

RELATIONS BETWEEN SELF AND VITAL FORCE IN IGBO CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Placidé Tempels' Bantu Philosophy dwelt essentially on the concept of vital force. His equation of being with force in Bantu philosophy gives the impression that being in all of Africa is equal to force. There might be relations but the extent and the manner of its application may be limited from one African culture to another. This article thus argues that 'vital force' does not apply in all cultures in Africa, especially, that of the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria.

Keywords: Bantu Philosophy, Selfhood, Relations, Vital Force, Igbo Ontology.

Introduction

Prior to the publication of Placidé Tempels' *Bantu philosophy* not much was clearly known about the vital force ontology among the Bantus. However, this force remains a living force among this people. Characteristically, vital force pervades or cuts across all strata of reality, with varying degrees of affectability. It (vital force) is also perceived as something impersonal and non-conscious. Which means it is usually located within the unconscious level of culture. This may be true, since it would require the intervention of a philosopher to identify it, and bring it to a level of philosophic consciousness.

No doubt, vital force has great significance for the Bantu ontology. It is so central that that nothing escapes its influence, according to Tempels. It pervades even in their linguistic expressions. Of course, language is the mirror of reality of a given culture. It is through proper study of linguistic forms that reality is penetrated and enlightened. According to Placidé

Tempels, the equation that governs reality for the Bantus is simply this: “being is force and force is being.” The accent placed on this equation is often misconstrued, especially outside the shores of Africa, to mean that the experience of vital force is general among African cultures, and that it is the force that governs reality in all of Africa. This is here strongly contested.

It is, therefore, against this background that we wish to show in this paper that a different kind of force governs reality among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria. Our discussion will take the following steps: first, we shall investigate the meaning of self in Igbo ontology and vital force in Bantu ontology, and second, we shall examine the relations between vital force and self, and third, we shall look at the Igbo alternative to vital force. And then the conclusion will follow.

The meanings of self in Igbo ontology and vital force in Bantu ontology

Ours is an interesting study that borders on the relations between *self* and *vital force*. The two are not mutually exclusive as both belong to the sphere of ontology. The duo entails the category of dynamism. The reality of the self is well established in Igbo ontology. The social and the moral views about the self are rejected due to their obvious lack of conceptual framework. In his *Identity and Change*, T. Okere (1996: 153-196) defends a synthetically structured ontology of self; being a product of his reflection on the Igbo word, *onwe*. In his own contribution, R. Onwuanuibe (1984: 184) identifies the self with ‘soul or spirit, and human presence.’ These authors reject a certain view of the self as a process. Rather the self is seen more as a ‘relational category.’ What this means is that the self is, first and foremost, an ontological entity, a subject of predication; but is imbued with the capacity to enter into relations. This is a way of expressing the self’s capacity to integrate some positive elements of sociality and morality in its being.

The concepts of sociality and morality embody the communal virtues of social equality, sympathy and solidarity. Morality speaks of the self’s affinity with the community, with God and the whole of nature. The self functions as a harmonizer of all these forces, in its capacity as a cosmic relational self. On the horizontal level a superstructure of enveloping relationships encircles the self. The self’s relational power can be summarized as follows: it is a being endowed with autonomy and freedom. Hence, it is ontological and communitarian. In his recent article with the title, “On the Unity of Conceptual Strands of the Self: Perspectives in Igbo Ontology,” C. Okoro has added another dimension to the self’s conception in Igbo ontology. According to him, the self’s proper sphere of operation is the *communo-divine context*, where the communal entails the social and moral, wherein the moral is deemed ‘cooperate,’ involving the living, the dead, the unborn and the whole of nature. The divine context depicts self’s transcendence, which indicates the self’s association with God or god as its essence. So, the selfhood that perfectly suits Igbo ontology, therefore, is a “synthetically structured communitarian self,” but whose ontology remains untouchable.

Similarly, dynamism equally defines vital force. Tempels’ Bantu philosophy does not offer us much on the definition of vital force. But to help our understanding, vital force bears some similarity with *sunsum* of Akan, meaning the heart. And it is that which gives a person’s personality its force. The word that expresses the same meaning in Yoruba is called ‘*okan*.’ In

its English designation, *okan* means either the attitude of the mind or conscience. The sense of the meaning of vital force can be further grasped by the kind of function it performs. It is branded impersonal and non-conscious, but nevertheless active in every living force. It can co-exist with the soul. To this, E. A. R. Omi and K. C. Anyanwu attest:

This life-force is impersonal and non-conscious yet constitutes the individuality of every living-force or individual. Every person has his own life-force, and this can vary quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Life-force is under the direction or guidance of the soul which is also a force, though it does not vary quantitatively or qualitatively. The African has no definition of such forces but only describes them in terms of their functions. (1984:90).

The above description of vital force establishes its unique relation to the human soul. The authors claim that vital force is under the direction of the soul, being a relationship that does not alter neither the qualitative nor quantitative make up of the self in its relations to the vital force.

Relations between vital force and self

Unarguably, the above passage offers a lot about the self's relation to the vital force. The self is usually identified with the soul or spirit. And now the two authors, Omi and Anyanwu tell us that vital force is under the direction of the soul. The stability of the self or soul is underlined, as it does not vary either qualitatively or quantitatively. This further underscores the ontology of the self as well as its impersonal nature. Hence, it is assigned to the self to dictate and control the direction of the vital force. This is a mark of responsibility that the self exercises over vital force. This again suggests that not even the vital force can determine the autonomy and freedom of the self. The indeterminable nature of human autonomy and freedom derives not from the self but from God, whose vital force is greater than all others, including humans. However impersonal and non-conscious vital force can be, its effect remains undeniable. Life force operates in a unitary African world where nothing is life-less or soul-less as against the soulless analytical world of the Western world. Interactions along the vertical and horizontal planes of existence happen, thanks to vital forces.

K. C. Anyanwu (1984: 89) explains that life force does not subject itself to any rules of logic or broken down in elemental units. He contends that human reason does not exhaust the means of accessing knowledge. Hence, other sources of knowledge abound as through art, music, folk song, and myth, imagination, intuition, feeling and emotion. He argues that by these means people are stabilized in their environment. We must submit with Anyanwu that knowledge derived through the aforementioned sources is not anything less rational. To make reference to knowledge in the discussion of vital force is not to suggest that source of African knowledge is based on a brute force. Even Greek mythologies offered great philosophical insights to many Western philosophers. But the recurring question has been 'at what stage does myth become philosophy?' The same question resurfaces in the discussion of how vital force can influence human knowledge. This is part of the 'mystery' of knowledge acquisition that anything can practically fire human imagination to generate knowledge.

The belief system of animism often associated with Africa must be clearly distinguished, and not be confused with life force. Animism purports to look at inanimate objects as spirit- or soul-filled. The truth is that “Africa does not attribute personal soul to all beings as proponents of animism or animatism purport. The truth, according to F. Njoku (2002:129) is the underlying belief that trees can serve as the abode of good and bad spirits. The idea behind vital force is that nature is personal; and, therefore, the medium through which human personality and will continually operate. In his *Africa: the Country, the Concept and the Horizon*, I. M. Onyeocha describes the African and his world as he quotes G. Ernest Wright thus:

Nature is alive, and its powers are distinguished as personal because (humans have) directly experienced them. There is no such thing as the inanimate. (Humans live) in the realm of a throbbing, personal nature, the kingdom of the holy gods. (They are) caught in the interplay of gigantic forces to which (they must integrate (their lives). (These forces) are known to (humans) because (they have) experienced them, not as objects but as personalities so much greater in power than (their) own (,) that of necessity they worship and serve them. (2007:165).

The idea of life force reveals the fact that nature is personal. I. M. Onyeocha further reveals that life force, when applied to humans, functions as the creative intelligence and will that are sometimes employed in most difficult situations to serve as a manipulative power on the created order to meet man’s numerous problems. (2007: 166-7). There is a plus to African personality here, as it is no spectator but a life force that plays an active part in life events. It operates with the logic of aesthetics where reality hangs together. It is worth clarifying that the best expression to describe reality in African context is not one of ‘hanging together’ or being ‘interconnected,’ but rather one of complementing each other. The African combines all human faculties and experiences: feeling, imagining, reasoning, thinking, and intuition. He highlights more on the processes of intuition and personal experience as veritable means of arriving at trustworthy knowledge for tackling life’s challenges.

Admittedly, the true meaning of vital force remains somewhat vague. It is no surprise then that it is construed in some quarters as a whirlwind that gathers no moss or as being magical or as a *deus ex machine* that explains nothing. Let us deepen our reflection then further on how life force relates to self or personhood. We do this indirectly. This indirect way relates life force to human being. It is considered a helpful window. But a good point of departure will be to acquaint our readers with what Tempels says concerning “being as force and force as being”, which formed the bedrock of his Bantu philosophy. Tempels makes a fundamental assumption that conceptual difference exists between Africans and non-Africans, also between beings and entities, and human beings. In Bantu ontology, ‘being,’ according to him, is conceived in terms of vital force or essential energies. Vital force suffuses every reality including Bantu language. But Tempels tells of the insufficient power of this same language to translate the word vital force. Force is both the necessary and sufficient condition of being. Or put in another way, ‘force is being and being is force.’ (Kaphagawani 2003:335).

This takes us to address the question about the relevance of vital force to human being and person in Bantu ontology. That is, the effect of the vital force on the human individual within

Bantu culture. This we consider a big help to understanding how Tempels understands the human being *vis-à-vis* vital force. Interestingly, Tempels distinguishes between being human and a person. Originally the word *munthu* in Chechewa designates both human and person. But Tempels does not translate *muntu* to mean a human in Chechewa language. Rather he translates *muntu* as person; meaning a vital force not endowed with intelligence and will. By implication, to be human, according to Tempels, is to be bereft of intelligence and will. But it is difficult to accept this, as the notion of *muntu* translates both human and person as earlier noted. There are sometimes contexts that emphasize either the humanness or the personhood. Such contexts distinguish being human and skin pigmentation on the one hand, and being a person on the other - where the emphasis is on the socio-centric view of personhood that varies from one culture to another. (Kaphagawani 2003:336). So, in the Tempelsian corpus, what the human being stands for is not made sufficiently clear. The loophole suggests dangerously that what is conceptually different between Africans and non-Africans (Whites) may be absence of intelligence and will on the part of the former. The clarity comes by way of the distinction made by Kaphagawani to the effect that being human derives from our common biological origins. But our being persons, i.e. the way we see ourselves varies from culture to culture, and from society to society. So, contrary to the implicit position of Tempels of the possibility of rational and non-rational forces, voluntary and non-voluntary forces, Kaphagawani maintains that the properties of intelligence and will distinguish the species "humans" from the genus "animals." This he stipulates in a relatively long-drawn argument thus:

... Tempels tries to steer clear of the Western conception of being in his account of the concept of a person in Bantu thought, he surreptitiously reverts to the very distinctions employed in Western philosophy to distinguish humans from other entities. He claims that in Bantu thought humans are beings distinct from other beings by their properties of reason and volition. Thus, on the Tempelsian thesis of being as force, it should apparently be possible to distinguish between rational and non-rational forces, voluntary and non-voluntary forces. For, according to the Force Thesis of beings as forces, there must be a radical difference between vital forces that have intelligence and those that do not. But it does seem that what it means for a vital force to have intelligence and will or, for that matter, what an intelligent vital force or a voluntary vital force is, cannot be accounted for in the Tempelsian framework. In any case, the properties of intelligence and will are precisely what, in Western philosophy, are taken to be properties distinguishing the genus "humans" from the species "animals." (Kaphagawani 2003:336).

No doubt, the properties of intelligence and will distinguish humans from animals. The indefinability of vital force that underlies the essence of being is part of the problem involved in the indefinability of person, or personality or self in Tempels' work. The suggestion that there could possibly be grounds to ascribe intelligence and will to some human beings and not to some others does not depreciate the dignity of African persons as rational beings. It is so, since vital force according to Okere (1983: 2) in his *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility* is applied not only to humans but also to all beings, God, the ancestors, and the living, animals, vegetables, and minerals in respect of their hierarchical vital force, it becomes clear that Tempels may be distinguishing

human persons with the forces of intelligence and will from inanimate objects that lack this power, irrespective of the fact that they share in the same vital force.

The Igbo alternative to vital force

Vital force is regarded as a cliché to the point of losing all its explanatory force. Little wonder then alternative concepts like dynamism and *nyama* (vigour in the living or God) have been suggested as better alternative replacements. Even the so-called better alternative concepts have been weighed and found wanting also. Parrinder suggests that whatever the force might be should be taken as a 'psychic element' found in varying degrees in woodcarvers, blacksmiths, hunters, orators, priests, chiefs and witches. Such power, or force or psychic insight stand as *kofi*, *ire*, *ashe*, *ike*, and can play both positive or negative roles on people. F. Njoku (2002: 129), argues that this force is deemed to be immortal, since it can survive beyond physical death. He claims that the Igbo tradition has medicine men, sorcerers, priests, and magicians invested with such power or force. But none of these forces represents or equates to the kind that Tempels associated with the Bantus' life force. His avowed position is that "reality in Igbo conceptual scheme is not force but value." He identifies the values of truth (*ezi-okwu*) and justice (*ikpe nkwu-muoto*) as the animating sources of life among the Igbo. This is expressed in rich Igbo cultural symbolism of *ofo* and *ogu*. Whereas the *ofo* symbolizes the authority to say the truth on the part of the ancestor and by extension all others, *ogu* stands for personal innocence to which one can appeal for acquittal in case of false accusations. The *chi* in Igbo cosmology is responsible for morality. In some instances of misfortune, it is the person's *chi* that is responsible. However this responsibility given to one's *chi* does not exonerate the individual from personal moral guilt. To overcome failures in the life of the individual, it is seriously suggested that the self must be committed to righteousness, i.e. to live in accord with the dictates of the Supreme Being.

The self in Igbo ontology must be reawakened to the consciousness of its link to the creator of all, God and to higher life's values. This is why the present Igbo crisis of identity is seen more as a crisis of value, by which money and the pursuit of material things now top the priority list according to Njoku (2002: 197-199). Thus, we maintain that much as vital force may be a driving motif for the people of Bantu, it is not universally applicable to all Africans, especially the Igbo. To further strengthen the position of Njoku, C. G. Osuagwu has reflected on "*Ikenga* and Igbo personality." His argument rests on the fact that the self or *onwe* is not sufficient to fully account for Igbo personality. A richer meaning, according to him, must come from the composite of 'onwe' being a contraction of 'onye nwe' own, owner; own, Lordship, and *chi* as individual's guardian spirit. He concretizes this composite in *Ikenga* which means when broken down: *ike*, force and *nga*, motif; both meaning 'driving force.' Accordingly, it is the *chi* that supplies the vision, while the *onwe* supplies the will. In the end, it is righteousness that sustains the union and guarantees success. The Igbo ethical life, he says, aims at avoiding 'unrighteousness' that could divorce the 'onwe' from 'chi' and dissolve the *Ikenga*; and that the *chi* which is the spark of God does not risk corruption by evil deeds. (Osuagwu 2010:14). It is clear to see then that the Igbo concept of force does not bear the same meaning so far given in respect of Tempels' vital force for the Bantu. Thus, the Igbo look at *Ikenga* as her driving force in life, whose sole aim is to achieve in Igbo personality a life characterized by moral rectitude. This moral rectitude implies living at rights with all of creation. Put differently, Igbo personality must embody in itself the virtues of truth and justice in daily

living and activity. What, therefore, may be considered useful in the Tempelsian vital force (and by extension to all Africans of which the Igbo is a part), and in the light of Kaphagawani's elucidation, is its identification with intelligence and will as defining features of all human beings and persons without exception. There is yet another problem. It is the role played by vital force in the self's relation to the community. Some have argued that this force is not blind. When it is said that the Igbo does not see the self in isolation from the community to which it belongs, C. Anyanwu (1984: 90) explains that, the reason for this is traceable to the understanding of life-force which equates everything to itself or that from which everything shares, and that this presents the ontological relationships among life forces that could not be discussed by taking individual forces in isolation from the community without, of course, disregarding the similarities or dissimilarities between things. In this way, we see vital force serving as a bond uniting all strata of existence and realities. Thus in this relationship, the visible is united with the invisible, the natural with the supernatural, human with the divine. Add to this, the Bantu's conception of selfhood is in accord with the Mbiti's formulation regarding the individual's relation to the community: 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore, I am.' The use of the pronouns 'I and We' shows the relatedness of the self to the community of other selves. The connectedness of the self with the group and the surrounding milieu does not tarnish the integrity of the self. Vital force plays one significant role of safeguarding harmony, and balance between the spheres of profane and the sacred and between the individual and the community. Vital force is not in conflict with human personality, as it does not alter it. Similarly, it does not constitute any danger to the freedom and autonomy of the self. C. S. Nwodo (2004: 13-15) in his *Philosophical Perspective on Chinua Achebe* has argued that the 'concept of balance' is at the heart of the relationship between dual entities as in 'male and female, individual and community, the living and the dead, the ethical and the religious' in Igbo culture. Here we have his actual words:

... in reality there is a plenty of room, thanks to the element of balance, for individuality, and for individual growth and personal identity. The community and the individual complement each other in a harmonious balance that allows the wise and the not so wise, the warrior and the coward to make their contributions freely in the assembly of the people, where decisions are taken only "at the end," "after everybody has spoken." (2004: 15).

The author in the above passage employs the 'concept of balance' to show there is complementary relationship between the dualities of the individual and the community. In spite of the relative tension, which is normal in a relationship, harmony is maintained. Viewed critically, this tension is necessary, as it may serve as a brainchild of sound decisions for the common good. Indeed the same sense is replicated in the relationship between God and human being. This is, especially important for the Igbo who incorporate God or god (chi) as a substantial part of personal identity. The God factor does not, in fact, interfere with human freedom. On the contrary, his influence in human life generally is for the overall good of humanity. The reason is that man who is from the beginning not alone in the order of existence cannot presume to operate independently of God in the order of action. It may be difficult to access the authenticity of the self outside the shores of community and God. In fact, it is the community of other selves that authenticates the self. Otherwise the self would become locked

up in its shell, and thus becomes the measure of its authenticity, which is absurd. What remains to be addressed in the above passage is the author's use of the 'concept of balance.' He says that the concept of balance is 'intrinsic.' The problem is 'how to reconcile this intrinsic concept of balance that is generative of harmony with the concept of vital force, which performs the same function?' This comes against the backdrop that conceptualizes vital force as being capable of existing either as something internal and/or external. Are their meanings: 'vital force and concept of balance' the same or are they different? We assume here that their meanings are the same; since the function they perform gives the impression that the concepts serve as agents of harmony and moderators of tension in human relationships in society. This is especially true of vital force, whose influence on the soul does not result to any 'qualitative' or 'quantitative change' - an expression that speaks of harmony and stability.

Conclusion

The cosmological world of the Igbo is densely spiritualized. This 'world' is described as being 'inter-sphere' as it involves both human and divine. What sustains their relationship is the practical lived religious experience of the people. Whether we speak about vital force or animism, the idea is the same: they refer to the dynamic nature of reality as well as express the fact that nature is personal. It is a 'dynamism' embedded in both the divine and human nature that speaks of one harmonious relationship. Far from being blind, vital force does not corrupt the sources of knowledge as, for instance, coming through art, music, folk song, and myth, imagination, intuition, feeling and emotion. Contrary to the dangerous insinuation by Tempels' conceptual clarification on 'human' and 'person,' vital force was never applied to the Bantus or African peoples to suggest that they are less human or irrational, i.e. bereft of intelligence and will. What is agreeable to reason is that: since human nature is the same, human persons everywhere are endowed with the qualities of 'intelligence' and 'will,' in contrast to animals without these qualities. Vital force is characteristically unassuming in Bantu ontology, as it does not affect the state of the soul/personal identity either qualitatively or quantitatively. Comparatively, as a concept of harmony, vital force has great affinity to the concept of balance in the relations of the individual and community on the one hand, the community and God/nature on the other. The element of dynamism that is associated with vital force may capture 'personal identity' in Igbo ontology as a relational concept, i.e. it can enter into relationship with the community, God and the whole of nature. It is a relationship whose aim is to harness all the forces in the universe to serve man's needs, physical and spiritual. On the whole, this may be true on comparative grounds. However what is unique to the Igbo is not vital force. But if we are looking for the Igbo alternative to the Tempelsian vital force of the Bantu, it is this: the Igbo conception of selfhood is constitutive of *onwe* and *chi*, which respectively mean to own and guardian Angel. Thus, whereas *onwe* supplies the will, it is the *chi* that supplies the vision. However the end to which the vision leads is best captured by the Igbo concept of *Ikenga*. Compositionally, *Ikenga* comprises *ike* (force) and *nga* (motif). The combination of the two concepts gives the meaning of *ikenga* as the driving force. Because of the presence of *chi* that supplies the vision, it makes the end or value to which the vision leads to be implicitly something spiritual. This 'spiritual end' indicates the self's vocation to pursue righteousness. Thus the Igbo identify truth and justice as what constitutes this righteousness. Far from being vital force, the driving force of every Igbo lay in the values of truth and justice.

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