 'diffused', because here we have a monotheism in which there exists other powers which derive from Deity. (1973, 135)

If the ubiquity of the lesser deities does not invalidate the ultimacy thesis, attributing the reality of evil in the world to the deities fails to demonstrate the compatibility of the magnitude of evil in the world with the belief in the existence of a transcendent God. Or, perhaps, Gyekye's interpretation of Akan religious phenomena is incorrect? Wiredu suggests that there is a better account of traditional Akan religion that upholds belief in a limited God rather than a transcendent being.

According to Wiredu, the very notion of a God existing beyond space and time is unintelligible within the traditional Akan metaphysical scheme because reality is necessarily spatio-temporal. As a spatio-temporal totality, matter has always existed and may well be a limiting factor in the universe. Where Gyekye posits the eternity of God and fails to account for God's origin, Wiredu posits the eternity of the universe and fails to account for the origin of the universe. However, the problem of positing beginninglessness is not the focus of this paper. By positing an eternally existing universe, Wiredu attempts to show that a creator-God (which the Akan believe in) does not have to be Gyekye's transcendent being. While God is indeed powerful as the creator or designer of the world, he is limited by the totality called the universe since he is just one entity in a universe filled with diverse entities. Wiredu notes:

In the Akan conceptual framework, then, existence is spatial. Now, since whatever transcendence means...it implies existence beyond space, it follows that talk of any transcendent being is not just false but unintelligible, from an Akan point of view. (WIREDU 1996, 49–50)

Elsewhere he notes that:

A carpenter creates a chair out of wood and a novelist creates fiction out of words and ideas. If God is conceived as a kind of cosmic architect who fashions a world order out of indeterminate raw material, the idea of absolute nothingness would seem to be avoidable. And this is, in fact, how the Akan metaphysicians seem to have conceived the matter. Moreover, *Oboade*, the Akan word that I provisionally translated as “creator”, means the maker of things. *Bo* means to make and *ade* means thing, but in Akan to *boade* is unambiguously instrumental; you only make something with something. (1998, 32)

For Wiredu, therefore, God is limited in power and knowledge. The attribute of omnibenevolence cannot apply to him. He notes that while the Akan conceive God as good, his goodness is a restricted quality and similar to that possessed by a just ancestor (2010, 195). Wiredu’s stance reflects the decolonization perspective which invites African scholars to eliminate imported Western categories from ATR and African philosophy of religion. Oladipo notes that the Yoruba believe that God’s powers are limited by various forces, influences and essences in the world. He notes instructively:

If omnipotence implies ‘infinite powers,’ then to say that Olódùmarè is omnipotent is to say that He is almighty in the sense that He is not subject to any constraints in the exercise of His powers. However, it is doubtful that Olódùmarè can be said to be all-powerful in this sense. A crucial consideration in this regard is the acknowledgment, by the people, of other powers and principalities – divinities, spirits, magic, witchcraft, and so on. Some of these powers and forces are treated as ends in themselves. Hence, the people endeavor, through sacrifice, to be on good terms with them in recognition of their powers to aid or hinder human activities. (OLADIPO 2004, 360)

Oladipo’s stance is supported by Bewaji (1998) and Fayemi (2012). Where Wiredu is reluctant to clearly state that God is capable of doing evil, Bewaji and Fayemi assert that the Yoruba God is not a merciful God. The Yoruba God is good, impartial and capable of doing evil. The capacity for evil would be consistent with God’s limitedness.

It becomes increasingly obvious that there is no single absolute conception of God in the ATR and African philosophy of religion literature (AGADA 2017, 2022b, 2022c; CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES and AGADA 2022). There are two dominant perspectives in the literature, with one perspective promoting the transcendence framework and the other proposing the limitation framework as the authentic African conception of God. Given the cultural rootedness of the two conflicting perspectives, Agada has argued that there is an antinomy of God's existence in African religious thought which demands a cautious approach from African philosophers of religion. In Agada's words, there is:

[E]vidence of a transcendent moment in Yoruba traditional thought that clashes with the non-transcendent moment. By the term transcendent moment, I mean the plausible traditional, theistic interpretation of traditional Yoruba and, by extension, African thought about the nature of God. The non-transcendent moment corresponds to the interpretation of the nature of God within the metaphysical framework of limitedness. The latter interpretation has gained ground recently among African philosophers. (2022a, 46)

It will appear that the limitation perspective best accounts for the reality of evil in the world. As earlier noted, appeals to the idea of free will and the malevolence of lesser deities do not provide persuasive reasons for an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God permitting the magnitude of evil that we find in the world. If God is limited in power and goodness, it makes sense that he is either not powerful enough to eliminate evil from the world or he does not see the point of eliminating evil from the world since he himself does evil or both together. Recognizing that there are two dominant and conflicting views of God in the literature will be helpful as we proceed to relate the COVID-19 pandemic to the idea of omnipotence and omnibenevolence.

God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a substantial challenge for governments, individuals, and society as a whole. The World Health Organization (WHO) first declared it a Public Health Emergency Concern and then later a pandemic. A pandemic is an epidemic that affects a massive number of people on a worldwide scale. COVID-19 is an illness that results from infection with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) that was first isolated and identified in patients exposed at a seafood market in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019.

COVID-19 represents a spectrum of clinical manifestations that typically include fever, dry cough, and fatigue, often with pulmonary involvement. It is highly contagious, and most individuals within the population at large are susceptible to infection. The virus that causes the illness has since mutated, with the Delta and Omicron variants ravaging the world and bringing death to millions even as billions of people are compelled to wear uncomfortable face masks to limit the spread of the dreaded virus. Wild animal hosts and infected patients are currently the main sources of the disease that is transmitted through respiratory droplets and direct contact. It has greatly increased morbidity and mortality over a wide geographical area. By 21 August 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) had recorded 212,357,893 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 4,439,843 deaths. Since its advent, the daily number of deaths due to COVID-19 has surpassed the number of daily deaths due to common causes. Since the advent of the pandemic in December 2019, people have been suffering the world over due to economic, social, and political

disruptions. As of 24 February 2022, 430,879,678 cases had been confirmed and 5,940,162 deaths had been logged (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

COVID-19 presented many challenges that disrupted the day-to-day activities of people the world over. These challenges threaten all aspects of the economic and social fabric while bringing suffering to hundreds of millions in virtually all the countries of the world. In an attempt to contain the virus, governments are imposing strict measures in the form of lockdowns that necessitate disruption of important services in the health, education, transport, tourism, etc. sectors. These lockdowns led to the forced isolation of people around the world.

One of the major challenges brought to the fore by the pandemic is economic inequality at individual, household and national levels. The severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is seen in the numbers: more than 120 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty and a massive global recession is underway (FERREIRA 2020). As suffering and poverty have risen, some data show an increase in another extreme: the wealth of billionaires (FERREIRA 2020). With both extreme poverty and billionaire wealth on the rise, the pandemic's contribution to heightened social and economic inequality is obvious. The pandemic glaringly exposed the gap between the haves and the have-nots, both within and between countries (UNDP 2020). Lockdowns have also made the digital divide more apparent, with billions of people having no access to reliable broadband (UNDP 2020). The lack of access limits peoples' ability to work, continue with their education and socialize with loved ones, among other deprivations. Also, with the closure of schools and the divides in distance learning, UNDP (2020) estimates indicate that 86% of primary school-age children in low human development index countries are currently not getting an education, compared to 20% in countries with very high human development index.

Developing countries are suffering the most along with the already vulnerable worldwide: those that rely on the informal economy, women, those living with disabilities, refugees, the displaced, and those who suffer social stigmas (UNDP 2020). The effects of COVID-19 have not spared the health sector.

According to the United Nations, the world is facing a global health crisis unlike any in the 75-year history of the United Nations, with death a daily occurrence in hospitals with overworked and traumatized health personnel (UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT, N.P). Inequalities have always existed in the health sector; however, with the advent of COVID-19 these inequalities became more apparent, with individuals from black and minority ethnic groups, poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, deprived urban and rural locations, and vulnerable groups in the society experiencing the full force of the pandemic (MISHRA et al 2020). The inequalities in the health sector have led to disastrous consequences and exposed systemic injustice. Studies have noted higher mortality rates among black and minority ethnic groups, vulnerable members of the society such as refugees, asylum seekers, and individuals from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds (MISHRA et al 2020). The social gravity of the pandemic, alongside transmission mitigation

tactics such as social distancing and quarantine requirements, is already encouraging depersonalized care delivery, greater severity of patient and family caregiver distress, and overstretched resources due to focus on testing, triage, and viral treatment (ROSA 2020 et al).

In addition to inequalities, there is the suffering of both communities and individuals as they grieve the loss of millions of lives worldwide. COVID-19 magnifies a collective fear and anxiety about impending destruction due to healthcare capacity constraints (ROSA et al 2020). Rosa et al (2020) further note the fear and anxiety that grip one upon confirming that they have COVID-19. First, there is likely fear associated with prognosis given the media coverage. Second, there is anxiety related to worsening symptomatology and the possible need for hospitalization. Sick individuals experience rapid decompensation characterized by shortness of breath, delirium, and gastrointestinal distress. At the same time, family caregivers cannot see, hold, or comfort their loved ones since visitors are prevented from going inside hospitals in most cases (ROSA et al 2020). Families watch loved ones taken away in ambulances, knowing that may have been their last moment together (ROSA et al 2020). Death and dying have increased markedly in hospitals globally, and family caregivers' grief and bereavement processes have been deeply impacted (ROSA et al 2020). Indeed, the existential distress experienced by family caregivers has likely never been higher, as is the potential for post-traumatic stress disorder and prolonged grief disorder in those left behind.

All these scenarios highlighted above bring to the fore the nature of suffering. Suffering is defined by Cassell (2004) "as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person. Suffering requires consciousness of the self, involves emotions, has effects on the person's social relationships, and has an impact on the body." The suffering inflicted on humanity by COVID-19 is an instance of physical evil.

Humans cannot be blamed for the pandemic as it has not been demonstrated that the COVID-19 virus was engineered in the lab by rogue scientists and released for maximum harmful impact. The philosopher has an interest in exploring the ethical, religious, social and political implications of the pandemic. The philosopher of religion, in particular, is interested in the exploration of the implication of the pandemic for traditional theism, the belief in a creator of the world who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent (see AGADA 2019). Oduwole (2007, 2) discusses the theistic position in relation to the question of evil and lays out the problem thus:

1. God exists.
2. God is omnipotent – all-powerful, capable of performing any act, even those that violate natural laws.
3. God is omniscient – all-knowing, continuously aware of everything.
4. God is omnibeneficent – wholly good, holy, loving, absolutely righteous.
5. Evil exists.

Fayemi (2012, 2) compresses and restates Oduwole's premises thus:

- i. God exists.
- ii. God has infinite and perfect attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, etc.
- iii. Evil exists.
- iv.

What can be deduced from the respective thoughts of Oduwole and Fayemi is that despite God being omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, there is evil in the world. The problem of omnipotence and evil thus arises. Writing from the decolonization perspective, Fayemi argues that God is powerful but not all-powerful. He is not all-good, but good and capable of doing evil. We demonstrated in the previous section that the limitation perspective has merit because it solves the puzzle of the reality of a transcendent God and evil in the world. Since COVID-19 is real it makes sense to think that God is unable to prevent the physical evil from occurring because it is beyond his power to do so. This paper makes the assumption that God exists. Thus, we are not going into arguments about God's existence. If God was omnipotent and omnibenevolent, there would be no COVID-19 and the massive suffering that the pandemic inflicted on humanity. If the omnipotent God was all-evil, there could still be COVID-19. But once an omnipotent and all-evil God caused COVID-19 to happen, the suffering resulting from the pandemic would not only be severe but the severity would be sustained in perpetuity. This is the case because, to be consistent with his thoroughly evil nature, an all-powerful and all-evil God would maximize the evil of COVID-19. Obviously, COVID-19 is not the sort of evil that would go on as a largely effective vaccination regime, social isolation, lockdowns and the development of natural immunity are all beginning to minimize the harmful impact of the COVID-19 virus. A God limited in goodness, that is one who is good but also does evil sometimes, would be the kind of being that can be a witness to COVID-19 and do little or nothing to stop the evil, because either he is unable to stop it or he sees no big deal in the occurrence of occasional pandemic disasters, or both together.

With the notions of omnipotence and omnibenevolence proving inadequate for the philosopher of religion, one is compelled to accept the applicability of the concepts of powerfulness (but not all-powerfulness) and goodness (but not all-goodness). Both the transcendence and limitation perspectives in African thought hold that God is a creator. God must be a powerful being to be able to create a world where COVID-19 pandemics happen. If he was powerless he would not be able to create the world and there would be no human beings to observe the world and notice a pandemic.

The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic does not negate God's benevolence and powerfulness. Instead, it questions the absoluteness of God's all-goodness and all-powerfulness. It questions how an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God can allow the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying suffering. An absolutely benevolent God cannot allow humans to suffer from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is only a God who possesses wickedness that can allow humans to suffer from the COVID-19 pandemic. The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that God cannot be absolutely powerful, without weakness. If God was omnipotent, the COVID-19 pandemic could not have occurred and continue to claim human life. In the next section, we will show how Ezumezu logic undergirds the kind of thinking that informs the view that God can be both good and bad, powerful and weak.

Reconceptualizing God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the African Philosophical Place

This section focuses on the reconceptualizing of God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence from the perspective of African thought. With the challenge that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence, rethinking these two superlative attributes becomes inevitable. How ought we think about God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence in this context? We shall engage the African duality theory and its undergirding background Ezumezu three-valued logic to reconceptualize the aforementioned attributes. What then is this African theory of duality? What is the nature of its background Ezumezu logic?

The African duality theory holds that reality is dual or two-sided. About duality, Edeh notes that "for all beings... existence is a dual and interrelated phenomenon... It has a dual existence, dual in the sense that the reality of its existence is a phenomenon in the visible world and also a reality in the invisible world" (1985, 77). For instance, reality consists of matter and spirit, physical and non-physical aspects, invisible and visible aspects, nonsensible and sensible aspects. Also, being consists of substance and accident. Furthermore, the world consists of physical and non-physical, invisible and visible, nonsensible and sensible qualities. Each of the pairs is believed to be inseparable, integrated, and complementary to each other. Little wonder, Udobata Onunwa (2005) uses the term inseparable duality to describe the phenomenon; Chris Ijiomah (1996, 2006, 2014, 2016) favours the term harmonious monism while Alexander Animalu and Jonathan Chimakonam (2012) call the phenomenon complementary duality.

The idea is that the two sides of reality always have a relationship of inseparable coexistence. Aristotle (1947) famously argued in his *Metaphysics* that substance is what possesses ultimate reality while the accident is dependent on substance. Since accidents are predicable on substance, the latter is what has being. Innocent Asouzu, influenced by African ideas of duality, reconceptualized being as consisting of substance and accident in a mutually complementary relationship (2007, 2011). This dual notion of being reconstructs Aristotle's bifurcating and polarizing ontology and affirms the duality that colors the African conception of reality. Thus, scholars like Edeh, Asouzu and Onunwa assert that reality, in whatever forms, always exist as dual.

African conception of reality as dual does not operate with the bivalent logic and the Aristotelian laws of thought underlying dualism. Scholars like Asouzu regard bivalent logic as an exclusivist logic of 'either this or that.' This logic that grounds dualism also grounds belief in a God possessing the superlative attributes of all-benevolence, without wickedness, and all-powerfulness, without weakness. Aristotelian bivalent logic underpins God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence in that it absolutizes an aspect of reality and neglect the other. For instance, Aristotle equates substance to being even in the absence of accident (ARISTOTLE 1947). This is the manner Aristotle's bivalent logic grounds God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence. With respect to God's omnibenevolence, this bivalent logic absolutizes God's love, negating God's wickedness and therefore leads to the view that God is all-loving – omnibenevolent. Also, regarding God's

omnipotence, this logic elevates God's power to an absolute instance, neglecting God's weakness and asserts that God is all-powerful – omnipotent.

Contrary to the above, African duality rests on a trivalent logic that goes beyond exclusion and embraces inclusion. Hence, it is an inclusive logic of 'this and that.' Unlike the bivalent logic that bifurcates and polarizes reality, trivalent logic unifies and harmonizes entities within reality.

Two African logic systems capture the nature of this trivalent logic, namely, harmonious monism (JIOMAH 1996, 2006, 2014, 2016) and Ezumezu logic (CHIMAKONAM 2015, 2018, 2019, CHIMAKONAM and OGBONNAYA 2021). However, Ezumezu logic is more plausible because of its well-articulated three laws of thoughts that ground it. Consequently, our focus will be on Ezumezu logic. The three laws of thought are *njikoka*, *nmekoka*, and *onona-etiti* (CHIMAKONAM 2018, 2019; CHIMAKONAM & CHIMAKONAM 2022). For example, the law of *njikoka* (integrativity and relationality) holds that two seemingly opposed variables share a relationship of integration within a whole. The metatheoretic representation of this law is $(T) A \downarrow (T) A \mid \rightarrow (T) (A \wedge B)$. This implies that "A is true iff A is true wedge-implies A and B is true" (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 100). Also, the law of *nmekoka* (contextuality and complementarity) asserts that two seemingly opposed variables participate in a relationship of complementing each other within a whole. The metatheoretic representation of this law is $(T) A \downarrow (T) A \mid \rightarrow (T) (A \wedge B) \text{ or } T \mid \supset F$. This connotes that "C is or equals a complement of T and F" (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 100). Furthermore, the law of *onona-etiti* (included middle and complementarity) states that two seemingly opposed variables share a middle ground. The metatheoretic representation of this law is $(T) A \wedge (T) \sim A \text{ or } (T) A \wedge (F) A$. This implies that "A is both true and false (both and)" (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 100). Here, the two variables coexist and complement each other without losing their identity. They become independent variables once strict contextualization occurs.

Chimakonam labels the variables *ezu* and *izu*. These variables cannot exist on their own except in relationship with each other. Hence, they always exist as an inseparable oneness known as *ezumezu*. Thus, *ezumezu* is a middle ground, which results from the complementary integration of *ezu* and *izu* (CHIMAKONAM 2019; cf. AGADA 2015). Therefore, to talk about *ezu* and *izu* is to speak beyond their singularities. That is, we cannot talk about either *ezu* or *izu* without the opposite other in *ezumezu*.

From the foregoing, it becomes apparent that *Ezumezu* logic is a trivalent logic with three values, namely *ezu*, *izu* and *ezumezu*. The values, *ezu* and *izu*, according to Chimakonam, are the sub-contrary values that function as the contextual modes. Also, the value, *ezumezu*, Chimakonam notes, is the complementary mode (2019, 97-99). In Chimakonam's words:

Granted that the two standard values in African thought system are subcontraries thus capable of [complementing] each other in the third value called ezumezu; it does not annihilate the inherent two values of Western logic. It only means that inferences switch from one platform to the other. So we break the modes into two to account for this namely: (i) the contextual and (ii) the complementary modes of thought. Standing on their own, the two sub-contrary values, called ezu and izu or true and false are treated as peripheries to the centre. At such a platform, each of the two standard values is in a contextual mode of interpreting variables on contextual basis. But joined together through the conjunctive motion in the intermediary third value, the product called ezumezu is said to be in a complementary mode treating variables no longer at a contextual but at a complementary level until complementation breaks down and variables return to the contextual modes through disjunctive motion. (2019, 99)

We must note that ezu and izu in their singularities are the exclusive true and false values (T or F), while ezumezu is the inclusive true and false value (TF or Tand F). It is the complementarily integrated value, ezumezu, that depicts the supplementary laws of thought discussed above. Although there is a dynamic relationship between ezu and izu, their coexistence brings about ezumezu. Thus, ezumezu is a duality of ezu and izu that are in a complementarily integrated relationship. This onto-logical discourse substantiates the claim that reality is dual.

We might ask if there is any time when Africans see reality as dominantly one side of the duality? For instance, can Africans see reality as either spiritual or physical? The answer is yes. However, this does not deny the reality of duality (CHIMAKONAM 2013). The point is what seems to be either physical or spiritual is also dual. Ijiomah explains this when he says that what is physical has inherent spirituality and what is spiritual has inherent physicality (IJIOMAH 2006, 2014). Thus, reality is always inseparably dual. This applies to all reality and all possible conceptions of reality.

Applying this onto-logical discourse can help us understand that inherent in God's benevolence and powerfulness are wickedness and weakness. For instance, if we talk about God's benevolence within the context of African duality theory, we speak of it with reference to God's wickedness. God is benevolent but also wicked. God's wickedness is inherent in his benevolence. This is apparent in the fact that the benevolent God who is powerful is failing to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from occurring and failing to stop it completely now that it has happened. But because this benevolent God is also wicked, God takes delight in seeing people suffer from the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, God is unwilling to take away the COVID-19 virus and ease human suffering. This does not make God all-evil and negate God's goodness. God is good and wicked at the same time as noted in the previous section. Therefore, a benevolent God is also wicked in line with the African duality theory.

Also, a powerful God is not devoid of weakness. God, who is powerful, also shows weakness when he fails to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from occurring and refuses to take it away as it has occurred. God allows the COVID-19 pandemic to occur and remain since it is beyond his power to prevent the pandemic by divine fiat. Therefore, inherent in a powerful God is weakness (see section 2).

The question that readily comes to mind is, why do some African scholars regard God as omnibenevolent and omnipotent and not wicked and weak in addition? The simple answer is, they think with the exclusivist bivalent logic that underpins dualism. For them, what is good cannot be evil, following the exclusivist 'either this or that' bivalent logic. Thus, for them, a benevolent and powerful God cannot be associated with wickedness and weakness. However, in the African worldview, this is not the case. The African duality theory and its undergirding inclusivist 'this and that' logic supply an idea of reality that holds that a good thing can have an evil dimension. Thus, just as *ezu* and *izu* coexist in *ezumezu*, benevolence and wickedness and powerfulness and weakness are pairs of attributes that coexist in God. Therefore, following African duality theory, God cannot be either benevolent or wicked, or powerful or weak. Instead, God is both benevolent and wicked and powerful and weak. This is because it is in the nature of things to be dual (EDEH 1985), and God is not an exception. One possible criticism that could be raised against our position is, how is it different from the respective but related positions of Bewaji (1998) and Fayemi (2012)? Although we agree with Bewaji and Fayemi that God is not omnibenevolent and omnipotent, we take this argument a step further. First, we are of the view that benevolence has its contrary or complementary opposite, which is wickedness. Also, powerfulness has its contrary or complementary opposite, weakness. Therefore, we ground this thought using African duality theory and Ezumezu logic, which makes room for the coexistence of opposites that are contraries but not contradictories. Hence, in God, the attributes of benevolence and wickedness coexist. Also, in God, the attributes of power and weakness coexist. What is glaring here is that with the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused so much suffering and pain, we have no choice but to rethink the attributes of omnibenevolence and omnipotence using the African duality theory and Ezumezu logic.

Another possible criticism is, does our view not strip the concept of God of absoluteness? Well, if we were thinking within a dualist and bivalent logic system, this criticism could have been warranted. This is because dualism and Aristotle's bivalent logic elevate and absolutize an aspect of reality, in this context, God's love and power, while their respective opposite other, God's wickedness and weakness, are negated. However, this is not what reality depicts. An aspect of reality does not equate to the totality of reality. Likewise, God's love without God's wickedness, and God's powerfulness without God's weakness do not capture God's reality. The point is that the criticism does not count since we are thinking in line with duality and an inclusive trivalent (Ezumezu) logic. The reality of the sufferings that come with COVID-19 pandemic helps us to affirm God's wickedness and weakness, which have been neglected by many African philosophers of religion.

Conclusion

So far, the question that guided our discussion is, can omnibenevolence and omnipotence, as attributes of God, be upheld in the face of the suffering that come with the COVID-19 pandemic? We teased out conceptions of God in Africa that present God as transcendent and limited and asserted that the limitation view can be helpful in accounting for belief in a benevolent God in the COVID-19 era. We discussed the COVID-19 pandemic, stating what it is, the nature of transmission, and the negative impact on humanity. We explored how the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic affects the idea that God is omnibenevolent and omnipotent.

Using African duality theory and its undergirding inclusivist ‘this and that’ logic, we argued that God is both benevolent and wicked and powerful and weak. Duality involves the complementary integration of seemingly opposed variables within a whole. Consequently, we contended in this paper that God possesses the attributes of benevolence and power alongside their seeming opposites, wickedness and weakness.

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