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Metaphysical Causal Agents in African Traditional Society: A Philosophical Analysis of Benin- Traditional Thought System

By

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Abstract

In this paper, attempt is made to provide a contextual explanation for the occurrence of some causal events in Benin cosmology .In Benin traditional thought system, nothing happens by chance. Occurrence of events are attributable to forces which include those of Deities, Divinities, Personal Guarding spirits and even a man's own hand or arm. These diverse categories of causal agents are believed to be responsible for whatever happens in areas of marriage, economy, health, morals, hazards and politics. The paper maintains that these forces play important roles in the average life of the Benin people.

Introduction

Location and Population

Benin City is located between latitude $6^{\circ} 20^{\text{N}}$ and longitude $5^{\circ} 31^{\text{E}}$. According to Igbinokpogie (1997), the Benin people constitute one of the more than 250 ethnic groups that make up Nigeria. They are mainly concentrated in local government areas of Edo state, namely: *Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia –South West, Ovia North East,*

Uhhmwode, Ikoba Okha and Egor. Currently these local government areas comprise forty seven wards. The population, according to the 1952 census, was about 292,000 (including other Edo speaking groups) while the 1991 provisional census put the population at 1, 152,538.

The Benin Traditional Cosmology

Cosmology as used in this context means world view, that is, how man looks at the world in relation to himself. In other words, cosmology is not seen as a science and branch of astrology which views the universe as integral whole or part of the universe which is under astronomical observation as part of that whole. Rather, according to Metuh (1985), “Cosmology world view is taken to mean: the complex of people’s belief about the origin, structure and organization of the universe and the laws governing the interaction of the being in it”.

It may be necessary to ask why a study of people’s problem of causality should start with their cosmology? As Uchendu (1965) observed,

to know how people view the world around them is to understand how they evaluate life, and peoples evaluation of life, both temporal and non temporal, provides them with “a character of action and a guide of behaviour.

While trying to characterize Benin traditional cosmology, occasional reference will be made to other African traditional cultures. According to Mbiti (1997), “Africans have their own ontology which is both religious and anthropocentric in the sense that everything is seen in terms of relations to man. Mbiti went further to divide this ontology into five categories as follows:

- a. God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and substance of both man and all things.
- b. Spirit being made up of super- human beings and the spirit of men who died a long time ago.
- c. Man, including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.
- d. Animals and plants or the reminder of biological life.
- e. Phenomena and objects without biological life.

The anthropocentric ontology can be conveniently grouped into sensible thing like man, plants, animals as well as phenomenon and objects without biological life; and supersensible entities such as God and the spirits. The second group is sustained more by belief systems than by empirical proofs.

In Benin cosmology, Egharevba (1968) identified the existence of two words, namely, *Agbon* and *Erimwin*. For him. *Agbon* is the sensible world created and controlled by Osanobua (God) through the divinities. All occurrences in *Agbon* are therefore believed to be controlled by Osanobua through the divinities as His agents. *Erimwin* is the invisible supersensible world. It is populated by a variety of spirit being such as Enikaro (Ancestors) and Ebo (Divinities). It is the general belief of the

Benin people that divinities who are osanabua's agents control both Agbon and Erinmwin.

Egharevbas two fold classification of Benin cosmology encompasses the five categories of African' ontology as outlined by Mbiti (1991)

Methodology

Before the discussion of causal agents, the following myth is taken as typical. *Itohan* and *Esohe* are both wives to the same husband. *Itohan* is the senior wife and *Esohe* is the junior wife and the favourite of the husband. *Esohe* is however; sickly and unable to give birth to children, not even one. Her husband had spent a lot on her without improvement. Meanwhile, *Itohan* the senior wife gives birth to new babies every other year. *Esohe* began to worry and therefore went to a herbalist who prescribed some medicine to no avail. In the end, as a hypothesis, *Esohe* attributed her sickness and infertility to the first wife's jealousy for sharing her husband with her. The first wife must be a witch. Another herbalist is consulted who confirm that *Esohe*'s problem is the handwork of an evil force.

This place of forces appears to be common in the conceptual life of traditional thinkers. These forces include; the Supreme Deity as the ultimate cause, the deities, forces in nature, which can be tapped by human beings, and human beings with innate abilities, which are in most cases, inexplicable.

The question one may ask is, of what relevance is the above account to the discussion about causation and casual agent? Gbadegehin (1991) tried to give answer to the question by suggesting that, one, it is an attempt to explain a puzzling situation that is, the predicament of *Esohe* which worries her and her husband and needs to be understood in terms of cause. Two, "there is an effort to find an explanation within the regular order of nature and thus be in a position to control it" (Gbadegehin, 1991), hence the first consultation with the herbalist-as the traditional medical practitioner who can diagnose and prescribe.

Then, when this fails, and no explanation in terms of the regular order of nature-as it occurs to them-is forth-coming, "recourse is made to explanation in terms of forces which seem to be outside the regular order of nature" (Gbadegehin, 1991) Why is there the strong belief that such forces are causally effective? Again, Gbadegehin (1991) asserted that "it goes back to the issue of the cosmology of the people and their understanding of its ordering. The cosmos is conceived as an orderly one in which all significant events are caused and are potentially explicable." If this assertion is correct, then any particular occurrence must have a causal explanation. Again, it is believed that though human beings are in the centre of the universe there are other forces, which operate on them and those which they operate on to effect changes, in their world. Gbadegehin (1991), commented that such operation are based on the principle that "the higher a force is, the more casually efficacious it is".

Hierarchically, therefore, the supreme Deity is the most causally efficacious, followed by the divinities, the deified forces such as the ancestral spirits and other extra human forces which can be conjured by man. Some human beings also have such powers to control nature.

The question is, why is causal efficacy attributed to these forces in the first place? In other words, why does a traditional thinker feel the need to postulate any force for accounting for such changes outside the independence of the regular order of nature? This seems to be the crux of the problem. Another problem is the presupposition that the forces postulated are non-empirical. Since this is the assumption that underlies most accounts of causality in African traditional cosmology, this paper aims at finding answers to the questions as they affect Benin Traditional thought System.

Another problem which calls for investigation is: are the various Causal agents, which include, Supreme Deity, divinities, extra-human forces, human with special powers, non physical or metaphysical? In other words are the various causal agents mentioned above conceived as supernatural by Benin traditional thinkers? To successfully approach this, there is the need to review the features normally attributed to such agents.

Review of the Features of Some Causal Agents Deities Osanobua (Supreme Deity)

The most common element shared by the various tribes in Africa is their belief in a supreme being who is responsible for the creation of the world. The supreme Deity in the various African world-views are called by different names because of language differences but appears to be conceived in similar terms, having similar features or attributes.

Sodipo (1973) wrote that “The Yoruba conceives *Olodumare* as immortal. He is also conceived as *Eleda* (creator), *Aseda* (maker) and *Elemi* (owner of divine breath)” He further described *Olorun* as “the ultimate cause of all visible processes in the world, but the actions and plans of the lesser gods contribute important secondary causes”.

According to Idowu (1962), “the key aspects of the Yoruba World-view are *Olorun* or *Olodumare* described as the “Disposer Supreme” to whom belongs the ultimate sanction of anything proposed, the acceptance of any act or worship, the blessing of any enterprise”. *Chukwu* is the name of the Supreme Deity in *Igbo*, *Abasi Ibom* in *Efik*, *Oghene* in *Isoko* and *urhobo*. Oroka (1998) observed that for the *Isoko* people, *Oghene* is “ that framing and overarching firmament, maker of earth and sky, remote and abstract, the one no one knows “ while Bradbury (1973) holds that *Osanobua*, the name of God in Benin, means “ The supplier of love, wealth, health, life

and other necessities needed for sustaining creation. That is, he who supplies the needs of his creatures.

Creation appears to be the most acknowledged work of God by the people in Benin. The Benin believes that God created all things. They perceive *Osanobua* (God) as “the designer or architect who formed the universe, hence, he is also referred to as the designer (*Osa no guona*). As a causal agent, the Benin see God as God of fertility. He is known as the ‘the Giver of Children’ (*Osayomore* or *Osayawemwen*) (*Osayamwen*). *Osanobua* is recognized as the God of procreation. Human procreation is particularly attributed to God. They believe that God causes conception to take place.

God did not only create the material universe, but also established laws of nature and Benin customs. For the Benin, *Osanobua* created things in an ordered fashion, and made an orderly and harmonious world where everyone could perform his / her own duties. The Benin belief that God established their customs, laws and regulations in addition to creating the world. This is why they call Him *OSANAKPAMA* meaning, the creator of all things. The high priest, Ugbenowewe of Udo (2002), opined that *Osanobua* (God) is “ the causal agent who determines the destiny of his creatures; precisely, that of human beings” Like the Yorubas, the Benins believe that before a person comes to this world, he presents himself before God to choose, receive or have his destiny affixed to him by God. He also determined how long that individual will live. In fact “everything is as it is because God made it so” (Bradbury, 1973). For example moon is one of the expressions of the God’s providence. For the Benins when the first appearance of the new moon coincides with any special occasion, it means that God has given his blessing to such an occasion. It is a sign of good things to such an occasion. It is sign of good things to come hence, the name “*Osayuki* – God created the moon. The Benin people teach their children that the source of being is above, and that God is the giver of life and prosperity. This is the reason why Benin parents incorporate God’s name into the children’s names, thereby recognizing that Children come from God.

The people of the Benin kingdom see God as their keeper, guardian, protector and preserver. The omnipotence of God is experienced by the Benin as protective, sustaining, upholding, saving and healing. One of the Benin names for God (*Osanorhiole*) means the owner / possessor and supplier of all powers. Names like *Osafamwen* meaning “God rescued me” and *Osamiewenfan* meaning “God delivered me” are expressions concerning God’s saving work. The people take it to be result of God’s help when they are rescued from danger of illness. He is seen as a causal agent of safety and security. Buttressing this role played by *Osanobua*, Mbiti (1991) has this to say, thus, God is involved in the affairs of mankind, and people experience this involvement in terms of his continuing to create, sustain, provide, pastor, nurse, heal and save. Most of these functions on the physical and concrete level of being, and with special reference to the life of man.

Mbiti's views appear to be relevant to the Benin cosmology, because the Benin hold that God is good to all men. They however, attribute evils and sorrows of life to Him as well. Calamities and afflictions in Human life, which puzzle the Benin society, are explained in terms of a causal agent, and that agent, probably, is *Osanobua*. When endless trouble continues in a given family, the Benins say that they come from, or are approved by God. The Benins believe that God can strike people who commit incest or contravene important rituals. The rampant death of every male child born into a given family, the premature death of every female child born into a given family, the inability of all full-grown daughter or adult males in a given family to have life- partners, the mental disorder and disease found in a given family and so on are interpreted by the Benins to be God's punishment for man's misdoings.

National calamities such as drought, epidemic, flood and death of infants are seen by the Benin people as beyond individual human cause or control. They are generally attributed to God's activity or to a spiritual being. If God is taught to be responsible, it is often taken that he is punishing people for their mischief. It is God's manifestation of a judicial manner. Death appears to be the most mysterious and puzzling of all misfortunes. For the Yoruba, Ibo, *Isoko* as well as the Benin, God is paradoxically the giver of life as well as the one who takes it away. Admittedly, other casual agents like sorcerers, witches, and others may be blamed for the immediate cause, but God is seen or thought of as the ultimate cause. The Benin people believe that there is a divinity of death (*Ogie-uwu*). Like the Yoruba, *Bacongo*, *Efik*, *Urhobo*, the Benin people hold that God created death for the purpose of recalling the persons whose times on earth is fulfilled. According to Mbiti (1991), God is not blamed for calamities, misfortunes and sorrows which strike men. He is brought into the picture primarily as an attempt to explain what is otherwise difficult for the human mind; an explanation, which also serves to comfort those struck by the particular event for suffering.

It is in the light of Mbiti's remark that the actions of the causal agents are examined. It is meant to explain the purpose for their actions.

Suffice it to say that the presence of God in the Benin cultural heritage helps to sustain moral sanctity, expose human limitations, encourage self-restraints and self-control, eliminate human malevolence, thereby protecting existing custom, tradition, norms and values inherent in Benin cultural heritage. His presence remains an invisible cord that binds all Benin people together under one untied political structure called the Benin kingdom with the *Oba* as the political and spiritual head.

All Benin people believe in a high God, *Osanabua* or *Osa*, the creator of all things and beings. Any person may pray to *Osa* for health, children and other benefits. In some villages, *Osa* is the object of a special cult conducted by a recognized priest. A few years ago, the *Oba* recognised the worship of *Osanobua* and founded "The Church of Holy Arousa" (*aruosa – shrine*) and appointed a chief priest with assistants. As a result of his causal connection with Edo of the Benin Kingdom, *Osa* has various names, which include:

Osanobua - God that brings love – wealth.
Osanudazi - Omniscience – having infinite Power and infinite knowledge.

Divinities: (Ebo)

Divinities are gods believed to be associates of the Supreme Being and deified communal priests and ancestors. Divinities are believed to have non-physical attributes derived from their associations with the Supreme Being. For example, Sodipo (1973) observed that *Esu*, the Yoruba trickster change the course of something even without the blessing of *Olodumare* and in defiance of the laws of nature. *Orunmila*, the god of divination is believed to be present with *Olodumare* at the choice of destiny by every individual coming into the world. This is why according to Sodipo (1973), the priests are normally consulted when a new child is born in order to know what is the pre-appointed portion of the child. Like the Yoruba, as presented by Sodipo, the Benin people also recognize *Esu* and *Orunmila* as divinities believed to be causal agents in Benin cosmology.

As earlier mentioned, some other causal agents are deified communal priests and ancestors. They were once members of the community, according to Gbadesegin (1991) at death; they become deified, because of the extra-ordinary power they wielded while alive. Such powers are believed to be beyond psychical or human means. Sodipo (1973) recognize *Sango* the Yoruba god of thunder who was a former king in old Oyo Empire as an example of deified ancestors. He is described as a powerful and effective ruler, who commanded fear and respect while alive. He had extra-ordinary powers that went beyond the natural. This is also the case of divinities in the Benin; Bradbury (1973) mentioned such divinities to include: *Olokun* and *Ovia*. According to him, *Olokun* is the senior son of *Osanobua*, identified with the sea (*Oku*), which is the great water of the earth. *Olokun* is associated with human fertility and wealth. *Ovia* the mythical wife of a king who melted into a river out of grief at being accused by her co-wives of bringing sickness upon her husband is also deified as a spirit being.

The above assertions by Bradbury reveal that “*Olokun* and *Ovia*” are believed to be super natural dwelling in nature phenomena and therefore, regarded as nature spirits. They belong to a special class of non human forces with extra human powers. People who know how to control such powers can appropriate them and use them for good or evil, and in so doing, they become causal agents.

Ehi (Personal Guarding Spirit)

Every individual is thought of as consisting of two parts, the living “person” in this world (*Agbon*) and the spiritual counterpart “*Ehi*” which is in *Erivi* (spirit world). According to the common belief as shown by Bradbury (1973), when a person is going to be born in *Agbon* he goes to *osanobua*, the creator and tells what he plans to do with his life on earth and requests the material and spiritual faculties for accomplishing this; thus, this act is expressed in the infinitive “*hi*” (to predestine oneself). He opined

thus; if a man is unsuccessful in the world, he is said to have done this badly or to be fighting against the fate, which he has determined for himself and when such people are being buried, the mourners call after them to “hi”.

(Bradbury, 1973). In Yoruba traditional thought says Sodipo, man’s *Ori* (the guardian spirit) is an important causal factor. He explained that *ori* is the bearer of one’s destiny. If a man’s *Ori* is a fortune one, then the person is destined luck and his affairs usually prosper but, if this *Ori* is an unfortunate one, then his affairs are usually ill fated (Sodipo, 1973).

Also, Omijeh (1983) explained that *Ehi* in one sense is a person and in another, a counterpart and guide in the spirit world. After the individual “*Omwan*” (the living person) is born, *Ehi* remains in the spirit world to act as a guide and intermediary with *Osanobua*. Omijeh’s comment seems to imply that *Ehi*’s task is to stand behind his counterpart when the latter is making his request to the creator and to ensure that his counterpart does not forget anything. Unsuccessful individuals sometimes make offerings to their *Ehi* to secure its intercession with the creator. Misfortune can, therefore be explained in terms of a failure to “*Ehi* well’ or to keep to the chosen life programme. The sufferer is said to have a bad *Ehi*’ and prayers and offerings must be addressed to the *Ehi* asking it to intervene. Omijeh, explained that at one level, the *Ehi* represents the innate potentials for social achievement with which each individual is believed to be endowed. Predestination is seen as a limiting factor on the individual capacity to achieve success through his own actions. He also observed that “though one who has a stroke of good luck should, and often does thank his *Ehi*, it is more often involved in context of failure and misfortune. In operation, *Ehi* seems to have ability to beget, or bear and keep healthy children.

According to Egharevba (1968) when a person goes before *Osanobua* to tell him what he wishes to be in the world- whether a farmer or a trader, a thief or a chief, and he asks for all these things, material and spiritual, which will enable him to carry through the chosen role successfully, *It is Ehi’s function to stand by and advise him (Omwan) and remind him to ask for everything he (Omowan) will need. Once the person has been born, Ehi is task is to guide him along the chosen path and to ensure his well being. If the person is an irredeemable social failure, it can be said that his Ehi is bad (Egbrevaba, 1968)*

However, close as a man and his *Ehi* seems to be, they are yet thought of as being independent agents and so there is a possibility of conflict between them. *Ehi* must therefore be propitiated in such the same way as other super-natural entities and failure to do these, results in trouble. Egharegba.s views show that *Ehi* is a personification of pre-destiny. *Ehi* is the way a man has to go. In other words, it is the symbolic recognition that people are born with different endowments, and potentialities for social achievement. It appears that the reception of the *Ehi* is, infact, a mechanism for shifting guilt arising from failure to some objects outside this world. The same

process that follows from childlessness, failure in examinations or abject poverty, is probably made more bearable if one can blame one's condition on something outside oneself and outside human society. The fact that *Ehi* is in one sense an independent entity allows this to be done and also leaves open the door for hope, for *Ehi* can be approached to set things right, however the notions that *Ehi* is really another aspect of oneself underscores the fact that failure is ultimately in one's own make up. This "semi detached" character of *Ehi* is thus a very subtle piece of symbolism. In theory of cause, the successful man is as much as or more beholden to his *Ehi*, and people do thank their *Ehi* with offerings from time to time but in practice there is strong tendency to blame ones *Ehi* for failures and to attribute success to one's hand, that is, to one's sense and enterprise

Conclusion

So far, efforts have been made to critically examine the position of casual agents in the study of causation in Benin cosmology. It has been revealed that causal agents play prominent roles in the explanatory model showing the cause- effect relationship.

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