

African Concept of Being, with Special Reference to the Concept of Witchcraft and Medicine in Africa

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The problem of being is the core problem of metaphysics, and of course one of the perennial problems in Western philosophy. This essay considers the problem of being in Africa and how the problem is related to the idea of witchcraft and medicine in Africa. Unlike the European, the African does not conceive the world as a conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, God and Devil. The African recognizes that all beings – that “which exist” – are made of forces. The African believes that the life force of the creator is present in all creatures and in all things. To the African, the fundamental notion under which being is conceived lies within the category of forces. African metaphysics studies this reality (that is, *force*), existing in everything and in every being in the universe. It is in virtue of this reality that all beings have something in common, so that the definition of this reality – *force* – may be applied to all existent forms of being.

To arrive at this force common to all beings, or rather, which is identical in all beings, it is necessary to eliminate all forms of reality; these belonging to one category only among beings. In Western philosophy is conceived the transcendental notion of “being” by separating it from its attribute (*force*) but this cannot be done in African philosophy. *Force* in African thought is a necessary element in being, and the concept *force* is inseparable from the definition of being. There is no idea among Africans of being divorced from the idea of *force*. Without the element *force*, being cannot be conceived.

What has been said above may be referred to as the basis of African ontology. In particular, the concept *force* is bound to the concept being even in the most abstract thinking upon the notion of being. To the African being is that which has *force*. Africans speak, act, live, etc. as if beings were forces. *Force* is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality, it is the reality. *Force* is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: force is the nature of being, “force is being, being is force.”² It can rightly be said that Africans regard being as exclusively or essentially a principle of activity.

When Europeans propose a conception of being, Africans conceive of *force*. Where the Europeans see concrete beings, Africans see concrete forces. When Europeans say that beings are differentiated by their essence or nature, Africans say that *forces* differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, vegetable and even material or mineral forces. The exact worth of this then being its identification as in contradistinction to European definitions of being. Where the European has “that which is,” or “the thing insofar as it is,” the African definition reads, “that which is *force*, or an existent *force*.” It must be noted here that *force* is not for Africans a necessary, irreducible attribute of being. Rather, the notion of *force* takes for Africans the place of the notion of “being” in European philosophy.

It is because all being is *force* and exists only in that it is *force*, that the category includes of necessity all beings: God, men – living and departed – animals, plants, minerals, etc. Since being is *force*, all these beings appear to the African as forces. Africans make a clear distinction and understand an essential differences between different beings, that is to say, different forces. Among the different kinds of forces Africans have come to recognize, just as Europeans do, unity, individuality, but individuality clearly understood as meaning individuality of forces. That is why it is

necessary to reject the foreignness to and imposition of the Western dualism of Good versus Evil to African philosophy; as well as what has been called “common being” or “community of nature,” when these terms are so used to eliminate the individuality of *forces*.

In the category of visible beings Africans distinguish that which is perceived by the senses and the “thing in itself.” By the “thing in itself” they are indicating its individual inner nature, or more precisely, the *force* of the thing. The Africans are expressing themselves in figurative language when they say, “in every thing there is another thing; in every man a little man.”³ But it is gross deception to wish to attribute to this piece of imagery an exact verbal expression of the African notion of being. This saying merely brings into relief the distinction they made between the contingent, the visible phenomenon of being or of force, and the intrinsic visible nature of that force.

When Europeans differentiate in man the soul and the body, as is done in certain Western writings, they are at a loss to explain where “the man” has gone after these two components have been separated. If, for instance, the European wishes to seek the African’s terms adequate to express this manner of speaking, the European will be up against very great difficulties, especially if the European is proposing to speak to the reality of man. Unless under European influence, Africans do not thusly express themselves in such differentiation. They distinguish in man body, shadow and breath. This breath is the assumed manifestation, the evident sign of life. Though it is mortal and in no way corresponds with what Europeans understand by the soul. When the body with its shadow and its breath have disappeared, what lives on after death is not described as simply a part of a man. Rather, Africans speak of what lives on after death as “the man himself,” “himself,” or it is “the little man”⁴ who was formerly hidden behind the perceptible manifestation of the man.

In Western philosophy in general and in European thought in particular, it is said of a man that he grows, develops, acquires knowledge, exercises his intelligence and his will, and that in so doing he increases them. Europeans do not hold that by these acquisitions and by this development he has become more a man; at least not in the sense that his human nature has changed. One either has human nature or does not, it is not a substance that is increased or diminished. Development operates in a man's qualities or in his faculties. African ontology – or, to be more precise, the African theory of *forces* – is radically opposed to any such conception.

When an African says, “I am becoming stronger,” he is thinking of something quite different from what Europeans mean when they say that their powers are increasing. When an African says that a *force* is increasing, or that a being is reinforced, his thought must be expressed in European language and according to their outlook as “this being has grown as such.” His nature has been made stronger, increased, made greater. Catholic theology teaches the supernatural realities of grace, that as a supernatural reinforcement of our being. That it is able to grow and to be strengthened in itself is an idea similar to what Africans accept in the natural order as true of all beings, of all *forces*. This is the sense in which one should understand the following expressions, all show the behavior of the African is centered on the idea of vital energy: “to be strong,” “to reinforce your life,” “you are powerful,” “be strong;” or again, “your vital force is declining, has been affected.” It is in this sense also that one must understand Fraser, when he writes in the *Golden Bough*:

“The soul like the body can be fat or thin, great or small....”

or again,

“the diminution of the shadow is considered to be the index of a parallel enfeeblement in the vital energy of its owner.”

“For the African, existence is a thing of variable intensity;”
and further on when he mentions, “the diminution or the reinforcement of being.”⁵

The origin, the subsistence or annihilation of beings or of forces, is expressly and exclusively attributed to God. The term “to create” in its proper connotation of “to evoke from not being” is found in its full signification in African philosophy. It is in this sense that Africans see, in the phenomenon of conception, a direct intervention of God in creating life. Those who think that one being can entirely annihilate another, to cause the other to cease to exist, has conceived a false idea. Doubtless that one force which is greater than another can paralyze it, diminish it, or even cause the operations of another to totally cease, but for all that, the force does not cease to exist. Existence, which comes from God, cannot be taken from a creature by any created *force*.

Europeans speak of mechanical, chemical and psychical interactions between beings. Realists and idealists meet in recognizing yet another causality conditioning being itself – the cause of the existence of being as such. It is a metaphysical causality which binds the creature to the creator. The relationship of the creature to the creator is a constant. That is, the creature is by its nature permanently dependent upon his creator for existence and means of survival. Europeans do not conceive of any equivalent relationship between creatures. Created beings are denoted in scholastic philosophy as substances, that is to say, beings who exist, if not by themselves, at any rate in themselves. The child is, from birth, a new being, a complete human being. It has the fullness of human nature and its human existence as such is independent of that of its progenitors. The human nature of a child does not remain in permanent causal relationship with that of its parents.

This concept of separate beings, of substances which find themselves side by side, entirely independent one of another, is foreign to African thought. Africans hold that created beings preserve a bond with one another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature and creator. For the African there is

the interaction of a being with another being – that is, of a force with another force. Beyond the mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions, there is an ontological relationship of *forces*. In the created force (a contingent being) the African sees a causal action emanating from the very nature of that created force and influencing other forces. One force will reinforce or weaken another. This causality is in no way supernatural in the sense of going beyond the proper attributes of created nature. It is, on the contrary, a metaphysical causal action which flows out of the very nature of a created being. General knowledge of these activities belongs to the realm of natural knowledge and constitutes the ensuing philosophy. The observation of the action of these forces in their specific and concrete applications would constitute African natural science.

This interaction of beings has historically been denoted by the word “magic” by Westerners. If it is desired to keep the term, it must be modified so that it is understood in conformity with the content of African thought. In what Europeans call “primitive magic” there is, to primitive eyes, no operation of supernatural, indeterminate forces, but simply the interaction between natural forces, as they were created by God and as they were put by him at the disposal of men. In African studies of magic, efforts are made to distinguish “imitative magic”, “sympathetic magic”, “contagious magic”, “magic of expressed desire”, etc. The very fact that there should have been recourse to differentiate these terms, the discussion of these distinct “kinds” of magic, proves that any attempt to penetrate the real nature of magic has been given up in favor of a classification in terms of secondary characteristics only.

The child, even the adult, remains always for the African, a man, a *force*, in causal dependence and ontological subordination to the forces which are his father and mother. The older force ever dominates the younger. It continues to exercise its living influence over it. This is in accordance with the African conception in so far that the beings

(*forces*) of the universe are not simply a multitude of independent forces placed in juxtaposition from being to being. All creatures are found in relationship according to the laws of a interdependence. Nothing moves in this universe of *forces* without influencing other forces by its movement. Africans perceive the world of *forces* like a spider's web in that no single thread may be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network. Africans maintain that "beings" only acquire "power" to act upon other beings or forces through the intervention of spirits and manes. The dead intervene on occasion to make known to the living the nature and quality of certain forces, but they do not thereby change that nature or those qualities which are preordained as belonging to that force. Africans expressly say that creatures are forces, created by God as such; and that the intervention of spirits or manes changes nothing: the suggestion of changes are a white man's idea.

Beings are differentiated in African ontology into species according to their vital power or their inherent vital rank. Above all *force* is God, spirit and creator, it is he who has *force*, power, in himself. He gives existence, power of survival and of increase, to other *forces*. In relation to other *forces*, it is, "He who increases (and here it must be added, decreases) force."⁶ After this being, God, come the first fathers of men, founders of the different clans. These beings were the first to whom God communicated his vital force, with the power of exercising their influences on all posterity. They constitute the most essential chain binding men to God. They occupy so exalted a rank in African thought that they are not regarded merely as ordinary dead beings. They are no longer named among the manes; and by their nature, they are referred to as spiritualized beings, beings belonging to a higher echelon, participating to a certain degree in the divine *force* (or the divine being – God).

After the first parents come the dead of the tribe, following their order of primogeniture. They form a chain through the links of which the forces of the elders exercise their vitalizing influence on the living 'beings'. Those living on earth rank, in fact, after the dead. The living belong in turn to a hierarchy, not simply following legal status, but as ordered by their being in accordance with primogeniture and their vital rank; that is to say, according to their vital power.

But man's being is not suspended in thin air. He lives on his land, where he finds himself to be the sovereign vital force, ruling the land and all that live on it: man, animal, or plant – for the African holds that all these are beings or *forces*. The eldest of a group or of a clan is to the African the sustaining link of life, binding ancestors and their descendants. It is he who reinforces the life of his people and of all inferior *forces*, animal, vegetable and inorganic, that exist, grow, or live on the foundation which he provides for the welfare of his people. The true leader follows from the original conception and political set-up of clan peoples: the father, the master, the king; he is the source of all zestful living – he is as God himself. This, perhaps, explains what the African means when he protests against the nomination of a leader, by government intervention, who is not able, by reason of his vital rank or vital force, to be the link binding dead and living beings. “Such a one cannot be chief. It is impossible. Nothing would grow in our soil, our women would bear no children and everything would be struck sterile.”⁷

After the category of human *forces* come the other *forces*: animal, vegetable and mineral. Even so, within each of these categories is found a hierarchy based on vital power, rank and primogeniture. From the above, an analogy can be found between a human and a lower group (as for example in the class of animals), an analogy based on the relative place of these groups in relation to its own class. Such would be an analogy

founded on primogeniture or upon a pre-determined order of subordination. A human group and an animal species can occupy in their respective classes a rank relatively equal or relatively variant. Their vital rank can be parallel or variant. A chief, for instance, in the class of humans shows his royal rank by wearing the skin of a royal animal. The respect for this ranking in life, the care not to place oneself higher than one's legitimate place, the necessity not to approach the higher *forces* as if they were our equals, enjoin the African to know the level of his *force* in order to fit into his society.

Having delineated the hierarchy of beings, we may have to shift our attention to the vital question, "where does the being go after death?" In the mind of the African, the dead also live; but theirs is a diminished life, with reduced vital energy. This seems to be the conception of most, if not all Africans, when they speak of the dead in general, superficially and in regard to the external things of life. When Africans consider the inner reality of being, they admit that deceased ancestors have not lost their superior reinforcing influence; and that the dead in general have acquired a greater knowledge of life and of vital or natural *force*. Such deeper knowledge as they have in fact been able to learn concerning vital and natural *forces* they use only to strengthen the life of man on earth. The same is true of their superior *force* by reason of primogeniture, which can be used only to reinforce their living posterity. The dead forebear who can no longer maintain active relationships with those on earth is "completely dead," as Africans say. They mean that this individual vital *force*, already diminished by death, has reached a zero diminution of energy, which becomes completely static through lack of faculty to employ its vital influence on behalf of the living. This is considered to be the worst of disasters for the dead. The spirits of the dead (*manes*) seek to enter into contact with the living and to continue living function upon earth.

Inferior beings or *forces*, on the other hand (animal, plant, mineral) exist only, and by the will of the creator, God, to increase the vital *force* of men while they are on earth. Higher and lower *forces* (or beings), therefore, are thought by the African to be in relation to living human *forces*. For this reason Africans may choose or prefer to call the influences of one created being upon another causal agencies of life, rather than causal agencies of being, or of *forces*, as they have been provisionally termed. In fact, even inferior beings, such as inanimate beings and minerals, are *forces* which by reason of their nature have been put at the disposal of men, of living human *forces*, or of men's vital *forces* or beings.

A rational being (spirit, manes, or living) can act indirectly upon another rational being by communicating his vital influence to an inferior *force* (animal, vegetable or mineral) through the intermediacy of which it influences the rational being. This influence will also have the character of a necessarily effective action, save only when the object is inherently the stronger *force*, or is reinforced by the influence of some third party, or preserves himself by recourse to inferior *forces* exceeding those which his enemy is employing. It should be noted, here, that it will be a contradiction in terms for the African to assert that lower *forces* act by themselves upon higher *forces*.

This is logically cogent because the idea of lower *forces* acting by themselves upon higher forces will contradict the general principles of the theory of *forces*. In African metaphysics, the lower *force* is excluded from exercising by its own initiative any vital action upon a higher force. Africans also consider certain natural phenomena, rocks, waterfalls, big trees, among others as manifestations of divine power (or divine force); they can also be the sign, the manifestation, the habitat of a spirit. But I wish to state here that such should be the explanation of the apparent influences of lower *forces* on the higher *force* of man. The lower beings or *forces* do not exercise their influence of

themselves, but through the vital energy of a higher force acting as cause. Such an explanation accords in all cases with African metaphysics. Africans hold, “we act thus to be protected from misfortune, or from a diminution of life or of being, or in order to protect ourselves from those influences which annihilate or diminish us.”⁸

Force, the potent life, vital energy are the object of prayers and invocations to God, to the spirits and to the dead, as well as of all that is usually called magic, sorcery or magical remedies. The African will say that they go to a diviner to learn the words of life, so that he can teach them the way of making life stronger. In calling upon God, the spirits, or the ancestral spirits, the participant asks above all, “give me force.” If urged by authorities to abandon magical practices, stating it is contrary to the will of God and therefore evil, one will get the reply, “wherein are they wicked?” What Europeans brand as magic is, in the eyes of the African, nothing but setting to work natural *forces* placed at the disposal of man by God to strengthen man’s own vital energy or *force*.

The African concept of witchcraft, medicine, magic and sorcery is linked with the problem of being in Africa. Every African who has grown up in the traditional environment no doubt “knows” something about mystical powers which are often expressed, or manifest themselves in the forms of magic, divination, witchcraft and mysterious phenomena, that seem to defy even immediate scientific explanations. The best way of understanding how these ‘things’ mentioned above operate in Africa is to use stories to illustrate their operations. Consider one story from John Mbiti’s, *African Religions and Philosophy* to marshal the point.

Mbiti tells of an experience he had when he was a schoolboy: During this period, Mbiti narrates; a locust invasion came to his home area. He had a neighbor who was an elderly man. This neighbor burnt a “medicine” in his field, to keep away the locust. Within a few hours, according to Mbiti, the locust had eaten up virtually everything green

including crops, trees and grass, and then flown off in their large swarms. Everybody, Mbiti tells, was grieved and horrified by the great tragedy, which had struck the area, for locust invasions always mean that all the food is destroyed and people face famine. Word went round Mbiti's community that the locusts had not touched any crops in the field of the neighbor that used "medicine." Mbiti went to his neighbor's place to see things for himself, and sure enough his crops remained intact while those of other people next door were completely devastated. Mbiti confesses that he had heard that a few people possessed anti-locust "medicines," but his neighbor was the first person he knew who had actually used such medicine and with positive results.⁹

Bloomhill tells the story of a European farmer in Rhodesia who lived next door to another European farmer. Both were unmarried, and seemed to match each other. The man proposed to the woman and was accepted. She unexpectedly visited him one evening and was infuriated to discover that he was having love affairs with his African maid. She burst out in fury, and calling the maid "a filthy black bitch" broke off the engagement, never wishing to see him again. The next day the woman saw a black bitch and a white ram on her farm; and a few moments later, her dog was dead, as if bitten by a snake. Two days later, the same black bitch and white ram came and entered the cattle Kraal; and a few moments later her finest Jersey cow was dying, with the front legs broken off. Disaster after disaster came upon this woman farmer, and every time it occurred after she had seen the black bitch and white ram. Finally she sent for an expert African medicine-man.

He prepared the right "medicine" and taking her with him, secretly followed the two animals the next afternoon. The animals dived into a river nearby, emerged and went to the home of the European (male) farmer. The woman and the medicine-man followed them there and found them dripping water. But they were no longer animals: they were

the farmer himself and his African maid. The medicine-man gave them his “medicine” from a horn, and cured them from the power to change into animals. This also ended the disasters of the woman farmer.¹⁰

Every African living in a village (or his traditional community) can narrate an almost infinite number of such stories. To an outsider they sound like fiction or illusion, not reality. Even so, the whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in this mystical power. Africans know that the universe has a power (*force*) in addition to the items in the ontological categories. It is difficult to know or fathom exactly what it is or how it functions. Even where allowance is made for conjuring tricks, apparent cheating, superstition, manipulation by use of clandestine means of communication and other skilled use of laws of nature, one is left with phenomena that cannot be scientifically explained. The incidents narrated above are very dramatic and yet they cannot be dismissed as trickery, hypnotism, or purely the result of psychological conditions of those who experienced them. In fact, there is no African society which does not hold belief in mystical power of one type or another. It shows itself, or it is experienced in myriad ways.

There is mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one (defined by of age, social status or office position). The words of parents for instance, carry “power,” or *force*, when spoken to children: they “cause” good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis. The words of the medicine-man work through the medicine he gives, and it is this, perhaps, more than the actual herb, which is thought to cause the cure or prevent misfortunes. Therefore, formal “curses” and “blessings” are extremely potent; and people may travel long distances to receive formal blessings, and all are extra careful to

avoid formal curses. The specialists have much mystical power both as individuals and by virtue of their offices.

Africans believe (and, perhaps, know) that magicians, sorcerers, or witches might make a doll that represents a particular person, and by burning or pricking that doll it is believed the person would be harmed accordingly. Sorcery, technically, involves the use of poisonous ingredients, put into the food or drink of someone. Africans, however, hold that sorcery stands for the anti-social employment of mystical power, and sorcerers are the most feared and hated members of their communities. It is feared that they employ all sort of ways to harm other people or their belongings. For example, they send flies, snakes, lions or other animals to attack their enemies or carry disease to them; they spit and direct the spittle with secret incantations to go and harm someone, they dig up graves to remove human flesh or bones which they use in their practices, they invoke spirits to attack or possess someone.

Africans feel and believe that all the various ills, misfortunes, sicknesses, accidents, tragedies, sorrows, dangers and unhappy mysteries which they encounter or experience, are caused by the use of this mystical power in the hands of a sorcerer, witch or wizard. It is here that we may understand, for instance, that a bereaved mother whose child has died from malaria would not be satisfied with a scientific explanation that a mosquito carrying a malaria parasite stung the child and caused it to suffer and die from malaria. She will wish to know “why” (which is a philosophical question), the mosquito stung her child and not somebody else’s child. The only satisfactory answer is that “someone” sent the mosquito, or worked other evil magic against her child. This is not a scientific answer, but it is reality for the majority of Africans.

We may easily get rid of mosquitoes and prevent many diseases, but there will always be accidents, cases of barrenness, misfortunes and other unpleasant experiences.

For Africans these are not purely physical experiences: they are “mystical” experiences of a deeply religious nature. People in African villages will talk freely about them, for they belong to their world of reality, whatever else scientists and theologians might say. Nothing harmful happens “by chance,” every thing is “caused” by someone directly or through the use of mystical power. In most African communities, if you have your ears open, you will hear the names of people being blamed for misfortunes, sicknesses, accidents, and other forms of suffering. In large part, it is mainly women who get blamed for experiences of evil kinds; and many a woman has suffered and continues to suffer under such accusations, sooner or later.

Anthropologists, sociologists, etc. use the term “witchcraft” in a specialized way. According to them, witches – again, mainly women – are people with an inherent power by means of which they can abandon their bodies at night and go to meet with similar people (other witches) or “to suck” or “eat away” the life of their victims. In some societies, like the Azande, it is believed that one can even pin-point the spot in the witch’s body where “witchcraft” is located. If we press this usage of the term witch and witchcraft, we would find that actually some Africans do not realize that they are witches; and this makes witchcraft an infectious or hereditary tendency. Some women suspect themselves to be witches while in actual fact (or, perhaps, in reality) they are not.

The term witchcraft is used more popularly and broadly to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical powers, generally in a secret fashion. African societies do not often draw the distinction between witchcraft, sorcery, evil magic, evil eye and other ways of employing mystical power to harm someone or his belongings. Whatever the terminology, what is most important thing is that Africans believe that there are individuals who have access to mystical powers which they employ to handle issues.

To summarize: In the minds of Africans, all beings in the universe possess a vital *force* of their own, whether human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate. Each being has been endowed by God with *force*, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man. Supreme happiness, the only kind of blessing, is, for the African, to possess the greatest vital *force*. The worst misfortune, and the only misfortune, is the diminution of this power or *force*. Every illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression or fatigue, every injustice and every failure – all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the African as, a diminution of vital *force*. Illness and death are the result of some external agent who weakens us through his greater *force*. It is only by fortifying our vital energy (*force*), through the use of magical recipes, that resistance to malevolent external forces is acquired. This is why the African notion of being is closely linked with the concept of witchcraft, sorcery, and medicine.

Africans are aware of a mystical power in the universe. This power is ultimately from God, but in practice it is inherent in, or comes from or through physical objects and spiritual beings. That means that the universe is not static or “dead”: it is a dynamic, “living,” and powerful universe. This notion “being” is similar to Gabriel Marcel’s notion of ‘being’ – that being is a mystery.¹¹ To the African, access to this mystical power is hierarchical in the sense that God has the most and absolute control over it ; the spirits and the living-dead have portions of it; and some human beings know how to tap, manipulate and use some of it. Each community assesses this *force* as useful and therefore acceptable, neutral or harmful, in which case it is deemed evil.

These mystical powers are thought to be capable of being employed for curative, protective, productive and preventive purposes. For this reason, Africans wear, carry, or keep charms, amulets and a variety of other objects, on their bodies, in their possessions, homesteads and fields. Medicine-men and diviners are the primary agents in the use,

manufacture and distribution of these articles of “medicine” or foci of this *force*. These various aspects of African behavior offer a holographic entry point to African thought and the necessity for an understanding of this vital *force* whose source is God. Vital *force* is the reality which is supreme in man. Man can renew his vital *force* by tapping the strength of other creatures. The subject of mystical power, magic, sorcery and witchcraft, with all the beliefs that accompany it, has other dimensions besides religious. There are social, psychological, economic and philosophical aspects which add to the complexity of discussing and understanding this subject.

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