

REINCARNATION: An Impossible Concept in the Framework of African Ontology *

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1. Dynamic Character Of The African Concept Of Being

The essence or nature of anything is conceived by the African as "force. " It is not even correct to say that 'being' in the African thought has the necessary element or quality of force. The precision of their concept of being will not be attained if their notion of being is expressed as "being is that which possesses force." Rather, "the concept of force is inseparable from the definition of 'being.' There is no idea among Bantu of 'being' divorced from the idea of 'force.' Without the element 'force,' 'being' cannot be conceived Force is the nature of being, force is being; being is force.(1) Care must be taken here not to confuse this dynamic notion of reality with some kind of universal force animating all existence.

For Africans there is a clear distinction and essential difference between different forces or inner realities of beings, just as there are differences between categories of material visible things.

"When you say in terms of western philosophy, that beings are differentiated by their essences or nature; Africans say that forces differ in their essences or nature. There is the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces, and vegetable and even mineral forces." (2)

In addition to different categories of forces, Africans maintain that these forces follow a hierarchical order such that God precedes the spirits; then come the founding fathers and the living-dead, according to the order of primogeniture; then the living according to their rank in terms of seniority.

2. Belief In Reincarnation In The Framework Of Western Ontology

How does Western metaphysics consider the entity man as a being? What is the reality in man? Here the notion of substance comes into play. 'Substance' is the term used to signify that which is sought when philosophers investigate the primary being of things (ousia) or essential nature. Conjoined with substance is the notion of accidents, which are predicable features of the essence or substance of a being. Accidents may change, disappear, while substance remains the same always. It is not relevant here to enter into the Aristotelian and Scholastic discussion of proper or essential and nonproper or logical accidents.

According to Western ontology man is made up of substance and accidents; the substance is the soul or spirit; the accident is the body or matter. In Cartesian language, man is a mind/body dualism. The body as an accident may change, rot, and cease at death, but the substance-soul, spirit, mind-the reality that is, (for man) subsists. For Christians, this soul goes to either heaven or hell, depending on how it conducted its

operations during its earthly existence. For believers in reincarnation, this soul informs another body for another span of life, even ad infinitum.

Because it is substance which is static, singular and unitary in nature, when once it informs a new body whether human, animal or tree, it ceases to exist in the spirit world. There is no further respect accorded it in the spirit world but acts of recognition and respect are accorded it in its new bodily abode. Sir James Frazer testifies to this in the religious life of primitive European peoples. "To the savage the world in general is animate and trees and plants are no exception to the rule. He thinks that they have souls like his own, and treats them accordingly. (3)

3. Reincarnation Impossible In The Framework Of African Ontology

Bearing in mind our earliest treatment of the African concept of being as "force" and its dynamic nature, we further add that in the category of visible beings the Africans distinguish that which is perceived by the senses and the "thing in itself" namely, the inner nature or "force" of the thing whether man, animal, or tree. When a person dies, the traditional African does not say that the "soul" of the dead has gone to the spirit-world. It is not the "soul" or "part of man" that has gone to the world of the spirits but the whole man though not in a visible but invisible state. Tempels explains:

"What lives on after death is not called by the Bantu by a term indicating part of man. I have always heard their elders speak of "the man himself;" or it is "the little man" who was formerly hidden behind the perceptible manifestation of the man; or muntu which at death has left the living,.. Muntu signifies vital force endowed with intelligence and will." (4)

The dichotomy of soul and body is not applicable such that at death, the soul separates and inhabits another body. Rather "the man" still exists as this person in a spiritual invisible form. His bodily energy goes but his vital force persists and waxes stronger and stronger ontologically.

In line with the hierarchy of "forces" the dead ancestors assume an enhanced vital superiority of intelligence and will over the living; "the departed must therefore have gained in deeper knowledge of the forces and nature" (5) and because of the ontological relationship existing among members of the clan, they interact with the living. What interacts with the living is "the man himself" who is now essentially "force."--Vital force grows and/or weakens through the interaction of forces. A person is "really dead" when his vital force is totally diminished. Due to their preoccupation with immortality and deathlessness, the ancestors are concerned with the increase of their and their descendants' vital force for the well-being and continuity of the clan.

One of the ways of increasing the ancestor's vital force is by sacrifices and prayers from the living descendants. Hence the wish of Africans to have many children who will offer sacrifices to them after death. By an inverse movement the "force" of the ancestor flows into the sacrifices and into the community which he embodies and the living receive the "strengthening influence" of the ancestor. "The whole weight of an extinct race lies on the dead... for they have for the whole time of their infinite deathlessness, missed the goal of their existence, that is, to perpetuate themselves through reproduction in the living person. (6)

This "perpetuation of themselves through reproduction" is what has been mistakenly called reincarnation. It is rather the "life-giving will" or "vital influence" or "secretion of vital power" of the ancestor on his living dependants. This is understandable because the ancestor who is now pure dynamic force can influence and effect many births in his clan without emptying his personality. This explains Prof. Idowu's "partial or more precisely apparent reincarnation. Reincarnation cannot be partial or apparent. Either it is or is not." The dead are esteemed, says Tempels, "only to the extent to which they increase and perpetuate their vital force in their progeny. (7)

The vital force of an ancestor is comparable to the sun, which is not diminished by the number and extent of its rays. The sun is present in its rays and heats and brightens through its rays; yet, the rays of the sun singly or together are not the sun. In the same way the "vital force" which is the being of the ancestor can be present in one or several of the living members of his clan, through his life-giving will or vital influence, without its being diminished or truncated. Just as the sun is the causal agent of his descendants who are below him in the 1 hierarchy. This vital influence is subordinate and distinct from the creative influence which is the domain of God. Tempels clarifies the point:

"Man is not the first or creative cause of life, but he sustains and adds to the life of the forces which he finds below him within his ontological hierarchy. And man, in Bantu thought, although in a more circumscribed sense than God, is also a causal force of life." (8)

This is the philosophical basis for the African claim that a certain ancestor has been reborn" in one or several living members of the same clan. What the Africans mean by 'return' or 'reborn' cannot be translated by 'reincarnation' because for them the child or children are not identified with the dead, since the birth of the little one(s) in no wise puts an end to the existence of the deceased ancestor in the spirit world. This becomes clearer still when one realises that Africans do not hold that conception is caused by the spirit of the ancestor. The biological conception of the child results from the concurrent act of God and the parents. The influence of the ancestor, which has been called reincarnation, "comes later on." It is the human being, who already possesses life in the womb of his mother (by divine influence), who finds himself under the vital, the ontological influence of a predestined ancestor or of a spirit. (9) This explains the "Paradox" which Prof. Idowu identified in the belief of the Yorubas that deceased persons do "reincarnate" in their grandchildren and still continue to live in AfterLife. The dynamic nature of the "being" of the deceased, the theory of ontological hierarchy and interaction of forces in African metaphysics explain how the deceased ancestor can be in the spirit-world and yet his presence is felt in the land of the living.

4. The Language Of Accommodation

Walter Lippmann in his book *The Public Philosophy* discusses what he calls the language of accommodation. He observed that "men have been labouring with the problem of how to make concrete and real what is abstract and immaterial ever since the Greek philosophers began to feel the need to accommodate the popular Homeric religion to the advance of science.(10) 'Reincarnation,' in the thinking of the present writer, is a language of accommodation employed by Western anthropologists and churchmen to make "concrete and real what is abstract and immaterial," namely, the cultural concept of Africans in connection with the return" or "rebirth" of ancestors in their

living descendants. It is as misleading as terms like ancestor worship, polytheism, animism, etc., applied to African religion by early European anthropologists. These were "working" definitions used to cloak realities which were incomprehensible to these early researchers but which have not been corrected and updated. Placide Tempels has contributed a correction by noting that:

"European observers generally believe that there is a belief in metempsychosis in the strict sense of the word. It is necessary to clear up this point You frequently come across several Ngoi or Ilunga. It is already clear that if there is metempsychosis, it is not in the sense in which this belief is ordinarily held.... The Bantu will tell you that the little Ngoi is not identified with the dead. In fact the birth of the little Ngoi in no wise puts an end to the existence of the deceased Ngoi in the world of the dead. The deceased Ngoi will become the nqudi or mbozwa of the newly-born, who is his majina (homonym).... Every Nqudi remains the inseparable protector of his homonym"(11)

5. CONCLUSION

There must be limits beyond which the language of accommodation should not be employed. Use of it should not be made when there is a sharp diversity of belief which, if obliterated, might cause a vital threat to a culture. The imposition of the "belief in reincarnation" on Africans has undermined African cultural identity in that their cultural respect to their ancestors, which are tokens of fellowship, hospitality, and family continuity, are misconstrued as beliefs in reincarnation. The situation becomes more disturbing when "educated" Africans are in the forefront in "imposing" the concepts of reincarnation on Africans. Other terminologies such as "vital influence," "life-strengthening," "personal ray," "vital participation," should be used in place of "reincarnation." Instead of saying that a newborn child is a "reincarnate" of an ancestor, we should rather say that he is the "vital influence" or the "life-share" or "personal ray," or "living-perpetuation" of the ancestor. If these suggested terminologies seem inadequate to the reader, I invite him to suggest an alternative, so that with the benefit of his collaboration, we can approach more nearly to perfection and exactitude. However, an attempt has been made in this paper to carry out a philosophical reappraisal of African belief in reincarnation; a systematic reflection on this "datum" of African culture has been effected. The result is in agreement with Richard Nettlehip's claim that "in thinking facts out to their consequences, the philosopher necessarily arrives at conclusions different, and often contradictory to the ideas current around him."(12)

NOTES:

- (1) Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris, 1969, p.37.
- (2) *Ibid.*, p.58.
- (3) James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, New York, 1964, p.108.
- (4) Placide Tempels, *op. cit.*, p.55.
- (5) Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*, New York, p.106.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p.109.
- (7) Placide Tempels, *op. cit.*, p.46.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p.99.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p.111.

(10) Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy*, New York, 1963, p. 131.

(11) Placide Tempels, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

(12) Richard Lewis Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato*, New York, 1958, p.3.

* Taken from *African Belief in Reincarnation: A Philosophical Reappraisal*, Enugu, 1996, pp. 33-45.