

The Word in African Ontology

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Abstract: The word in African ontology is more than mere expression of sounds. It is a being which is intra-mental and extra-mental. It is a creation of human mind and the human lips. But it is also an independent entity with enormous causal powers in the African universe of forces. It is an art as well as a means of communication. It is the embodiment of the history of the African community. Embedded in the word, is the community's ethics. Yet, the word is also a series of sounds which can be learnt and repeated. It can be uttered by anyone yet not everyone can put it to every use. The word can be profound in a context and meaningless in another context. The same word that is commonplace in common speech can be a causal force in a coded ritual. Yet, it is the word: ubiquitous and cryptic, mystic and plebeian; sacred and profane, artistic, yet plain bland on the lips of many.

Keywords: African ontology; coded ritual; the word

1. Introduction

The word, no doubt is a universal human heritage. It is one of the defining evolutionary acquisitions that have set the Homo sapiens apart from the rest of nature. Although several beings in the category of Animalia are capable of sounds apart from man, none has so far been seen to be capable of the word. So to speak, the word is an exclusive property of man. Though dogs can bark, barking remains a reflex action. A well fed lark can make melodious sounds while a happy parrot can parrot anything. But these, do not translate into the word.

Humans in every culture speak, but what is spoken, how it is spoken and how it is cherished vary from culture to culture. Some cultures see the word as no more than mere symbols of communication. But in African ontology, the word has a far wider signification. The word is both speech and integral part of the African cosmic ontology. Unlike in any other culture, in the African ontology, the word in addition,

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is a being in its own right. It is a force with enormous causal powers. These powers have been variously termed African magic or African mysticism, depending on the commentator's view of African ontology.

Since the publication of Placide Tempels' **La Philosophie Bantoue** (1952), the global view of philosophy has never been the same. Until then, philosophy was viewed as the exclusive property of the West despite the undisputed fact that most of the early Miletians learnt their philosophy in Egypt. Africa was viewed as the Dark Continent that was incapable of philosophy. The significance of Tempels' work lay more in the debate it set off – the debate on African philosophy. For the first time, the Western paradigm uncritically accepted in philosophy as the universal norm was being questioned. African realities were being considered in their own right, and not in relation to the Western worldview. It was the birth of African phenomenology, so to speak. This newfound African phenomenology, set aside the usual bias against everything un-Western, and considered Africa realities as they manifested. The word is an integral part of these African realities. With these developments, it could be argued that the Hegelian Absolute Spirit had finally landed on the African soil (Fukuyama, 1992).

As Nkrumah (1958) has demonstrably proved, there is always a social contention in every philosophy. In the same vein, it could be argued that this work is a subtle expression of the African identity which had been suppressed by Western intellectual racism. The work draws the attention of the modern African to his rich and powerful heritage which had been erroneously dismissed as the 'African magic'. There is power, mystery and art in the African word. The African word is an integral part of the African universe of forces.

2. Debunking the Bias of the Western World as the Universal Standard

One of the greatest tyrannies of the Western cultural imperialism is its imposition of the Western paradigm as the universal standard. Like the Protagorean man, the West made itself the measure of all things. The Western mode of philosophising was termed the standard philosophy. The propagation of the Western bias was greatly aided by imperialism. As the West subdued the world, they also subdued the intellectual property of the subdued peoples. The subdued people's worldview was made to look untenable, and their culture categorized as base. Whenever the people accepted these biases, their cultural emasculation was complete. The destruction of the Haitian cultural heritage is a typical example (Jahn, 1958).

The Western bias has been so successfully sold to the world that even a segment of the elite of the victimised cultures has actually become the champions of the Western paradigm. Is there any wonder that some African scholars question the authenticity of the African identity as well as African philosophy?

Until the dominance of empiricism, the word was much more than mere speech in Western ontology. The logos of Greek mystery systems was the universal reason (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy (2nd ed), 1999). It was the principle of intelligence. It was said to be the ultimate source of reasoning in the Orphic mysteries (Tripolitis, 2001). The Greek logos did not exactly translate into word or speech. It was also associated with intelligence and reasoning. For the word is the vehicle of intelligence as well as an expression reasoning. Logos, meant reasoned speech. Hence, it translated into scientia in Latin, which meant science.

Apart from their fixation with numbers, the Orphic mysteries held the word in cryptic ontological significance. In later years, these were absorbed into another mystery corpus known as gnosis. The advent of Christianity brought about inculturation as well as the radical alteration of the logos corpus by the Yohanine tradition (May, Herber & Metzger, 1977). The first chapter of the Gospel according to John bears this out in a glaring manner.

In the beginning the word already existed; the word was with God, and the word was God. From the very beginning the word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. The word was the source of life, and this life brought light to humanity (John 1 vs 1-6)

The portrayal the word above bears striking semblance with the nommo in Bantu ontology (Jahn, 1958). It is an ethereal entity imbued with the power of creation, a causal force in the cosmos. The Western celebration of the word is culminated in the Christian communion in which bread is transubstantiated into divinity through the ritualization of the word. The West expresses the force of the word in prayers.

The triumph of empiricism over rationalism in Western thought mitigated the place of the word in Western ontology. Observation and scientific experiments were enthroned over and above mystical realities.

The Word as the African Language

The word in African ontology is first and foremost, the African language. The art of speech is ontological to man. A people's language is always autochthonous to them although sometimes, the vagaries of history may foist another language upon them. Nevertheless, every people has an indigenous language. It is important to note that there is no such a thing as a superior language. Contrary to some biases, every language is the vernacular of the people who speak it. There is no such a thing as the standard language.

There are roughly six language groups in Africa. Each of these groups has many variants. In Nigeria alone, a nation of about 160 million, there are over two hundred and fifty languages. Language has been argued in some quarters to be the highest human invention. The many languages of African origin point to the evolutionary sophistication of the African people.

The African word is peculiar to the African people. It is a language with which Africans express their unique cosmic realities.

2.1. The Word as an Art

The African word has aesthetic dimension. It is an art. The African speech is normally laced with proverbs. The mastery of the art of using these proverbs appropriately as well as using the right word at the right time is no small art. The African child is brought up to learn the nuances of the African word. Good speakership is a cherished African art. At typical African evenings, children gather in the African hamlets around bonfires to take informal lessons in the art of the African word. The male child is especially trained in the word art as he is expected to speak well at the gatherings of his kinsmen. Thus, the male child accompanies his father to the meetings of the elders where he learns the wisdom of the elders as well as the art of good speakership.

On the lips of a thoroughbred African, the use of proverbs is a sublime work of art. As Achebe (1958) declared in **Things Fall Apart**, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. The African word yields itself to poetry of a powerful genre. The African word is celebrated in different genres of music around the word.

2.2. The Word as the Expression of Intelligence

The word is an accumulation of the evolutionary intelligence of a people. It has been argued that there is no human invention greater than the word. The word, so to speak is intelligence structuralized and unitized. Embedded in the word is the logic of the human mind. Hence, etymologically, the word 'logic' translates to word/speech. The whole enterprise of logic could be reduced to the art of making speech meaningful. The word embodies human intelligence. It is also a measure of man's intelligence as the level of a man's intelligence is readily evident in his speech. The collective intelligence of the African community is stored in the African word.

2.3. The Word as the African History

The traditional African culture is an oral culture. Important events were encoded in the African word as community folklores. It was the inability of early European visitors to Africa to understand the African word history that made them designate Africans as a people without history. Although some scholars in the past had pegged historicity on literacy, technological inventions have bastardized that assumption. Today, there are many ways of storing history without necessarily putting it down in writing. The digital era could well do without writing. History is studied today also in soundbites and videos. In fact, history thus stored has more credence than writing. The author's bias and personal interpretations are often manifest in his writings. But digital video and audio render undiluted history as the present history raw and unedited.

2.4. The Word as a Causal Force

Ordinarily, the word is imbued with a causal force. It always carries an impelling force. A word can instantly make one feel good or feel bad. The word that makes a man panic may make another man indifferent. The word can cause a man's health to deteriorate. The word can also be lifesaving in dire moments. The word can make a man perform beyond his abilities. Some victories in some historic battles were made possible by the power of the word. The victory of Napoleon over the Austrian army was made possible, partly due to the moving speech he made to his soldiers before the battle started (Lentini, 2016). The crossing of the Rubicon by Caesar's army and the dramatic victory that followed was due to mainly, his dramatic use of the word on his soldiers (Greene, 1998). The word can be the difference between war and peace. Most wars are caused by mismanagement of the word. The entire diplomatic corps around the world do mostly word management.

At the mention of a man's name, he turns his head instinctively towards the direction of the sound. A word can cause heartache; it can cause headache. Such is the power of the spoken word. It unleashes a force which has a life of its own. Once unleashed, the total power of a word can hardly be recalled. That is all the more the reason the word has such significance in African ontology. Africans see the word as an enormous force in the cosmos. It can be a healing force or a destructive force if misapplied.

All major religions changed the world via the causal power of the word. Christianity was a word system that broke away from Judaism. The Christian word was so powerfully causal that men were willing, and did indeed lay down their lives for it.

3. The Word in the African Universe of Forces

The African word is indeed a constellation of forces. Force is the characterizing essence of the African cosmogony. In the African cosmos, all things are forces. Human relations are inter-relations of forces. The word plays a vital role in these interactions of forces. The African universe is not an alienated universe. Unlike the Western universe, the African universe is at one with the African person. All nature is a network of forces that form a complex whole. The word orders these forces and restores their equilibrium whenever there is an imbalance.

3.1. The African Gradation of Forces

A dissection of the African gradation of forces is necessary for the proper understanding of the place of the word in the African universe of forces. The Bantu African constellation of forces is used in this work because of its broad spread and applicability.

The Bantu have four categories of forces. These four categories of forces are encoded in the structure of the Bantu Language. The Bantu language structure bears out the central thesis of this work that the African word is a mirror of the African universe. The structure of the Bantu universe is manifest in the structure of the Bantu Language.

The four categories of the Bantu universe are: Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu. The four categories are characterized by *ntu*. But *ntu* itself is not a separate force. It cannot exist except in manifestation as any of the four forces. All phenomena fall within the ambience of these categories (Janheinz, 1958). Unlike in Western ontology, in African ontology, there is no such thing as an impersonal entity called

'being'. The *ntu* could have translated to the Western 'being' but the *ntu* cannot stand on its own but can manifest only in any of the four categories. Until the rise of logical positivism, Western metaphysics was largely predicated on 'being' as an impersonal entity rather than a characteristic of the multitude of things that exist. In the Bantu African ontology, every being must manifest concretely or particularly as either *muntu*, *kintu*, *hantu* or *kuntu*.

3.2. The Kuntu

The *kuntu* is a modal force. Certain words which are mere utterances in Western understanding are independently existing ontological entities in African ontology (Janheinz, 1958). Some words classified as abstract nouns in Western language system are independently existing forces in African ontology. Words such as laughter, wickedness, poverty, greatness, etc. are independently existing forces. This is akin to the forms in Plato's word of ideas.

Tutola (1936), a Yoruba author expressed,

.. we knew 'laughter' personally on that night, because as every one of them stopped laughing at us, 'Laugh' did not stop for two hours. As 'Laugh' was laughing at us on that night, my wife and myself forgot our pains and laughed with him, because he was laughing with curious voices that we never heard before in our life. We did not know the time that we fell into this laugh, but then we were only laughing at 'Laugh's' laugh and nobody who heard him when laughing would not laugh, so if somebody continue to laugh with Laugh himself, he or she would die or faint at once for long laughing, because laugh was his profession and he was feeding on it. Then they began to beg 'Laugh' to stop, but he could not (p.45)

Tutola renders a glaring expression of the word as a modal force. This is possible only in African ontology. Therefore, the *kuntu* is a word force. Though it is not ethereal as such. It is neither an attribute of divinity nor does it function in conjunction with any divinity. It is a force category of its own, operating independently.

3.3. The Hantu

The *hantu* is the force of space and time. The *hantu* answers questions of when and where. According to Janheinz (1958),

Hantu is the force which localizes spatially and temporally, every event and every 'motion', for since all beings are force, everything is constantly in motion. To the question, 'Where did you see it?' the answer may be, 'Where did I see it? Why, in

the reign of King X'. That is, a question of place can be answered in terms of time (p. 190).

3.4. The Kintu

The kintu is otherwise what the West would call 'thing'. They are frozen forces. They do not act on their own except when acted upon by a muntu. The gamut of things belong in this category. Trees, objects, animals – name them. But in the case of animals, they have been infused with drives by the bon dieu (Janheinz, 1958).

3.5. The Muntu

The muntu is the force category that encompasses the god, the ancestors, the dead and the living. It includes the *orishas* as well as the *loas* (Janheinz, 1958). In the same category is also, the Bon Dieu. The muntu is a force endowed with intelligence; a force that has command over the nommo, the active seminal, creative word-force.

3.6. The Nommo

The nommo is a unique phenomenon (Janheinz, 1958). It is the word but it neither translates into speech nor utterance though it connotes these phenomena. The possession and control of the nommo is what sets the muntu apart from the rest of the categories and elevates it to highest category of force. The nommo is intelligence, but it neither translates into wisdom nor intelligence. Though the nommo is intelligence, it is not an intelligence in the sense of angels and spirits. The difficulty surrounding the definition of the nommo brings out in a unique way, the reality of the peculiarity of some African experiences. The assumption that every African reality must have a European duplicate is patently fallacious. The concept of the nommo is a unique African reality.

The nommo is the creative force. It is the creative intelligence exercised by the muntu. It is a seminal force. It gives personality to the human person. The Bantu baby is not yet a person until it is named. The act of naming imbues the child with the nommo word-force that makes it a muntu – a person. It is the active force that awakens the frozen force of a kintu through the agency of a muntu. It is the powerful African word. It is the force in the African medicine that makes it potent. It is the same force that makes the affliction return when the patient defaults in his payment obligations to the medicine man. The nommo is the potent word of African magic. It is the word that is imbued of ultra-causal powers over all nature. Below is the explication of the nommo by the renowned African sage-philosopher, Ogotommeli (Janheinz 1958).

The vital force that carries the word issues from the mouth in water vapour which is both water and word. Thus nommo is water and the glow of fire and the seed word in one. Nommo, the life force, is the fluid as such, a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything (p. 124).

4. The Word as an Ethical Force

The African ethics is encoded in the African word. The word holds the norms and sanctions of the morality of the African community. The word approves and reprehends behaviours. The word rewards good behaviours and mortifies bad behaviours. Through the potency of the *ofò*, the Igbos make mystical use of the word to pronounce blessings and order justice. The word also sanctions through the *nommo* expressed in curses. The African ethics is not based on the force of the law on the force of the word-*nommo*.

5. Conclusion

This work has drawn the attention of the reader to the profundity of the word in the African universe of forces. Although the word is a commonplace phenomenon, it is also a mystic force that can yield its potentials when properly handled. The word though ordinary can be the difference between life and death. On the day of trouble, an answer to a question could either save or condemn. The word can be the difference between war and peace. But the African word is a powerful force. It is the life force of the *muntu*, the *nommo* which makes the *muntu* a person. It is the principle of designation, the custodian of the community ethics and the harbinger of blessings or causes. The African word is not an inert expression. It is a cosmic force.

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