

Language of the Ancestors

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Abstract

In this paper, I orient myself within an Africentric world view and advance the thesis that understanding language is fundamental to understanding African cosmology. NTU cosmology and Kemetic cosmology are examples of African cosmology that are inextricable from the languages in which they are understood and practiced. Through this discussion and further with the discussions of Ifá/Santería, I offer my own growing understanding of African cosmology.

Introduction

I remember traveling for hours and hours in a jeep in Tanzania and then looking at the map and seeing the tiny amount of ground that we'd covered. It gave me the unshakable impression that Africa is incredibly vast. How can I begin to even scratch the surface of all the cosmologies native to Africa across immeasurable time in my writings? Over-generalization and over-simplification are clear dangers for me. On the other hand, in this course we've explored the work of scholars with an incredible depth and breadth of knowledge about the cultures, histories, perspectives, psychologies, cosmologies and languages of Africa and Africans. Over all I feel that I have plenty to share from what I've learned over the course of the semester, but I'm fundamentally aware of how little this amounts to in the bigger picture. While I can by no means arrive at or impart an exhaustive understanding of what African cosmology is, I can at least begin to explore the topic.

By combining academic scholarship with insights gained through my own lived experiences and at times a narrative writing style, I explicate the idea that understanding language is fundamental to understanding African cosmology. Specifically I look at two cosmologies (NTU cosmology and Kemetic cosmology) and show that these are examples of African cosmologies that are inextricable from the languages in which they are understood and practiced. Then I continue investigating two other African cosmologies in the pursuit of understanding on a deeper level what African cosmology is.

Esteemed Loyola professor Dr. Cheryl Grills informs us that the term cosmology refers to "the structure of reality, and a definition of the relationship to the divine" (Grills, 2004, p. 174) This means that the deeper question that I'm exploring here is, what is the African structure of reality, and what is the African relationship to the divine?

Methodology

I approach this paper from an Africentric perspective. The Africentric lens lends primary importance to the origination of people, culture, philosophy and technology in Africa. Through this lens, Africa is the origin of harmonious human communities living in reciprocal and reverent connection with the Earth going back at least a hundred thousand years. The Africentric perspective is prior to and critical of the Eurocentric perspective, which is “grounded in ideations that privilege difference, aristocracy, elitism, classism, racism, sexism, genetic inferiority and caste attribution, resulting in a ‘grand narrative’ that, in fact, reflects deep intrinsic Western beliefs (both descriptive and explanative discourse) as universal” (Nobles, 2016, p. 39). Approaching this paper with an Africentric methodology not only means that I reject the arrogance of Eurocentric assumptions – it also means that my investigations embrace the notion that interconnection is fundamental to knowledge.

Epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge) is concerned with the topic of how we know what we know. As McDougal astutely puts it, “the starting point of African epistemology, traditionally speaking, should be the premise, “We are, therefore I am.” African philosophy suggests a collective mind. For the African, ‘I’ presupposes a “We,” in fact, “I” is contingent upon ‘We’ (McDougal. 2013, p. 240). My very existence as an individual is contingent upon people having had relationships with each other and with the Earth well before I was born. Not only that, but my individual life is sustained in the context of the relationships I have with others and with the Earth. “We are, therefore I am” and the related phrase: ‘I am because we are’ represent wonderful ancient African alternatives to Descartes’ *cogito, ergo sum* (McDougal. 2013, p. 240). The spirit that is within and behind all expresses through individuals and collectives. This is a root of compassion.

The notion that ‘I’ as an individual outsider may accurately write about and judge peoples, traditions or cultures from the comfort of my ivory tower is silly. Rather, a certain amount of immersion and merging a sense of ‘self’ with ‘collective(s)’ is necessary for this paper. Therefore, I draw upon the immersive experiences I’ve been fortunate enough to participate in, including an important study abroad experience I had in Tanzania in 2014. I was part of a group of students there earning college credit on a wildlife conservation and political ecology program learning Swahili and living with and like different Tanzanian families in homestay situations over the course of the spring semester of my junior year. Drawing on these experiences is necessary in order for me to write authentically from my own Africentric lens.

NTU Cosmology & Language

The Bantu language family influences 85 million speakers, and consists of over 500 languages spoken all over Africa. Swahili alone is spoken by more than 5 million people as a first language, and 30 million people as a second language (Bendor-Samuel, 2017). Studying Swahili in Tanzania for a few months in 2014 gave me a basic background in the concept of “NTU” in the Bantu languages.

Back then I learned that all languages in Swahili start with the sound ‘ki’ followed by the stem - so the word for Swahili in Swahili is actually ‘Kiswahili’. This part of the word that precedes the stem is called the determinative. Jahn tells us that “the stem without the determinative does not give a word; the stem cannot stand alone, but loses all concreteness and in fact does not occur in speech.” (Jahn, 1990, p. 100) This is like how the stem ‘jambo’ doesn’t occur in speech separate from its determinative in Swahili, and those outsiders who greet people by just saying ‘jambo’ are incorrect in doing so and are effectively exposing their ignorance. You

have to add the conjugated determinative before the stem in order to create a meaningful Swahili word - Hujambo (how are you), Hamjambo (how are we), Hatujambo (how are they), etc.

There are four categories of these determinatives. I just gave an example of the first category of “Muntu = ‘Human being’ (plural: Bantu)” - the other categories are “Kintu = ‘thing (plural: Bintu); Hantu = ‘place and time’; [and] Kuntu = ‘modality’.” (Jahn, 1990, p. 100) The fact that “everything there is must necessarily belong to one of these four categories” is what lends a “harmony” and “unity” to African traditional thought on a linguistic and deeper philosophical level in my opinion - at least in places where Bantu languages are spoken. (Jahn, 1990, p. 96, 97, 100) These categories are called the ‘NTU’ and “must be conceived of not as substance but as force”. (Jahn, 1990, p. 100) Indeed, “NTU is the universal force as such which, however, never occurs apart from its manifestations”. (Jahn, 1990, p. 101)

This “universal force” which underlies Bantu languages is central to African conceptions of God. (Jahn, 1990, p. 101) Jahn postulates that God is "NTU itself, and that would mean: that Being which is at once force and matter, unseparated and undivided, sleeping primal force, yet without Nommo, without life" (Jahn, 1990, p. 105). Because of this, even when life ceases, existence does not. To understand this fully, we must understand that “there are three words meaning ‘life’ in Kinyaruanda: bugingo, buzima, and magara. Bugingo means the duration of life and is unimportant for our inquiry” (Jahn, 1990, 106). The other two words may be defined as “Biological life (buzima) and spiritual life (magara) [which] meet in the human being” (Jahn, 1990, p. 107). When a person dies, “something remains, namely that ‘life force’ Nommo” after the death of the buzima and magara" (Jahn, 1990, 107). "The principle which designates the union of Nommo-force with a body is called magara: life” (Jahn, 1990, 107). There is separation of Nommo and body in death, but not a cessation of existence because all is held in NTU.

Through this example, we see how important language is to shaping the cosmology of its speakers. Imbued into the Bantu language family is both a structure of reality and a relationship to God characteristic of African cosmology. I personally experienced the way that the structure of NTU language gets embodied into the warmth and kindness of Swahili speakers in Tanzania. The lofty idea of cosmology becomes grounded in the sense of ease and compassion that comes from seeing beyond the external forms to a deeper understanding of the loving spirit that permeates all existence.

Kemetic Cosmology & Language

The same is true of the ancient Kemetic language, as highlighted by Jeremy Naydler. Naydler references well-known figures such as Freud, Jung, Bacon, and Darwin who all had a 'progressive' view of science and history which privileges the superiority of the new in relation to the old. (Naydler, 2005, p. 37) This evolutionary standpoint was different from the view of the ancient Egyptians and many other civilizations that see history as cyclical and devolutionary. In this latter view, the ancestors knew far more than we do today and knowledge is lost (not gained) over time for the most part. This reverence for ancient practices and understandings is not shared by the Egyptologists who in modern times come from a materialistic & positivist standpoint rather than a spiritual or mystical one. I agree with Naydler that internal mystical experiences are an important source of knowledge about the *Dwat* (invisible realm before birth and after death) and I wonder why he doesn't mention William James in this context. He cites many seemingly narrow minded Egyptologists such as Maspero, Hornung, Goff, Breasted and Gardiner who ignorantly cast aspersions upon the highly advanced knowledge of the ancient Kemites. They are presumably under the sway of modern forces such as eurocentrism or white supremacy. I wonder

whether they and their ilk are involved in an intentional occultation of the ancient knowledge, or whether they're just blinded by their prejudice. I appreciated the perspectives of Assmann, Wente, Dupuis, and others who have a reasonable reverence for ancient Kemetic wisdom keepers - a reverence that Naydler shares.

In fact, Naydler would likely have us expand the famous Whitehead quote regarding the whole of philosophy as being merely footnotes on Plato to point out that Plato's work was likely merely footnotes on the whole of ancient Kemetic religion. He recounts a story of "a hermetic text dating from around the second century A.D. [which] gives the Egyptian view of their own mental and linguistic capacities in comparison to those of the Greeks" (Naydler, 2005, p. 39). In this text, which summarizes many ancient Kemetic teachings, it is stated that "it will be entirely unclear when the Greeks eventually decide desire to translate our language into their own, and thus produce in writing the greatest distortion and unclarity. But this discourse expressed in our paternal language keeps clear the meaning of its words. The very quality of the speech, and the sound of Egyptian words have in themselves the energy of the objects they speak of" (Naydler, 2005, p. 39). The text then goes on to contrast the "empty speech" of the Greeks with the spiritually empowered language of ancient Egypt. In fact "the Greek language is too feeble, too arrogant, and too superficial to be able to convey the mysteries expressed in the original Egyptian" (Naydler, 2005, p. 39).

The fact that the mystical ideas contained in ancient Kemetic thought may only be accessible to a speaker of the ancient Kemetic language is compelling to me, and would help to explain why there is so much misunderstanding of the concepts and practices today amongst English speakers today. Of course, the lack of Afrocentrism amongst English speaking scholars is the fundamental root of the misunderstandings. Ultimately, grasping the fundamentals of

ancient Kemetic language and immersion in that mindset would reveal that which English words may only point at. When egotistical Egyptologists arrogantly place their Eurocentric assumptions upon their area of study, erroneous and often offensive misconceptions result.

Other concepts like that of the 'nwn' are important to Kemetic cosmology, and I can see how only through a thorough understanding of the language can one truly comprehend it's meaning. "Nwn was conceptualized as matter in the form of primal water, endowed with spirit and consciousness. In Kemetic cosmology, it was from this uncreated, ungenerated matter that the entire universe was created. Therefore, everything in the universe is endowed with the fundamental substance or vital force, called Nwn" (McDougal, 2014, p. 238). From a literalist, materialist Eurocentric perspective, this concept may appear fanciful or infantile, maybe something best understood in terms of metaphor. In the framework of the rest of the Kemetic language and when understood through an Africentric lens, the concept of nwn is sophisticated and mystical. Perhaps it is something we may understand on a deeper level by turning inward and exploring practices that would reveal the fundamentals of reality to us.

The idea of dying before you die was one of the fundamental bases of Kemetic religion. I remember in college having the opportunity to go skydiving with the outing club. I decided to turn it into a spiritual practice, since I had just learned in a Buddhism class about how the Buddha is said to have died to the world before his body died. Before going to the skydiving facility, I arranged all of my worldly affairs as I would if I were actually expecting to die, and I said goodbye to all of my family and loved ones. We got up over 10,000 feet in the airplane and I was strapped to a handsome Skydiving guide who looked like Brad Pitt. I psyched myself into believing that I really was about to die. With consciousness and intention, I let go of my life and fell out of the airplane in tandem with Brad Pitt. The freedom of falling through the air was

parallel to the emotional freedom I felt in that moment. He pulled the parachute, and we made it to the ground safely. I threw up and waited for some other friends who drove me back to college in a daze laying down on the back seat with a humble conviction in the preciousness of each new moment. I imagine that through similar/even more profound practices, the ancient Kemites were able to investigate the dwat and arrive at knowledge of that realm.

Ifá

In the previous two sections I explore the importance of language to African Cosmology. The following two sections regarding Ifá and Santería explicate the term African cosmology further and elucidate more deeply what that term really means. “Ifá as a blanket term describes a spiritual tradition of west Africa that is... non-Abrahamic... monotheistic... and also polytheistic” (Babatunde, 2022, p. 37). The monotheistic God of Ifá is called Olodumare, the Creator expressed through the original prophet named Orunmila. The “corpus of knowledge” is a kind of holy scripture called Ifá, which was brought to humanity by Orunmila (Babatunde, 2022, p. 37). As Babatunde says, “Ifá as it were is the embodiment of Olodumare and esoteric consciousness, a level only attained by Orunmila, many of the verses of Ifá state. Orunmila is referenced as the deliverer and interpreter of Olodumare’s message” (Babatunde, 2022, p. 39). Every individual has an Ori which chooses important features of one’s life and personality before incarnating. A practice of Ifá’s adherents is to pray and make offerings to one’s Ori and ancestors (Egun). The Orisa are deities that are “benevolent in general” and who also receive prayers and offerings (Babatunde, 2022, p. 61). I was surprised to see the eightfold noble path of Buddhism included as constituting the correct or ideal character which we may strive to align to (Babatunde, 2022, pp. 87, 88). I love Buddhism so this was a pleasant surprise. I wonder if the

Buddha learned the eightfold noble path from someone familiar with Ifá? Perhaps these religions have survived for so long because it is an excellent outlet for sincerely reverent people to express their devotional nature. Contemporary people need to access meaning in their lives as much as ever or even more than ever before, and what is offered by Ifá meets that need.

Santería

Santería is an “Afro-Cuban religious system” which “originated with the religious beliefs and practices of Yoruba-speaking slaves brought to Cuba primarily during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the region of Nigeria, West Africa” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 356, 357). As a cosmology with its roots in helping slaves and their descendants cope with their oppression, “[t]he magical and ritual practice of Santería is motivated primarily to enhance the individual practitioner’s feelings of security, protection, and power” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 358). The most high in Santería is the same Olodumare from Ifá; “the Supreme Being, [who] has all of the sublime functions displayed by a creator God of more institutionalized religions— eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, mercifulness, and justice” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 357).

Santería is a tradition full of intermediaries; Olodumare “is perceived as too powerful and remote to respond to the base needs of mere mortals. Thus, humans depend on intermediaries, the orisas/santos, to intercede on their behalf, accessing for them the power and assistance of Olodumare” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 357). Furthermore, “santeros/santeras, priests and priestesses... propitiate the orisas on behalf of their followers” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 358).

Sandoval tells us that “for many Afro-Cubans... the religion of the Orisas/santos is more than a religion; it is the core of their ethnic identity” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 360). In fact, Santería functions as “social and economic network and as a supportive complementary healthcare

system... Devotees who regularly frequent the house of a santero/santera become part of an intimate, surrogate family that represents a significant substitute for estranged or absent extended families” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 363). Santería has “a reputation for being a religion of ‘lower’ class, primarily black, mulatto, and white uneducated people” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 356). This is related to the fact that

“[n]ormally, Santería does not place any moral judgment on a person based on his professional activities, personal characteristics, or sexual orientation. For example, some drug dealers have joined Santeria in hopes of obtaining supernatural protection from the authorities and from their enemies. Also, many homosexuals and people whose lifestyles do not conform to the dominant value orientation are initiated as priests, and they enjoy a wide following” (Sandoval, 2008, p. 364).

I believe that Santería is appealing and interesting to people because it has empowered the oppressed for centuries. Indeed, the more that Santería emphasizes one’s own and one’s community’s connection to the divine, the more empowering and intriguing of a wisdom tradition it will be.

Ancestor communion so important to Ifá and Santería has become relatable to me through the connection I have been cultivating with my late grandfather over the course of this semester. I created an altar based on one described by Teish (1985) which consists of a square white cloth, a rock in each of the corners, spirit water (water with a little rum), macadamia nuts, tobacco, candles, bells, and some photos of my mom’s dad Murray Falk (AKA Zadie). A few times a week I sit with that altar, light incense, make offerings, and contemplate those photos. I often feel the flavor of love that is particular to my grandfather flood my heart and bring a smile

to my face. Stewing in that energy has been a really deep spiritual practice for me over these last few months, and has given me a new appreciation for the connection I have with my ancestors.

African-Centered Psychology

Intertwined with the concept of African cosmology is the concept of African-Centered psychology. Dr. Grills quotes the African Psychology Institute as having adopted the following definition of African-Centered psychology:

“African-Centered psychology is the dynamic manifestation of unifying African principles, values and traditions. It is the self-conscious centering of psychological analysis and applications in African reality, culture and epistemology. African-Centered psychology examines the process that allows for the illumination and liberation of the spirit. Relying on the principles of harmony within the universe as a natural order of existence, African-Centered psychology recognizes: the Spirit that permeates everything that is; the notion that everything in the universe is interconnected; the value that the collective is the most salient element of existence; and the idea that communal self-knowledge is the key to mental health. African-Centered psychology is ultimately concerned with understanding the systems of meaning of human beingness, the features of human functioning, and the restoration of normal/natural order to human development. As such, it is used to resolve personal and social problems and promote optimal functioning (African psychology, Institute, 1995)” (Grills, 2004, p. 172).

Much of Dr. Grills’ discussion of African-Centered psychology is relevant to our inquiry into African Cosmology. As I mentioned in the introduction, Grills maintains that the term cosmology pertains to “the structure of reality, and the definition of the relationship to the

divine” (Grills, 2004, p. 174). The principles of harmony within the universe as a natural order of existence, and the interconnectedness of everything in the universe are aspects of African-Centered psychology which pertain to a general African cosmological structure of reality. The recognition of the “spirit that permeates everything that is” relates back to the definition of our relationship to the divine (Grills, 2004, p. 172). Spirit is in the emptiness, the stillness in the center of the wheel, the axle upon which it turns. Bruce Douglas told our class that the zero point energy is there, and it can be amplified and utilized to build obelisks and even pyramids. Waterways were constructed in Gaza to bring water in and out of the pyramids. A device with the dimensions of the arc of the covenant sat in the king’s chamber and diffused sacred energy through the water to the lives of the plants and animals that ate in the area. Bruce thinks that Africans and other ancient collectives interfaced their consciousness with this technology, until it all exploded 12,000 years ago around the time called the younger dryas when the poles shifted and Earth experienced an ice age. None of Bruce’s views seem to be in conflict with African psychology or cosmology – rather I feel that they complement each other.

Conclusion

African cosmologies share some fundamentals in common over vast space and time. Language is of paramount importance to NTU cosmology and Kemetic cosmology, and connection to those who have died from the vantage of the living is characteristic African cosmology. Furthermore, African cosmology recognizes the interconnectedness of everything in the universe, the spirit that permeates everything that is, and are teleologically aimed at the “illumination and liberation of the spirit” (Grills, 2004, p. 172). We see this not just in Professor Grills’ writings, but also in the four discussions of African cosmologies that fill this paper.

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