

THE FOUR CATEGORIES OF FORCE IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: What the constitutes the bulk of African philosophical discussions is identified by the late Kenyan philosopher, Henry Odera Oruka, as being the six schools of thought on what African philosophy is or could be, namely, ethno-philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, professional philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy, and artistic or literary philosophy. The first four are the generally well known and well explained schools of African philosophy. However, while ethno- philosophy and philosophic sagacity may not be totally qualify for philosophy in its real sense, they however, provide the data for serious philosophical reflection, like Placid Tempels Bantu Philosophy of force, where he presented the idea of African force vitale as the engine house of African philosophy where force is everything and everything is force. Force seen in this context equals the Western idea of Being, where everything that exist is being, and being is everything. The extra ordinary research on the concept of force was part of the process of decolonisation of knowledge highly dominated by the Western thought pattern. The intention is towards the rediscovering of the ancestral philosophical worldview and spiritual values that had been denigrated and distorted by colonial education. Africans need to rediscover their values, which can only be done through mental re orientation that will orchestrate new conceptual framework. A hermeneutic approach is therefore necessary to interpret the use of African languages that will hitherto elucidate African worldview making it more meaningful.

Keywords: The Four, Categories, Force, African, Philosophy

Introduction

Western philosophers like Heidegger talk about being as the “fundamentum underlying the particular expressions of beings”² For the Africans, it is not being but force, force seen in the sense of “existence being a thing of variable intensity”³ so while the West talk about Being, Africans talk about force. Force is seen as Masolo noted “ultimate unifying force”⁴

The Western attempt in discussing the problem of being is pre-Socratic. Parmenides defined being as ‘what is’. The philosophical struggle to unravel the problem of being continued up till this present age. However, one is of the opinions about being that run through is the idea of being as static – a being that is there. However, Africans consider being as dynamic. Being as force is transcending, it is not static, it moves from itself. It is very active. It includes being existing both in the physical and spiritual worlds. Kagame identifies this force as NTU – the super-ordinate to which the determinates are predicted.

2.0 Force as the principal of life

The African philosophy of force refuted the Western view of Africa as being “savage”. As Africa by demonstrating the existence of a coherent ontology of force go to prove a clear vision of human dignity and the rights of the individual. Vital force is viewed as the reality which though invisible, is supreme in man. Therefore, man can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures. African philosophical categories can be identified through the categories inherent to language. The primary metaphysical category in the thought of Bantu-speaking societies is Force. That is, reality is dynamic, and being is force.

There are three possible views of the relationship between being and force.

- Being as distinct from force, that is, beings may have force or may not.
- Force as part of being, that is, being is more than force, but dependent upon it.
- Being is Force, that is, the two are one and the same.

The last view of force. Specifically:

'Force' is not for Bantu a necessary, irreducible attribute of being: no, the notion of 'force' takes for them the place of the notion 'being' in our philosophy. Just as we have, so they a transcendental, elemental, simple concept: with them 'force' and with us 'being';

Tempels argues that as a result of this fundamental difference in categories, the African life of the mind is structured around understanding and defining Force, which contrasts sharply with the Western enterprise of understanding and defining Being.

Vital force is the key idea in Bantu philosophy, the source of vital force is God. Vital force is viewed as the reality which though invisible, is supreme in man. The Bantu holds the perceptions that all beings in the universe possess Vital Force of their own: human, animal, vegetable and inanimate and these forces are capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation, the man. Therefore man, can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures.

2.1 Interaction of Forces: One being influencing another

The vital human force can directly influence inferior force beings such as animal, vegetable, or mineral in their being itself. The inferior forces have been created by God in order to help man increase his force here on earth. By reason of their nature, they have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces, or of men's vital forces. Africans believe that forces just like human beings interact with each other, that there is no force which can exist on its own, on isolation without interacting with other forces. For example, the human vital force needs inferior forces to strengthen his force, and also at the same time he depends on God in order to sustain his living on earth.

Placid Temple's Bantu Ontology is governed by interaction of forces. The relationship between the creator and creature is constant. The creature permanently depends upon his creator for existence and survival. The created beings are known as substances, because they did not come into existence on their own, instead they have a creator. For the Bantu there is an interaction of being with beings, being with the creator and one force can either weaken or reinforce another. The interaction of beings is regarded as 'magic' and also the Bantu held the view

that older force dominates the younger and that all creatures are found in relationship according to the laws of a hierarchy, and nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. This is visible in most African societies today such that when performing rituals or ceremonies these inferior forces are being used. For example, it is through these inferior beings that the medicine man is able to give life. That is, the medicine man uses plants and other inferior forces to preserve and protect the vital force. Again, the Sangoma uses the animals' blood to give life or perform rituals, to fortify himself or the community. Also, there are mountains like the Njelele in Zimbabwe, 'Lentswe la baratani in Otse, in English called 'The mountain of lovers' which are considered to be sacred places and are supposed to be used only for religious purposes, such as consulting the Gods and performing of rituals.

2.2 Hierarchy of Forces: Primogeniture

Being is differentiated into species according to their vital power. Iroegbu identifies the Cosmos among the other six zones of 'Uwa' comprising the Divine-world, Godian –world, Good –spirit world, Bad – spirit world, and Ancestral world. The Divine world is the world of God who is the superior force over all other forces, he is the creator of all forces and these forces comes after him, they depend on him. The first fathers of the clan convey messages between man and God. For example, traditionally in Botswana, this is shown whereby those who have the connections, those who have the spirits such as the Sangomas, Hosannas, communicate with the first fathers and these founders of the clans then sends the message to God.

However, the world of Cosmos is the central locus of the operations of all other worlds, as it is "man who posits the question of the worlds, who reflects on their existence, and who is the subject-object of their operations (Iroegbu p.342). However, he observed that the relationship among the six worlds is dynamic. "it is a process, fluid and often unsystematized. The meta-empirical geography of the zonal existence of the worlds has no fixed boundaries. They compenetrates each other's world-zones. They are not ontologically a multitude of worlds but one world: Uwa" Iroegbu (p.342)

These forces which exist in all beings, of which man can use to strengthen himself, are discussed under beings and inanimate forces below.

3.0 Categories of Being

The West considers whatever is as 'being', invariable 'being' is the root word of all that is. So, all that 'is' is being. In the African mind-set, Iroegbu P will analyse the root word of whatever is as 'Uwa'. 'Uwa' is being, and being is U'wa'. He notes that "whatever is, in so far as it is, is 'Uwa'. For him, "Uwa is reality, and reality is Uwa". (Iroegbu p. p.338). The concept of 'Uwa' is mirrored as such "the entirety of existence, from God the highest Being to inanimate beings of our cosmos can be summarized in the englobal concept of the Igbo term Uwa. Uwa is all inclusive. It mirrors being, existence, entity, all reality. It englobes all that is: animate and inanimate, visible and invisible. It is comprehensive, universal and global. It has transcendent and immanent scope as well as explicative and prospective elasticity" (Iroegbu P. p.339) Kagame analysed the root word of force as NTU, to which all that exist are classified into. Ntu is a very important word in African Philosophy as depicts existence. It is a universal force. Masolo called it the "ultimate unifying notion"¹ it is the subordinate to

which the determinate are predicated off. These determinate like MU, KI, HA and KU presicate NTU. And therefore, indicate the families or categories of being. The role is to express the ‘specific difference’ of NTU. When translated to English means “person” It is everything we are and everything the world is, it is all that we see around us, everything we do. The presence of Ntu is very important when looking in our everyday life. It conveys that there is a spiritual essence that underlies and incorporates all materials. In a nut shell, Ntu can be said to be a philosophy which sees harmony between physical world and spiritual world. This philosophy is also referred to as the “Bantu” philosophy (Roberts, 1996, p. 335). Ntu entails the basic concept of vital force, of which the source is God. We recognise and conflict this force in all that we do. It is found in many African languages, that is, the Bantu language. This Vital force, Tempels calls it the Bantu Ontology.

In short, Ntu means a human being and it emphasises that there is spirit of oneness and harmony among people and nature. The concept of Ntu emphasises solidarity and oneness amongst Africans.

African philosophy of Ntu, existed long time ago, and it brought about solidarity and oneness in African society. The importance of this paper therefore is to discuss the African Philosophy of Ntu. The paper will start by defining the key concepts, then differentiating African philosophy from Western philosophy. The paper will go further into discussing the basic features that make up the Ntu philosophy and also, towards the end of the paper the African philosophy will be criticised. At last a conclusion will be drawn up, summing all the main points of the paper.

All that exist in the universe of being and becoming is summed up under any of these categories. “Everything there is must necessarily belong to one of these four categories and must be conceived of not as substance but as force.”¹ Man (Muntu) is therefore a force, dog (Kintu) is also a force. West and yesterday (Hantu) are forces; also beauty and laughter (Kuntu) are forces. Being forces, they are related to each other. Their relationship to each other is seen in the determinative Ntu; this is common to all of them.² What then is NTU? It appears meaningless and to some extent contradictory to begin to give credence to the concept of NTU as Kagame had already referred to it as a determinative from which all four categories are derived. But it is not meaningless and poses no threat to our understanding of the categories, for NTU is what all the categories are. It is not something that completes itself. It is the central force in which all four categories find their unity and express their being. FORCE Since all four categories of African philosophy are forces and Ntu is what the categories are, then Ntu is a force

The four categories of African philosophy are: Muntu (human being), Kintu (thing), Hantu (place and time), Kuntu (modality).

Four Categories of Force

Muntu

The Muntu is a force endowed with intelligence. It is the ‘human being’ with intelligence. The force concept of ‘human being’ is not coterminous with the common idea of human being as it includes spirits, the human dead and living humans. In the hierarchy of forces, the superior force control inferior ones, or as Tempels says can diminish the force of lower entities. The Muntu apart from God, is senn as “the sovereign vital force ruling the

land and all that lives on it man, animal or plant.”⁵ for him, the created universe is centered on man. The present human generation living on earth is the centre of all humanity, including the world of the dead. This vital human force considered as the superior force has the capacity of having direct influence on inferior forces. The Muntu differentiates itself through its ability to reflect, compare, and invent all of which are attributes of intelligence. The Muntu uses the kintu to increase its vital force.

Kintu

The second category is Kintu, and it includes all those forces which cannot act for themselves. These forces can only become active through the command of a Muntu, whether living or dead. To this category belongs forces like plants, animals, minerals, tools, objects of customary usage. The plural of Kintu is Bintu. They are called Bintu because they have no will of themselves. Since they have no will of their own, their forces are ‘frozen’ and can only act with the influence of a Muntu. These forces are at the command of Muntu with the exception of certain trees like Poteau-mitan in voodoo considered as the repository of the deified as the word of the ancestors, surges up spontaneously. These kinds of trees are said to belong to the category of Muntu class. However, we must know that when a sacrifice is made to a tree, it is never the plant to whom the sacrifice is made, but the loa or the ancestors that is, the Muntu forces that are journeying along it. Even sculptures made from such woods receive special attention having been consecrated by the Nommo of the ancestors. The difference between the Kintu and Muntu lies on the degrees of forces and principles. The Muntu is higher by force of intelligence over the Kintu, while the Kintu is under the command of the Muntu.

Under the Kintu, we have the vegetal and inorganic forces. Inorganic nature is considered as ‘fixed’ and is separated from the vegetal level by a substantial form. The vegetal is separated from the animal sphere by the animal ‘soul’. The animal soul is a spiritual principle responsible for some animal powers similar to those of humans such as knowledge, love, desire etc.

Hantu

The Hantu is the category of ‘Space and Time’. The Hantu is a force that localizes spatially and temporally every event and every motion. The concept of force is the concept of dynamis, motion. Since every being is force, everything is constantly in motion as force is not static. Since motion is involved, it means that the question of ‘time and space’ must be invogue, as whatever happens, happens on a giving place and at a giving time. This idea gives a picture of beings as possessing certain principle or force that makes them act upon each other.

The Levels of Place

The notion of the general activity of beings on one another enters into the general concept of movement as an essential element of being. In accordance with this movement, Kagame identifies three levels of place:

- a. The physical place This refers to a ‘locality’ or ‘space’ susceptible of being occupied by an object.
- b. The second type is localization insofar as it is a position in space or internal place.
- c. The third is the ‘External place’ equivalent to latin ‘Ubi’. The internal and external places are metaphysical places and are different in this aspect from the ‘physical place’.

Just as in Space, the essence of time is becoming which means passage and transition from any one state to another. It is interchangeable with space, as it “converges with the category of space to individualize movement of being, which means individualizing being even as its activity and internal perfection proceed”⁶. Time in this sense is seen as the ‘unfolding of being’ whatever happens, happens on time such that each event or unfolding has time as its fundamentum, that is, its basis. Hence, without time, there would not be events. Time moves or measures the unfolding forces. And by measuring them, as iroegbu will say, make things happen.

Kuntu

The forth category is the Kuntu. Kuntu talks about modality. It is a way or manner. In Kuntu, the designation of the image determines what the image expresses, the designation is independent of the shape or form of the image. The image receives its meaning through its designation. While in Kuntu other component enters into the creative process along with the act of designation – that component is the modality.

Components of Kuntu

In Kuntu, the image receives its designation, while in Kuntu it receives its form. Hence, Kuntu gives form to the image. We call this Kuntu components, the determination of the image, because they express whatever category or sub – category the images will evoke. For example, the most important category is Muntu, they are therefore given the human form. We have also what Kagame called second order determinant which does not individualize the figure but determines its place in the ontological system, in the hierarchy of the world of the living and the dead. For example, the King is giving attributes like crown while hoe is the farmer.

However, it is important to note that the determinant of the first degree stresses the general before the particular and begins therefore with the most general, in the ontological category. For example, in carving a Muntu, it must have the face of a human and not that of a lion.

i. Rhythm

Another component of Kuntu is rhythm which is the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives it form, the pure expression of the life force. Rhythm is expressed through corporeal and sensual means, through lines, surfaces, colours and volumes in archiyecture, sculpture or painting: through accents in poetry and music, through movements in the dance, Rhytm is described as the Kuntu of the Nommo, as oit turns all these concrete things towards the light of the spirit. Senghor opines that it is only rhythm that gives the word its effective fullness. He noted that it is the word of God, that is, the rhythmic word that created the world. There are two types of rhythm:

- a Polymetry in which several different sorts of basic metre are heard simultaneously
- b Plyrhythmic in which a single basic metre is accented and syncopated in different ways.

ii Masks

The Masks always signify a Muntu. There are however two types of masks: the Muzima and the Muzimu. The Muzima masks represent a living person and therefore serve [profane uses, mostly entertainment and amusement while the Muzimu msks are employed for the purpose of ritual. Inorder to make the Muzimu forces perceptible, these masks must possess features which distinguish Muzimu from Muzima. Sinse Muzimu has no body, neither

does it have face, the image must therefore go beyond reality. The artist enjoys the greatest freedom in the creation of the mask. However, it is easy explaining some modal actions in Kuntu than in others. for example, while it is easy to explain laughter as a modal action, it is not the same with beauty, as beauty is hard to imagine as an independently acting force. African aesthetics rests on the aesthetics of Kuntu, that is on the harmony of meaning and rhythm, of sense and form. Beauty is identified with the good. Thus, when one says this is good, in African linguistic carriage, the term good carries at the same time the meaning beautiful. Hence, if the rhythm the division of accents, fails to correspond to the meaning, then Kuntu, and there with the art, has failed, there is no effect, therefore Kuntu is a bad and subsequently ugly. Njoku in his essays in African Philosophy, thought and theology subscribed to this idea when he noted that what is of value is usually described as “*ihe di mma or ihe oma – what is good or what is beautiful*”¹¹

Evaluation and Conclusion

NTU according to Jahn is the universal force as such, which however, never occurs apart from its manifestations: Muntu, Kuntu, Hantu and Kuntu. These four categories are thus manifestations of NTU. However, we note that the first categories of Muntu and Kuntu correspond to the Aristotelian categories of substance, the third category of Hantu correspond to the Aristotelian categories of space and time while Kuntu is shared among the remaining seven Aristotelian categories of Quality, Quantity, Relation, Passion, Position, Possession and Action.

It is apt at this juncture to observe that in the Western conception of existence, being is static while for Africans being is force, and force is dynamic.

Secondly, being gives man his real place in the created order as Muntu is regarded as superior force that can use other forces to increase his vital force.

Thirdly, it manifests the hierarchy of forces.

Lastly, it brings out the inner dynamism that characterise existence as everything is characterized by motion, - Heraclitus noted that everything is in flux.

Generally, NTU is the universal force which does not occur apart from its manifestations of Muntu, Kuntu, Hantu and Kuntu.

End Notes

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