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Excerpted from

The Idea of Spirit in African Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

The life experiences of African people are multi-dimensional and multi-faceted, revealing and manifesting the nature of reality to African people in their own peculiar way. While many experiences are readily comprehensible, some others may seem inexplicable, particularly to non-Africans. This book concerns itself with one of those experiences, that of spirit and the world of spirits. The experience of spirits is common to virtually all African cultures. However, the interpretation of this experience differs from culture to culture within Africa. No wonder John Mbiti asserts that, “each people has a culture and culture is changing all the time whether slowly or rapidly... Each African people has its own cultural heritage. Some aspects of our cultures are fairly similar over large areas of our continent. There are also many differences, which add to the variety of African culture in general.”¹

The question Bolaji Idowu asked long ago becomes relevant at this point. In his words: “Is there any reason why what has been thought and practised in one place could not occur in another without any contact between the two places?”² Kwasi Wiredu may suggest an answer to this question by saying that “the difference between one culture and another is the contingent elements of a culture.”³

Even in the same cultural background, explanations may differ from person to person. According to Samir Amin, “Cultures are cultures; they are specific and different full stop.”⁴ The differences become evident in the way different groups and individuals attempt explanation for their culture, even within the same cultural milieu.

In this process of interpretation, there are realities that transcend the physical. The senses cannot truly comprehend the nature of these realities. Yet, the apprehension of these realities lies at the very heart of the African worldview. Often, the repertoire of

¹John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1991), pp. 7 – 8.

²E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare, God in Yorubaland* (Lagos: Longman Publishers, 1996), p. 3.

³Kwasi Wiredu, “Problems In Africa’s Self – Definition in the Contemporary World,” in Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (eds.), *Person and Community*, Ghanaian Philosophical Studies 1.

⁴Samir Amin, “Towards a Strategy of Liberation” in Chris Uroh (ed.), *Africa & the Challenge of Development* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1998), p. 160.

beliefs and practices among the African people makes no sense to some Westerners. These experiences are dismissed as myths and superstitions; African culture is looked upon with contempt and underestimation.⁵ Indeed, some Western anthropologists seek to repudiate the image and character of African societies. These anthropologists, for example, James Frazer,⁶ C. Taylor,⁷ Levy Bruhl,⁸ and others, having taken “for granted the logico-scientific criteria of rationality developed within the context of Western culture, see traditional beliefs and ritual practices as a bundle of false hypothesis about man, society and nature which do not correspond to any objective reality.”⁹

Although these beliefs and practices cut across all strata of African social life, Western scholars still do not place any premium on them and so fail to examine them more closely. As long as reason and experimentation cannot prove the veracity of such realities, they have no meaning for most of these scholars. A. J. Ayer for example, says that, “Philosophy is not a search for first principles. The function of philosophy is wholly critical...philosophising is an activity of analysis.”¹⁰ For him as a logical positivist, the purpose and method of philosophy is the “rejection of the metaphysical thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of a transcendent reality.”¹¹ But this is not the only view of philosophy’s role.

Philosophy as a discipline strives to proffer arguments to critical questions about reality. Hence, for a scholar like Jacques Maritain, philosophy is “the science which by the natural light of reason studies the first causes or highest principles of all things.”¹² As Joseph Omoregbe puts it, “Philosophy is a rational search for answers to the basic questions about the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole and of human life in

⁵Paulin Hountondji J, “Reason and Tradition” in H. Odera Oruka and D. Masolo (eds.), *Philosophy and Cultures* (Nairobi: Bookwise, Ltd, 1983), p. 143.

⁶James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 648.

⁷Cfr. C. Taylor, “Rationality” in M. Hollis and S. Luke (eds.), *Rationalism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 85-90.

⁸Levy Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, Herbert Spencer Lectures, 1931, p. 21.

⁹Olusegun Oladipo, *The Idea of African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Hope Publications 1998), p. 30 – 31.

¹⁰A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 37.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1975), p. 102 – 132.

particular.”¹³ Reality is not confined to the physical alone; the whole of reality embraces both the physical and metaphysical, the natural and supernatural.

One very important aspect of that reality in African culture is the world of spirits. The African concept of reality influences beliefs and practices regarding spirits in a peculiar way, quite unlike anything in Western thought. African traditional thought has its own logic for explaining and understanding these apparently unintelligible beliefs and practices. Influenced by the Wittgensteinian notion of “language game,” Peter Winch argues that logic is learnt in the process of socialisation. Hence, he says the criteria of logic are not a direct gift “of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of ways of living or modes of social life.”¹⁴ Winch argues therefore that the scientific is not a necessary paradigm of the rational. It is easily possible to have criteria of rationality that are incommensurable with those employed by Western science but which are nevertheless valid.¹⁵

When this criterion or methodology is applied, beliefs and practices hitherto found unintelligible will be made explicit. One such belief in Africa is this belief in the world of spirits. Belief in the spirit world is exceedingly strong in Africa and carries with it profound conviction regarding the existence of a metaphysical realm. In the words of D. E. Idoniboye, “The ontology of any distinctively [African] worldview is replete with spirits. Spirits are the one entity that remains constant in all African belief systems.”¹⁶ But the existence of spirits has been beset with ontological and epistemological difficulties. It presents riddles that are urgently in need of answers.

Also, there is this strong notion among Africans that the universe is densely populated both with visible and invisible beings. It is quite easy to explain, interpret and comprehend that which is visible or physical through the empirical method, i.e., the method of science, but this is not the case with the invisible beings. It was for this that Wiredu “holds that the objectual interpretation of quantifiers by W. V. O. Quine

¹³Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 1990), p. 3.

¹⁴P. Winch, *The Idea of Social Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), p. 100.

¹⁵Alfred Martins, “The Rational Status of Magical Beliefs and Practices” in *Bodija Journal*, No. 6, June 1994, pp. 36 – 37.

¹⁶D. E. Idoniboye, “The Idea of an African Philosophy: The Concept of ‘Spirit’ in African Metaphysic” in *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, J. O. Sodipo (ed.), Vol. 11, No. 1, 1973, p. 83.

erroneously joins the concept of existence with the concept of the object and that for something to exist, it does not necessarily mean that it is an object.”¹⁷ From this argument, it follows that it is possible for something to exist without being an object.

The idea of spirits is discussed here within the framework of this notion of invisible beings. Spirits are a reality among Africans generally, yet numerous questions arise regarding the reality of these spirits. The focus of contemporary analysis regarding problems of ontology is centred on questions such as, do non-physical entities like God and spirits exist? If they exist, how can they be logically explained and interpreted? How do we know that they exist? What is the nature of their existence and operations? What is their relevance to modern day social advancement and development? This book attempts to answer these and some other puzzles and riddles in African culture that cannot simply be ignored.

This book is divided into four chapters. Chapter One shall attempt a conceptual analysis of modern scientific rationality and the idea of spirit generally. Chapter Two focuses on a critical exposition of African ontology and the African idea of spirit. Here, we shall examine the preconceived and prejudiced notions of some scholars concerning African beliefs, and the defence by some African scholars against these biased notions. There will be exposition regarding the hierarchy of beings in African metaphysics, in order to properly understand how spirits fit into the African worldview.

In Chapter Three, our focus shall be on the tensions and contradictions that arise out of the impact and influence of spirits on material reality, in order to arrive at a possible reconciliation of these issues. In Chapter Four, the final chapter, an attempt will be made at justifying the reality of spirits in the African worldview, based on the analysis of the three previous chapters. The idea of and necessity for spirits in contemporary African society shall be critically examined, in order to show how a positive, objective, unbiased and critical study of this belief could be of great benefit to African philosophy, philosophy as a universal discipline, and to scholarship in general.

¹⁷J. E. Wiredu, “Logic and Ontology II,” in *Second Order*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 20 – 23.