

The Question of the Nature of God from the African Place

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Abstract

What is the constituent nature of God? Most scholars project the idea that God is an absolute, pure spirit devoid of matter. In this paper, I engage this position from the African philosophical place. First, I contend that the postulation that God is pure spirit stems from an ontological system known as dualism. This system bifurcates reality into spirit and matter and sees spirit as good, and matter as evil. Therefore, scholars who subscribe to this theory of dualism, posit that God, the Supreme Being is the ultimate good that is, and is pure spirit. Secondly, I disagree with this position. Using the African theory of duality, I argue that everything that is has both spirit and matter, and that spirit and matter are good. Thus, God as an existent reality consists of spirit and matter. I will support my argument using Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology and Ijiomah's Harmonious Monism, two African culture-inspired philosophical systems. In this paper, I employ conversationalism as my philosophical method.

Keyword: God, African theory of duality, Ibuanyidanda ontology, Harmonious monism, Conversationalism

Introduction

My topic falls under the field of African philosophy of religion. I formulated this topic in line with the colloquium's theme. The colloquium's theme suggests that African philosophy's existence presupposes African philosophy of religion's existence. If this is the case, it is germane to conceptualise the notion of African philosophy of religion. Hence, the question, what is African philosophy of religion? To answer this question, we need first to understand African philosophy.

African philosophy is a philosophical tradition distinct from other philosophies such as Western, Oriental, etc. According to Chukwudum Okolo, African philosophy involves a critical, rigorous, and systematic reflection on the African experience of reality. He also contends that it is concerned with how the African engages with reality and the situation his/she finds him/herself as an African as "being-in-the African-world" (OKOLO 1983, 8; 1993, 12). This implies that central in African philosophy is how the African experiences reality as he/she exists in the world with other realities. Here, reality is experienced and investigated to arrive at the truth about itself. This is

done using an African culture-inspired logic lens. Thus, African philosophy is the quest for truth in the African philosophical place by approaching and understanding reality using the African culture-inspired logic lens.

With the above point made, it becomes necessary for me to conceptualise African philosophy of religion. African philosophy of religion is the critical and rigorous investigation of religious realities in the African philosophical place using an African culture-inspired logic lens in order to arrive at the truth about these realities. One of the religious realities that African philosophy of religion concerns itself with is God, the subject of my inquiry.

Africans have always sought to make sense of what God is. This is apparent in their various views about God as recorded in the works of African scholars (MBITI 1969; 1975 (1991); IBEABUCHI 2013; NALWAMBA 2017; EZEUGWU & CHINWEUBA 2018). Some have God as a withdrawn being who cannot be reached or approached directly hence the need for intermediaries or media. Others assert that God can be reached and therefore approach God directly. In all, the existence of God within the African reality scheme is beyond question since God is at the apex of the African conception of reality (African ontology) (IJIOMAH 1996; CHIMAKONAM AND OGBONNAYA 2011). However, what God could be like in terms of God's constituent nature seems to be an under-researched topic in contemporary philosophy, especially African philosophy of religion. Nevertheless, it appears to be a given within the African philosophical place that God is spirit and nothing else.

In this paper, I critically and creatively evaluate the above concluding remark, using the African duality theory. First, I argue that the idea that God is pure spirit, without matter is rooted in dualism, a philosophical system or theory that bifurcates, polarises, and absolutises an aspect of reality, and in the case of God, spirit. Hence, while dualism suggests that reality is essentially one-sided, its antithesis 'duality' holds that reality is two-sided. This theory of duality is exemplified in Ijiomah's Harmonious Monism (IJIOMAH 1996; 2006; 2014; 2016) and Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology (2007a; 2011). Second, employing this duality theory, I argue that God as reality cannot be pure spirit devoid of matter. Instead, assert that God consists of spirit and matter.

After this introduction, I shall consider the following section centred on God as spirit in the African religious world. Here, I shall argue that this conception of God mirrors dualism instead of African duality. This will be followed by the section on conceptualising the African theory of duality. This section will explain duality and Ijiomah's Harmonious Monism and Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology discussed as examples. Afterward, this African duality theory will be used to reconceptualise God as consisting of spirit and matter as its constituent parts.

God as Spirit in African Religious Cosmology: A Reflection of Dualism

The concept God is an integral part of the African religious cosmology and reality scheme. African cosmology is religious because its has religious undertone. In Udobata Onunwa’s words, the “cosmology is deeply rooted in religion” (ONUNWA 1990, 8). This is because the conception of the world that it projects is religious. Some African scholars hold that the world is both tripartite (NWOYE 2011, 307) and dual (EDEH 1985, 74). It is tripartite because it is compartmentalised into three parts, namely, the world above (sky), the human world (the earth), the world beneath (the underworld) (MBITI 1969, 32; EJIZU 1985, 136; IJIOMAH 2005, 84; 2006, 30; 2014, 97; OKORO 2007, 85). C. C. Ekwealor demonstrates a similar partitioning of the world but using his Igbo words and their equivalent to illustrate them. According to him, the world is partition into *Elu-Igwe* [the sky], *Alammadu* [the land of humans] and *Alammuo* [the land of spirits] (Ekwealor 1990). The diagrams below show Ijiomah and Ekwealor’s cosmologies, respectively:

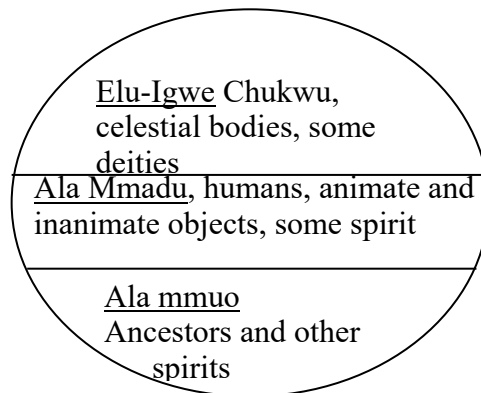


Figure 1: Ijiomah’s Igbo [African] worldview. Source: Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2011, 276)

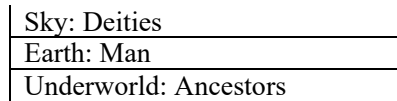
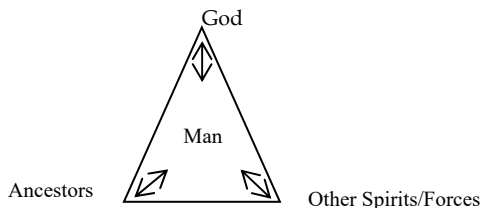


Figure 2: Ekwealor’s Igbo [African] Worldview. Source: Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2011, 276)

It must be noted that Africans hold a dynamic conception of the world; hence, the tripartite conception of the world is also dual. The world partitioned into three can roll up into two – spiritual (nonphysical) and physical. The world above and the world beneath are said to be spiritual (nophysical), while the human world is termed physical. Victor Uchendu notes that Igbo world (a typical African world) is dual given that it consists of the human and the spiritual world. He also notes that there is a constant interaction between these two worlds, “the material and spiritual, the visible and invisible” (UCHENDU 1965 12). Of this Igbo world, T. Uzodinma Nwala posits that it is made up of two parts: Eluigwe –sky (Ala Mmuo – the spirit world or supernatural other) and Elu-uwa – the earth also called Ala (Ala Madu – the human world or visible other). They two are created by God – Chineke – God the creator (NWALA 1985).

It is germane to note that African cosmology is an ontologised cosmology. This is because beings populate the world. Uchendu captures this by arguing that the human world is filled with all created things and beings of both animate and inanimate, while the spirit world consists of the creator, ancestral spirits, disembodied and malignant spirits. Hence, he remarks there is a constant interaction between the two worlds, “the material and spiritual, the visible and invisible, the good and bad, the living and dead” (UCHENDU 1965, 12). Thus, in African cosmology, beings are arranged in the following hierarchical order: God, divinities and ancestors, humans, animals, plants, and inanimate Objects (TEMPELS 1959, 21; NJOKU 2002, 18). This points to the fact that God is at the apex of African cosmology. Onunwa’s representation of the African cosmos in an isosceles triangle captures this point vividly and better.

Figure 3: Onunwa’s Igbo worldview (ONUNWA 2005, 68)



The point is that in the tripartite conception of the world, God is at the apex. This is also the case for the dual conception of the world. For instance, the Igbo world is divided into the visible and invisible worlds and that God resides in the invisible world with other spiritual beings. Although God coexists with realities in the spiritual and invisible realm of existence, God is equal to any. Theophilus Okere argues that Chukwu or Chineke is a spirit in that Chukwu is invisible to us. This God or Chukwu is not one among gods but a Supreme Being with no equal (OKERE 2005, 2). Pantaleon Iroegbu also reaffirms this point as he asserts that God is the highest of all beings that live on high, whose presence is felt on earth (although through intermediaries) (IROEGBU 2002, 14). From the preceding, one is left to wonder about the constituent nature of this God.

In most African belief and thought systems, God's constituent nature is restricted to an aspect of reality. This has to do with the spiritual aspect. Hence, the assertion, 'God is spirit' (MBITI 1975 (1991), 59; IBEABUCHI 2013, 293; NALWAMBA 2017, 1; EZEUGWU & CHINWEUBA 2018, 29). In African religious worldview, God is conceived as made of spirit and has no material part. That is to say that God has only spirit as its constituent nature. According to Madu "God is spirit and immaterial" (MADU 2003, 19). "To the Akan, God is essentially pure spirit, a being that is invisible" (AGYARKO 2013, 53). "God is pure Spirit, and this implies that he has no body of any kind" (MADU 1997, 55). This implies that God has only a spiritual part with no physical or material part. Thus, God (Chukwu) is the supreme spirit (ARINZE 1970, 12; 319; UKWAMEDUA & EDOGIAWERI 2017, 319).

The above conception of God as being solely spirit with no matter is a manifestation of dualism. Dualism is a philosophical system that promotes binary opposition. It holds that reality is either spiritual or physical/ material, with the spiritual part being superior. A typical example of dualism is Aristotle's ontology, which according to Asouzu, is bifurcating and polarising (ASOUZU 2007a; 2011). Aristotle avers that being is comprised of substance and accident. The former is non-material, the latter is purely material. He goes on to identify substance as the essence of being. He notes that "if these are not substance, there is no substance and no being at all; for the accidents of these it cannot be right to call beings" (1947: Bk B, 5). Thus, being is substance. In this context, this substance equates spirit and then God. This substance is believed to be spiritual and has nothing like matter. Thus, God is pure spirit, existing independent of matter.

African Duality Theory: Harmonious Monism and *Ibuanyidanda* Ontology as Examples

Besides dualism examined above, there is duality, a philosophical system that is seemingly antithetical to dualism. This duality theory is said to be African. But this does not imply that it cannot be found in non-African cultures. No! It is also found in other philosophical places outside African philosophy. A good example is Zen logic (SUZUKI 1956; 1957; DUMOULIN 1963; CHEUG-

YUAN 1969; CUA 1981; KASULIS 1981; CHENG 1986; UDOIDEM 1992), which is an expression of duality. However, the point is that duality is a philosophical system that dominates the African philosophical place and thinking, as can be seen in many African scholarly works (MBITI 1969; EDEH 1985; IJIOMAH 1996, 2005, 2006, 2014, 2016; ONUNWA 2005; ANIMALU & CHIMAKONAM 2013; OBI 2017; etc).

The African duality theory states that reality always exists as two-sided, equally important entities. Reality is that which is made up of two entities or parts that are inseparable. Various African scholars describe it differently. Ijiomah describes it as 'harmonious monism' (1996, 2004, 2014, 2016). Onunwa describes it as 'inseparable duality' (ONUNWA 2005). Animalu and Chimakonam describe it as 'complementary duality' (ANIMALU & CHIMAKONAM 2013), etc.

Although in African cosmology, the world is said to consist of the world above, the human world and the underworld (the world beneath) (MBITI 1969; EJIZU 1985; EKWEALOR 1990; IJIOMAH 2005, 2006, 2014; OKORO 2007; etc), it is also said to be dual. The world's dual nature is that it consists of the physical and nonphysical (spiritual) aspects, or the visible and invisible aspects, and the sensible and nonsensible parts. Here, the world above and the underworld are seen as nonphysical, invisible, nonsensible, while the human world is physical, visible, and sensible. The point is that for the African, the world is a duality. This is also the case with being and the human person.

In African ontology, being is seen as consisting of substance (essence) and accident, material and immaterial aspects, etc. Similarly, in African conception, the human person who could be tripartite (consisting of spirit, soul and body) or multiple parts (GBADEGESIN 1998, 28-40; APPIAH 2004, 27; etc) is reducible to two parts. Thus, the human being consists of two basic elements, the physical and the nonphysical parts. The bottom line is that duality involves a "harmony of opposites" (OBI 2017, 5). For instance, the metaphysical and the physical (MBITI 1969, 177), the natural and the supernatural (PARRINDER 1962, 27). This duality theory is well articulated in two African culture-inspired ontological theories: Harmonious Monism and *Ibuanyidanda* ontology. My task in the paragraphs that follow is to tease out these ontological theories. I shall begin with Harmonious Monism.

Harmonious Monism has Chris Okezie Ijiomah (1996; 2006; 2014; 2016) as its proponent. This African culture-inspired ontological theory holds that everything that is has both physical and spiritual aspects. Ijiomah argues that although some realities might sometimes be thought of as being solely physical or spiritual, they are both physical and spiritual. Here, what is physical has inbuilt spirituality and what is spiritual has inbuilt physicality. Another way to put this is that on the one hand, what is physical has a veiled spiritual aspect. And on the other hand, its spiritual aspect is manifested while the physical aspect is veiled. Ijiomah sees this process as "dovetailing of realities into one another" (IJIOMAH 2014, 118). There is an internal

dynamic, harmonious relationship between the physical and physical aspects of being or reality since they empty themselves into each other with the whole (being). Where being manifests as physical, the spiritual empties itself into the physical aspect. And where it manifests as spiritual, the physical empties itself into the spiritual part.

Ijiomah also holds that the world is dual, made up of physical and spiritual and physical worlds. First, he asserts that the world is tripartite, consisting of the sky, the earth, and the underworld. Secondly, he reduced them into two inseparable worlds, the physical world (the earth) and the spiritual world (the sky and the underworld) (IJIOMAH 2005, 84-85; 2006, 30-31; 2014, 97-122). The point is that the world is an inseparable twoness of the physical and spiritual worlds.

Jonathan Chimakonam and L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya contend that this ontological theory is grounded in three principles that they gleaned from Ijiomah's works. First is the principle of complementarity, which holds that complements are missing links or opposites that are incomplete and yearn for each other, and they find their completeness within a whole where they complement each other. The second principle is the principle of unification. It states that reality is a result of the unification of opposites. And the third principle, the principle of coexistence, posits that extremes or opposites coexist within a whole (IJIOMAH 1996, 45-47; 2014, 92-132; CHIMAKONAM AND OGBONNAYA 2021).

By implication, the physical and spiritual aspects of reality are the complements, missing links, opposites that are incomplete and yearn for each other and become complete when they coexist and complement each other as they are unified within the whole. This demonstrates that reality is a unification and complementation of the physical and spiritual aspects that coexist as one. With this point made, it becomes necessary to tease out *ibuanyidanda* ontology.

Innocent Izchukwu Asouzu is the proponent of *Ibuanyidanda* ontology. This ontology is articulated as a reaction against Aristotle's bifurcation and polarising metaphysics (ASOUZU 2007a; 2011). For example, Aristotle holds that although being consists of substance and accident, substance can be equated to being even in the absence of accident. This, for Asouzu, is an unwarranted and unacceptable way of conceptualising being. Hence, the need for reconceptualising being from an African philosophical place using *ibuanyidanda*¹ as a conceptual framework. Given that *ibuanyidanda* connotes complementarity, Asouzu contends that his ontological system (*Ibuanyidanda* ontology) unifies and harmonises entities instead of bifurcates them (2003; 2004; 2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2011; 2013a; 2013b). It is in this light that he articulates his theory of being contrary to Aristotle.

¹ *Ibuanyidanda* is an Igbo aphorism that Asouzu translates as complementarity.

For Asouzu, being cannot be equated to substance without accident. Instead, being is that which consists of substance and accident that are in a mutually complementary relationship. He substantiates this assertion using some Igbo aphorisms and concepts. One of such Igbo aphorisms is *ka so mu adina* (ASOUZU 2007a, 257). This aphorism means ‘that I might not be alone.’ For being to be, neither substance nor accident exists alone. They must exist with each other. This is because they are missing links. Missing links are entities that are incomplete in themselves but are complete when they coexist with others. In this context, substance and accident are missing links that ought not to be alone (*ka so mu di*) (ASOUZU 2007a, 257). They ought to be with each other (*ka so mu adina*) for there to be being. This coexistence is in a mutually complementary manner. Thus, there is being when substance and accident are in a mutually complementary relationship as they coexist. Hence, Asouzu opines that “to be is to be in mutual complementary relation (*ka so mu adina*) and its negation is to be alone (*ka so mu di*) and nothing” (ASOUZU 2011, 42).

Also, being is articulated using another Igbo aphorism which reads: *ihedi, nwere isi na odu*. This translates as ‘what exists, has head and tail-end’. Here, ‘the head’ (*isi*) is the substance, and the ‘tail-end’ (*odu*) is the accident, while ‘what exists’ (*ihedi*) is being. Hence, being is that which has substance and accident. Therefore, neither of substance nor accident is neglected. They are both seen as essential aspects of being. This is captured in the Igbo concepts *ihe kachasi mkpa* and *ihe di mkpa*. While *ihe kachasi mkpa* means what is more important, *ihe di mkpa* connotes what is important. Although this implies that *ihe kachasi mkpa* seems to be ontologically higher than *ihe di mkpa*, they are both indispensable in defining being. Thus, being consists of *ihe kachasi mkpa* and *ihe di mkpa*. Where, *ihe kachasi mkpa* is substance and *ihe di mkpa* is accident. This renders substance and accident the essential constituent parts of being.

Asouzu’s notion of being is grounded in two principles, an imperative and a criterion. The first principle is the principle of integration (harmonious complementation) which states that “Anything that exists serves a missing link of reality” (ASOUZU 2003, 58-59; 2005, 281; 2011, 103). The second principle, progressive transformation, holds that “All human actions are geared towards the joy of being” (ASOUZU 2011, 44; 2013b, 23). Ibunya yidanda imperative asserts that “Allow the limitation of being to become the cause of your joy” (2004, 281; 2007c, 187). Finally, the truth and authenticity criterion posits that “never elevate any world immanent missing link to an absolute instance” (2007b: 197). In other words, one ought not to “elevate a world missing link to an absolute mode” (ASOUZU 2007b: 197). The point here is that substance and accident are missing links that must be acknowledged as limited and insufficient in themselves. They must be seen as complementary to each other for being to emerge. Humans derive joy in realising that being consists of two missing links, substance and accident, which are incomplete but become complete when they complete each other.

So far, the thought is that Ijiomah's Harmonious Monism and Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology exemplify African duality theory. This is because they contend that reality consists of an inseparable twoness. Here, reality has two interconnected entities that interpenetrate each other such that none can exist without the other. These two entities are spirit and matter. Iroegbu takes up this discussion and contends that neither spirit nor matter can exist without the opposite. In his words:

We maintain that while spirit needs matter to be understood as spirit, matter cannot be matter completely outside spirit. Briefly put, while matter is the hermeneutical foundation of spirit, spirit is the teleological fulfilment of matter. While integral matter is spiritualized matter, authentic spirit is material-related spirit. (IROEGBU 2002: 9)

He further stresses this point as he notes that:

In synthesis, spirit and matter are not two different and opposing realities. They are two aspects of reality, which is one ... both of them coexisting in the universe. To disunite them is to create tension, even crises. Matter without spirit decomposes. Spirit without matter is elusive; at best, it is unreachable and unidentifiable. Matter and spirit must always be together. This is ontic realism, an explanation we must describe as integral. (IROEGBU 2002: 29)

The above shows that spirit and matter are indispensable aspects of reality inasmuch as African duality theory is concerned.

The Constituent Nature of God: An African Duality Perspective

What could God's constituent nature be? Pure spirit or what? This is the issue at hand in this section. The position I seek to argue out here is that God is not pure spirit. God is both spirit and matter, immaterial (spiritual/nonphysical) and material (physical). This argument will be built on the African duality theory that has been explicated above.

African duality theory holds that reality is two-sided in that it has the metaphysical and the physical dimensions. No reality exists without this two-sidedness. God as a reality is no exception. Thus, the nature of God, like other realities, can be conceptualised as a duality. This implies that God consists of spirit and matter.

Following Ijiomah's brand of African duality theory, God is a monism consisting of harmony of spirit and matter. In the light of his principle of complementarity (IJIOMAH 1996; 2014; CHIMAKONAM AND OGBONNAYA 2021), spirit and matter are seen as complements, which are missing links and incomplete unless they complement themselves. In this context, God is the whole in which they complement themselves. The second principle, which is the principle of unification (IJIOMAH 1996; 2014;

CHIMAKONAM & OGBONNAYA 2021), shows that spirit and matter are indivisibly unified in God. Also, the principle of coexistence (IJIOMAH 1996; 2014; CHIMAKONAM & OGBONNAYA 2021), the third principle points to the fact that spirit and matter coexist in God. Thus, Ijiomah's Harmonious Monism demonstrates that God is a reality consisting of spirit and matter that complement each other as they coexist and are unified as one.

Also, Asouzu's brand of African duality theory has implications for the constituent nature of God. This is apparent in Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology explicated in the preceding section. Here, God as reality consists of 1.) substance and accident, 2.) head (*isi*) and tail-end (*odu*), and 3.) *ihe kachasi mkpa* (what is most important) and *ihe di mkpa* (what is important) that are mutually complementary relationship. Where substance, head (*isi*), and *ihe kachasi mkpa* (what is most important) stand for spirit and accident, and tail-end (*odu*), and *ihe di mkpa* (what is important) represent matter. In God, spirit and matter are in a mutually complementary relationship. Anything short of this implies that God is outside the realm of reality, and is meaningless, and nothing.

This way of conceptualising God's constituent nature aligns with the principle of integration, which emphasises the notion of missing link. Thus, spirit and matter are seen as missing links that yearn for each other. Consequently, they remain incomplete until they complete each other as a whole. The point is that spirit and matter are individual entities that do not exist in isolation but in a mutually complementary relationship with each other in God. It is in this that they affirm the existence of each other. Also, as missing links, spirit and matter are limited and should never be elevated to an absolute instance. This follows Asouzu's truth and authenticity criterion, which states that "never elevate any world immanent missing links to an absolute instance". Therefore, if God is seen as pure spirit devoid of matter, we elevate spirit to an absolute instance. To do so implies that spirit is complete in itself and does not need matter to complement it. If this is the case, then we have failed to allow the limitation of spirit to be the cause of our joy as Asouzu enjoins us in *Ibuanyidanda* imperative.

We can find joy when we realise that spirit and matter independent of each other are limited. This is what will help us reconceptualise God as consisting of spirit and matter, which are in a mutually complementary relationship. Hence, this will bring joy to our being in realising that we are not absolutising any world immanent missing link (in this case, spirit) in line with the principle of progressive transformation and the truth and authenticity criterion. Thus, God cannot be said to be spirit in isolation. God as spirit also has matter. God as spirit has inbuilt matter. To say that God has matter implies that God is a tangible being with accidental parts that can be felt. Here, I am saying that God possess physicality – physical substance like human bodily parts. Thus, God as reality has spirit and matter. This is the way that God ought to be conceived from the African viewpoint.

The possible question is, how can we begin to conceive God in the above manner? This question calls for concern because many Africans have always conceived God as spirit devoid of matter. This is because they suffer from *the mkpuchi anya* (the phenomenon of concealment) and have a disjunctive mindset (ASOUZU 2004; 2005; 2007c; 2013a; 2013b). As a result, they bifurcate and polarise reality and absolutise an aspect of reality. Asouzu holds the way out of this mindset is through a psycho-therapeutic measure known as “noetic propaedeutic” (2011; 2013a). Noetic propaedeutic is a pre-educating or re-educating the mind to begin looking beyond bifurcating and polarising reality, and absolutising an aspect of reality. Instead, it helps the mind to unify and harmonise aspects of reality as one. This psycho-therapeutic mechanism is supported by what Asouzu calls “existential conversion” (2007a; 2013b). Existential conversion is another psycho-therapeutic mechanism that enables the minds to see missing links as transcendent categories that can be unified and harmonised as one (Asouzu 2007a, 429-330).

Thus, when our minds are influenced by, and operate with, noetic propaedeutic and existential conversion, we have “*obioha*” (2007a; 2007b). *Obioha* is a holistic, comprehensive complementary mindset that has overcome the bifurcating, polarising of reality and absolutising of an aspect of reality. This mindset does not restrict itself to linking a fragment of reality as reality. Instead, it sees fragments of reality as missing links that ought to be unified. With this mindset, we can conceive all realities as two-sided, including God. Hence, God can be conceived as consisting of spirit and matter in line with the African duality theory.

Conclusion

African philosophy of religion challenges African scholars to reflect deeply on their conceptualisation of reality in the African philosophical place. One such concept that requires much attention is the notion of God, which seems to be pervasive in Africa. I have given a critical and creative look at this concept concerning God’s constituent nature in the preceding sections. My concluding argument is that God cannot be pure spirit if the African duality lens examines its constituent nature. Instead, God will be seen as consisting of spirit and matter that are harmoniously complemented and integrated as they coexist as a whole. Outside this, God ceases to be reality, and becomes meaningless, and nothing.

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