

## RE-EXAMINATION OF THE QUESTION OF BEING, HIERARCHY OF FORCES IN BANTU ONTOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT:

The scholarly work of Placide Tempels on Bantu ontology has sparked enduring debate, particularly among African philosophers. The arguments and counterarguments center on questions of interpretation, Being, and the hierarchy of forces. This study undertakes a re-examination of the concept of Being within Bantu ontology, with particular focus on the hierarchical ordering of forces. It draws on the philosophical framework of Placide Tempels and challenges static interpretations of Bantu thought by foregrounding the dynamic, relational, and force-based characterization of Being. This study critically analyzes the hierarchical ordering of these forces, which proceeds from God (the Supreme Being), through ancestral spirits and living humans, to animals, plants, and inanimate objects, with each level possessing a distinct degree of vital influence. Revisiting this hierarchy reveals tensions between its descriptive cultural roots and its prescriptive use in justifying traditional authority or social stratification. It is the contention of this paper that the hierarchical structure is neither rigid nor purely ontological; rather, it is interwoven with relational ethics, ritual efficacy, and communal well-being. Furthermore, by interpreting Being as force, this re-examination challenges lingering colonial interpretations that depict Bantu ontology as primitive or irrational. In essence, this study proposes that the hierarchy of forces is best understood as an open, participatory field of becoming—where the task of human existence is not merely to contemplate static Being, but to intensify, channel, and preserve life-force through proper relational conduct.

**KEY WORDS:** Re-examination, Being, Hierarchy, forces, ontology

### INTRODUCTION

The concept "metaphysics" as coined by Andronicus of Rhodes in 70 B.C in his arrangement of Aristotle's treatises which means "After physics" was ranked as a core branch of the philosophical endeavour. Thus, the popular understanding of the word down through the ages as expressed by Omoregbe is the discipline dealing with realities beyond the physical world.<sup>1</sup>

The question; what is being? admittedly is the most fundamental question in philosophy and the central question of metaphysics. It was articulated by Parmenides in the pre- Socratic era as he echoed that "whatever exist, is, being and being accordingly is external and unchanging."<sup>2</sup>

Parmenides and most Western philosophers therefore conceptualized being and reality as such as a static entity. Reality was seen as one, not multiple.

Mbaegbu C. sees the western static conception of being as a dualism and thus a contradiction in human experience and thus averred:

The Western world had since reduced the whole material world, all physical, all mechanics, and the whole stellar universe to one single idea; "Being" Being as such or the reality common to all being is defined as "the reality that is," "anything that exist," "what is"<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to the Western conception of being, African philosophy or culture does not make such sharp distinction between the Ego and the world, subject and object. In the words of Mbaegbu C. "the African culture is a world of great art and synthesis."<sup>4</sup> By implication, the African universe is a continuum, a unitary and an inseparable reality.

The nature of reality for the African is conceptualized as the "vital force" as against the Western concept of being. The "vital force" is dynamic and characterized by growth, influence and vital hierarchy.

## 2.0 EXPLICATIVES

### 2.1 HIERARCHY

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defined, hierarchy; as "a system with grades of authority or status from the lowest to the highest."<sup>5</sup> However chambers 21st century Dictionary defined hierarchy as "an organization or body that classifies people or things in order of rank or importance".<sup>6</sup> in other words, the organization or classification of a particular group. Hierarchy could then be said to be the systematized arrangement of entities or

things, material and immaterial, spiritual and temporal in order of respect, status and harmonized complementary unity between them. Hierarchy could be expressed either in an ascending or descending order.

## 2.2 FORCE /FORCES

The concept of force ordinarily has different interpretations, depending on the context of usage and application.

Thus, Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary defined force variously as

- i. Physical strength or power
- ii. Violent physical action
- iii. The strength or power of something
- iv. The authority of something.<sup>7</sup>

Chambers 21st Century Dictionary likened the concept of force to; strength, power impact or impetus.<sup>8</sup> From the scientific perspective, it becomes "any external agent that produces a change in the speed or direction of a moving object or that makes a stationary object move (for example, force of gravity)"<sup>9</sup>. Encyclopedia Britannica, observed that "force: in mechanics means any action that tends to maintain or alter the position of a body or to distort it"<sup>10</sup>. Science equally recognizes that, a force always deforms (changes the shape of) a body to which it is applied; it may or may not cause the body to move. The effect of a force on a body is determined by its magnitude, direction and point of application.

In philosophy generally and African philosophy in particular the concept 'force' assumed a unique meaning and interpretation. Placide Tempels, researched into the anthropological and philosophical world of the Bantu peoples of East and Central Africa and came out with the assumption that the western concept of 'being' could be likened to the African concept of "force". Panteleon Iloegbu observed that the concept of "force is bound by the concept of "being" as he expressed Placide Tempels thought "...Being is that which possesses force. Force is the nature of being, force is being and being is force".<sup>11</sup> "Force" therefore becomes the supreme and underlying category of all reality.

Panteleon Iloegbu observed that "force: in Bantu ontology is understood as life, energy, strength, power, dynamism or what Tempels technically refers to as force vitale (vital-force)<sup>12</sup> Thus, whatever is, from the highest being, God, to the lowest being: inanimate being, is or has, force vitale.

## 3.0 THE HIERARCHY OF FORCES

African philosophy (Bantu ontology) is characterized by the differentiation of forces (beings) into species according to their vital power or their inherent vital rank. This writing will seek to expose hierarchy of forces in a descending order.

### 3.1 GOD

The highest force vitale is God himself, the creator of all that, there is. Temples observed that *Vidyé* (God) is great person (*Muntu*) and for Iloegbu P. "the great here connotes the reality of God as the most powerful and the most reasonable living force."<sup>13</sup> Technically, *Vidyé* is strong one as he possesses force in Himself.

Panteleon Iloegbu expressed this view when he observed, "He is also the *Dijina Dika-tampe*, the great name, since He is the great force in all reality. He is therefore, the *Mukumo*, the one who is stronger than others."<sup>14</sup>, Mbaegbu C. corroborated the above view when he concluded:

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,<sup>15</sup>

God therefore is the strong and most grand in force vitale, and can give this force vitale to other creatures. He is undoubtedly the one who increases force; as evident in the Bantu prayer for increment of force.

### 3.2 FIRST FATHERS OF MEN (FOUNDERS OF THE DIFFERENT CLANS)

This is the second in the hierarchy in a descending order. They are the powerful spirit of the departed. Temples calls them the Arch patriarchs because they are the founders of clans and kingdoms. According to Mbaegbu as he expressed temples view; "These Arch patriarchs were the first to whom God communicated his vital force, with the power of exercising their influence on all posterity"<sup>16</sup> They constitute the most important chain binding men to God and occupy so exalted a rank in Bantu thought. The *Baluba* calls them spiritualized beings, that is, being belonging to a higher hierarchy, participating to a certain degree in the divine force.

### 3.3 THE DEAD OF THE TRIBE

These refers to the ancestors and Mbiti calls them the living-dead because, though dead, they are alive in the spirit-world and from there, they maintain contact with their kith and kin. The living-dead are therefore ranked according

to 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 generation.

### 3.4 THE LIVING

This is characterized by those living on the earth. They however belong in turn to a hierarchy, not simply by legal man status, but as ordered by their own being in accordance with primogeniture and their vital rank. It could be said then that the chief who oversees the affairs of the village is ranked higher, followed by the family-head, the highly active, talented and successful members of the society (community), down to the average person and to children. Mbaegbu thus; avers: "Man is the sovereign vital force ruling the land on which he finds himself and all that live on it: man, animal or plant."<sup>17</sup>

For the Bantu, the eldest of the clan is by divine law, and their sustaining link of life, binding ancestors and other descendants. He 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 chief, accordingly, based on the original conception and political set up of the clan, becomes, the father, master, king and the source of all zestful living, he is as God himself. It is in recognition of the hierarchical status of the chief that Mbaegbu C. noted:

No wonder then, the Bantu had to protest against the nomination of a chief, by government intervention, who is not able by reason of his vital rank or vital force, to be the link binding the dead and living "such a one cannot be chief. It is impossible. Nothing will grow in our soil, our women would bear no children and everything would be struck sterile".<sup>18</sup>

### 3.5 OTHER FORCES

This group falls within the lower rank of the hierarchy of forces. They include, animals, vegetables and minerals. However, within this lower categories is an intra hierarchy founded on vital power, rank and primogeniture. Iloegbu P. then acknowledged that "an Iroko tree has a higher capacity force vitale than an oil bean tree. Some animals and plant, e.g. totems, have a higher force than non-totems,"<sup>19</sup>

### 4.0 CRITICAL EVALUATION

Placide Temples being a non-African by birth and parentage undertook independent research on the philosophical orientations of the Bantu peoples of East and Central Africa. He was perhaps moved by a genuine desire to give meaning to the existence of a people addressed by the western world as the "primitives" in mind, thought and action.

Thus, ab initio, the underlying motive of Temples investigation and even aim of study is questionable. He could equally be accused of the same already ingrained bias of the westerners against the Africans, as primitive and uncivilized peoples. Iloegbu P. was then right when he observed:

Temples is a trained philosopher, versed in the western conception of philosophy as the search for ultimacy, for the underlying substratum in things and for the explanatory category in the vagaries of beings that confront the human being,<sup>20</sup>

Temples used western philosophical parameter to assess the African world and any undertaking of this sort will invariably be bereft of a holistic and objective result.

The hierarchy of forces as a by-product of Temples hypothesis surely cannot be dismissed without a pause. Temples hierarchy of forces attests to a self-evident truth in nature, which is the existence of order and harmony in the universe. It is technically called teleology - the orderly motion of the heavenly bodies, the orderly succession of the seasons of the year, the wonderful organization of the human body etc,<sup>21</sup> all points to the above fact.

There is therefore hierarchy in nature characterized by gradation in respect of rank and status. Even in the metaphysical sphere, hierarchy exist, with God at the zenith and thus force in Himself. God empowers every other being as we descend the hierarchical chain.

However, the positing of a hierarchy of forces has wider implications. How can Temples explain to his audience the hierarchy of forces that embraces material and immaterial realities? This hypothesis equally presupposes a high level of interaction within the hierarchical chain. And so, how does the interaction of these forces take place, from God, the first fathers of men, the ancestors, the living and down to inanimate realities? Temples surely did not offer any satisfactory explanation as regards the level of interaction within the hierarchy. If the hierarchy of forces which Temples exposed is the force vitale, what is the nature of this force that is even in inanimate things like minerals?

Temples hierarchy of forces equally raises the question of human freedom. How free is man to operate within the hierarchical chain which he is said to be at the centre? One can deduce from Tempels argument that man is determined and that the Bantu, nay African world view is a deterministic world view. And if that is the case, what is the place of freedom and responsibility in Bantu philosophy? Where does morality fall?

These questions and many more exposes the lacuna inherent in Tempels Bantu philosophy and by implication his hierarchy of forces.

#### 4.1 CONCLUSION

Since all beings are ultimately related to a common Creator and to a central source of force and being, all entities are interconnected and ontologically bound to one another.<sup>22</sup> The work of Placide Tempels, despite its apparent inadequacies, has undoubtedly sparked a long-standing debate that continues to this day. His articulation of Bantu ontology poses a fundamental challenge to Western substance metaphysics. The assertion that “being is force” should not be dismissed as primitive animism but understood as a sophisticated relational ontology in which existence is defined by the capacity to influence and be influenced. Within this framework, the hierarchy of forces is better conceived as a dynamic web of participation rather than a static chain; thus, each entity’s vitality depends upon its relationships with others.

Admittedly, Placide Tempels has been criticized for overgeneralization, for writing from a colonial standpoint, and for employing a scholastic vocabulary that at times distorts the realities he sought to describe. Nevertheless, elements such as his metaphor of the spider’s web, his emphasis on participation as the central dynamic, and his willingness to challenge European ontology on its own terms distinguish his work as a pioneering contribution to intercultural philosophy.

Furthermore, the hierarchy of forces offers a pathway beyond the dilemma of either dissolving reality into pure flux or reducing it to inert substances. Forces, in this view, are ordered, real, and differentiated, yet their reality remains fundamentally relational and dynamic. Placide Tempels’ intellectual humility—evident in his presentation of his work as a hypothesis—has endeared him to many contemporary African philosophers, who regard his work as a valuable point of departure for further inquiry into African philosophy.

Ultimately, his work demonstrates that the question of Being admits of answers not fully anticipated within Western philosophical traditions. Therefore, his articulation of Bantu ontology, notwithstanding its limitations, deserves a recognized place in the history of metaphysics.

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