

## **Causality in African Ontology**

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### **Abstract**

*In African metaphysics, the problem of causality is a central issue. And the fundamental question that looms at the horizon of this piece is: What is the concept of causality in African ontology? This paper studies the dimensions of causality in African ontology and discovers, using the historical, expository and critical methods of enquiry that for the African, the world is an ordered universe in which all events are caused and potentially explicable. The African does not just speak of mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions like his western counterparts; he also speaks of a metaphysical kind of causality, which binds the creator to the creature; the seen world to the unseen world; the spiritual to the physical.*

**Keywords:** Causality, African, Ontology, Chance, Metaphysics, Extra, Sensory, Perception.

### **Introduction**

Aristotle had argued that there are two ways of coming to know reality. Firstly, reality could be known through knowing individual things or events as individual things and events, and as they appear to us; this form of knowing excludes the underlying principle or ultimate causes of the reality that is known. This kind of knowledge is acquired through sense perception and is common to all kinds of people. Secondly, we can also know reality through going beyond the perception of the senses, beyond the perception of things and events as individual and isolated, to the perception of the ultimate causes or underlying principle of reality. A cause here, speaks of that which brings about a certain effect.

Kanu (2012a&b) avers that the Ionians were concerned with this level of knowing when its representatives like Thales spoke of water as the underlying principle of being; Anaximenes spoke of a neutral element as the ultimate cause of reality and Anaximenes spoke of air as the basic unity in the midst of the plurality of things. Aristotle categorized this kind of knowledge as philosophical knowledge born out of intellectual reflection. He classified the causes of things into four: material cause, which is the material with which a thing is made of; the formal cause, which is the form or essence which makes a thing that particular thing; the efficient cause, which is the source or agent responsible for bringing a thing into being; the final cause, which is the purpose or end for which a thing is made. In African metaphysics, the problem of causality is a central issue. And the fundamental question that would constitute the burden of this chapter is: What is the concept of causality in African ontology?

## **African Concept of Causality**

Hume (1902) in treating the compatibilism of freedom and necessity, spoke of things happening by chance, meaning that things could happen without any cause. The word ‘perchance’ is recurrent in the works of Shakespeare (1852) precisely in the ‘Twelfth Night’, which reveals the Western poet’s understanding that things can just happen. If the question, ‘Does anything just happen?’ were put to an African, what would be his response? For the African, according to Aja (2001), the world is an ordered universe in which all events are caused and potentially explicable. Thus Gyekye (1987) maintains the doctrine of universal causation in the Akan-African world. The African does not just speak of mechanical, chemical and psychological interactions like his Western counterparts; he also speaks of a metaphysical kind of causality, which binds the creator to the creature. Reacting to the Western concept of chance, which believes that things could happen by chance, Ozumba (2004) argues that what they call chance is their ignorance of the series of actions and reactions that have given rise to a given event.

Although Gyekye (1987) maintains a universal doctrine of causality in African ontology, he emphasizes that greater attention is paid to extraordinary events and not natural events or regular occurrences when issues of causality is discussed. Regular or natural events would include, rain during rainy season, drought during dry season, a pregnancy that lasts nine months, the growth of plants, catching of few fish at some particular times of the year etc. Such events do not constitute a problem for the mind of the African, because, as Gyekye argues “such events are held by them to be part of the order established by the omnipotent creator” (p. 77). They are empirical, scientific and non-supernaturalistic. They have been observed by people who now know that there is a necessary connection between such events, for instance, they know that during dry season, the river dries up, or that a child stays in the mother’s womb for nine months before delivery. Extraordinary or contingent are those that engage the minds of Africans, and such events would include, a woman being pregnant for more than nine months, drought during rainy season, a tree falling and killing a man. These events according to Gyekye have particular traits that make them mind disturbing, “They are infrequent and hence are considered abnormal; they are discrete and isolated; they appear to be puzzling, bizarre, and incomprehensible; they are not considered subsumable under any immediate known law of nature” (p. 78). The events are deemed insufficient to explain their causes, thus, the ultimate cause of the event is sought. The interest is not on what has happened but why it happened. Thus, not that the tree has fallen, but why it fell on a particular man and not on the ground or on any other man.

Iroegbu (1995) talks about two kinds of causes in African ontology: the **ontological cause** and the **functional cause**. The ontological cause produces the being of the effect. It is such that without the ontological cause, the being which is the effect wouldn’t be. An example is the relationship between God and man. God is the ontological cause of man; Iroegbu further speaks of God as the mediate (indirect) ontological cause of all that man causes and man as the immediate ontological cause

of his actions. This perspective would be dangerous, because if God is the cause of all that man does, then man cannot be held responsible for whatever he does. God is better described as the immediate ontological cause of man. Describing God as the immediate ontological cause of man, Kanu (2012c) would describe him in Igbo ontology as *chikere ndu* (God created life), *chiwendu* (God owns life), *chibundu* (God is life). Man could also be the ontological cause of another man by producing his own kind. The second cause, which is the functional cause, explains the reason for the operations of being in relation to other beings, as regards the force they exert on other beings, for instance, when an elder curses a younger person.

Thus Tempels (1998) avers that in the created force, a causal force emanates from the very nature of that created force to influence other forces. Through this interaction, a force could weaken or re-enforce another force. Each force has an activating principle or vital force which allows it to function in a specific manner. The idea of a created force excludes God, who is the creator of the created force. Taking from Aristotle, he is the UNCAUSED CAUSE and the ultimate cause of all things. The hierarchy of being could be arranged as follows:

- a. God
- b. Divinities
- c. Spirits
- d. Man
- e. Animate realities
- f. Inanimate realities

In describing the place of God in the hierarchy of causes, Ioegbu (1995) wrote that,

We shall regard as effect, all reality outside the Supreme Being, who himself is never caused by another. For he is the supreme cause of all else, including the gods and spirits. These effects can, either concurrently or separately, also be causes of things. In this case they will be regarded as both cause and effect in different perspectives. (p. 366).

The African believes that events are determined by the wills of spiritual beings. And spiritual beings from the hierarchy of being are God, divinities and spirits.

At the occurrence of an event, causality raises the dual but complementary enquiries: how? and why? The *how* question requires a description of the event that has occurred. Having understood how it happened, the African begins to assess the why. The how will include the place, time and situation. At this level, it is an empirical question at the domain of the African empirical science. The question of the *why* comes after an understanding of the *How*. Here, the African moves beyond empirical analysis and goes deep-down and all-round. The reason why it happened is what is investigated here. It is at this point that sacred scientists are consulted to look into the spiritual world for a deeper understanding of the event. Profound enquiries such as these, are based on the African principle expressed in the Igbo saying: *ife na-akpata ife* (something is caused by something); *odighi ihe gbaraka mee* (nothing happens

without a reason); *nwata no nuzo na-agba egwu, odi nwa nnunu na aguru ya egwu no'hia* (a child who is dancing on the road, there is a bird singing for it in the bush), *You cannot see the rabbit in the afternoon in vain*. The Akan would say, “whenever the palm tree tilts it is because of what the earth has told it”. Thus, if a woman is passing under the tree of a bread fruit and it falls on her and she dies, it is not seen as chance. Something must have caused it, explaining why it happened only when she came by; having it that many other people have passed that same way that day.

Nnamdi (2009) argues that there are basically three worlds in the African universe, even though Edeh (1985) maintains that there are only two worlds, however, both agree that there is harmony and unity in the African world. The first is the earth which is the visible world, *Uwa*, in which human beings, deities and other material things reside. The second is the land of the spirits, *Ani muo*, which is the invisible world. The ancestors as well as other spiritual beings inhabit the invisible world and from there they influence the activities of human beings and other things in the world. There is a third world called *Igwe*, the sky. It is quite up and only *Chukwu* lives there. And from there he cares for and directs things in *Uwa and Ani muo*. According to Jahn (1961), God is a determining power in African ontology and although he might be banished from the Greek world without any harm done to the logical architecture of it. In the African world it would be impossible. This is because the finger of God is manifested in the most rudimentary element of nature. Idowu (1962) avers that God is the absolute controller of the universe. The Igbo would refer to him as *Osebuluwa* (the sustainer of the universe). He did not just create the world but actively sustains it. All other creatures are in being for the reason that he is also in existence. He is neither a Remote God (*Deus Remotus*) or a Withdrawn God (*Deus Otiosus*). He is both transcendent and immanent. His effect is felt in his universe as he exerts power over all things.

As God exerts his power on all beings, there are divinities that also exert power on the universe. Thus when rain falls or lightening flashes, or one suffers some bad omen, *Amadioha* is said to be the cause. In fact, even human mistakes are believed to have been caused. When one gets a good harvest, it is said that *Ahiajoku* has blessed the person, not that one farmed well and applied fertilizer. When the crime committed by a person is known, it is said that *Ala* has exposed the criminal. When one gives birth, it is taken that *Chi-Omumu* has blessed the person with a child, not that the child came about as a result of the sperm of the man fertilizing the egg. When warriors gain victory in war, it is taken that *Ekwensu* has granted them victory, not that the warriors fought gallantly. When one is healed, it is taken that *Agwu* has healed the person, not that one has been healed through the drugs taken. In the world, human beings also exert their power on fellow human beings and other animate and inanimate beings of lesser forces, like stone, water etc.

There are basically two kinds of spirits in African ontology: the benevolent and malevolent spirits. The benevolent spirits are those that bring good fortune to people, even though they could also bring punishment on people based on an atrocity or abomination committed. There are also bad spirits who are not interested in the well

being of people. They are called malevolent spirits. Onuigbo (2009) avers that their job mainly, is to cause havoc and inflict harm among people. As such, for the traditional Igbo man, things don't just happen. These spirits in one way or the other affect the activities of human beings, the life of plants and animals. The outcome of this belief is the understanding that every event in the life of someone is either a reward or punishment from the gods for something done by the person in question or by his or her ancestors. To remedy the situation, Kanu (2012d) avers that sacrifices are offered. However, before any sacrifice is offered, people with special functions in the society are consulted to know the kind of sacrifice that is required for the appeasement of the gods. People who undertake such functions stand as intermediaries between the people and the world of the spirits. According to Mbiti (1969), they are regarded variously by different authors, as sacred personages, special men, sacred men, sacred specialists, but sometimes as 'specialists'.

In the web of causes and forces in African ontology, there is also the issue of witchcraft. Ozumba (2004) defines this phenomenon as the spiritual skill of being able to carry on certain inimical activities in disembodied form. They are carriers of great current of waves which can be projected to bring about certain desired ends, however, with some limitations. This could include sucking of blood, eating, holding of meetings, causing accident or inflicting pains or diseases. The proven cases of witchcraft abound in Africa. For the western thinker, this might be relegated to the background of fetishism, without a philosophical and scientific foundation. If fetishism means that which is old and unreal, then to reason this way might not be totally right.

The African world is also dominated by man's spiritual companions that could also exert great force on lesser forces. Uchegbue (1995), speaks basically of two types: spiritual comrades or playmates and spiritual spouses. The spiritual playmates in Igbo are called the *Ogbonuke*, just as the child plays, fights, associates, eats, shares with his playmates in the physical world, it is believed that he also has his playmates in the spiritual world. Thus, when a child smiles in a dream, it is believed that he is smiling with his *Ogbonuke*. When a child is seen soliloquizing, it is believed that he is discussing with his *Ogbonuke*. When a child wakes up from the sleep with injuries on his body, it is believed that he fought with his *Ogbonuke*. When scratches are seen on the body of a pregnant woman during sleep, especially at the beginning of her pregnancy, it is believed to be the signs of safe delivery, and also a sign that the child carried by his mother in the womb has good *Ogbonuke* and would grow up to be a popular person. As regards the spiritual spouses (nwayi-mmuo and di-mmuo), they abound; as people are believed to be married in the physical world, some are believed to be married in the spiritual world. Some have sex with their spiritual spouses in dream, and in some cases their spiritual spouses could come and have sex with them in real life. This usually happens if a man has a flourishing relationship with his wife before his death, he would like the relationship to continue and so he returns in the dream; if the relationship was bad, the spiritual spouse could return seeking redress. They cause havoc such as: long trials, such as loss of property, children, barrenness, poverty; nightmares, sleepless nights, hearing footsteps at night; ill-luck;

extravagance; kleptomania; sex in dream; difficulties in wooing and love disappointments and bed wetting.

Words also have causal powers in Africa. There are also cases where someone tells another, may be after a quarrel or fight, ‘You will see’ or ‘I will deal with you’. And may be after three days of the threat, the person in question falls sick or dies. Usually the person who had said this is accused of inflicting sickness or killing the person in question. Another example is when a person tells another that ‘It will not be well with you’. Such words are believed to have consequences on the person it is said to. This is even more serious when it is said by a person who has a higher force, say an elder or a father or mother to a son or daughter. Thoughts and words in African metaphysics have the power to bring about what they symbolize. While evil words causes harm to others, good words bring blessing. This explains why the blessing of a father or mother is a very important element for the son or daughter.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the idea of chance is not African. There is always a reason for whatever happens. Aja (2001), argues that even when the African speaks of *odachi*, or *Ife mberede* (an accident or the unexpected event respectively), he does not speak in terms of chance, but in terms of an event whose cause is not yet known. This explains why for most Africans, when one dies from say typhoid fever, it is believed that there is a force involved. When one is bitten by a snake, it is not just understood as the product of chance, it could be interpreted as sorcery or witchcraft as the cause of the situation. When one sneezes, it is believed that someone is somewhere gossiping about the person in question. Thus, things don’t just happen.

This notwithstanding, the African concept of causality, which arrogates causes to unquestionable spiritual forces, affects the level of development in Africa. When sicknesses like stroke, diabetes etc., are not understood as human sicknesses, which could be dealt with in the hospital, many Africans run from one prayer house to another, or from one native doctor to another, and the end result is that many die as a result of a sickness which could have been easily cured through modern drugs in the hospital. Development begins with the identification of the real problem; for if the real problem is not identified, getting a solution would be difficult. If typhoid is the problem, and instead of trying to get a drug that will cure the disease, one goes to spiritual houses to deal with a physical problem, a lasting solution to the problem at stake remains in the far.

This limitation, however, Africans are able to explain the inevitable predicaments and vicissitudes of life through their concept of causality. If this is brought before the court of present day science and reason, the issues raised, like witchcraft and spiritual spouses, etc., could be reduced to psychological malfunctioning or illusion. But African metaphysical experiences cannot easily be dismissed or reduced to an illusion. The African experience surpasses the narrow causal explanatory framework of Western philosophy and science. The scientific model is therefore not absolute, and thus not enough. There is the method of extra sensory perception which is used by

sacred specialists, endowed to understand the more complicated causal framework in the African world.

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