

## **An Argument for the Non-Existence of the Devil in African Traditional Religions**

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i1.5>

**Submission: November 1, 2021 Acceptance: January 28, 2022**

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### **Abstract**

In this essay, I will argue that the discourse over the existence of the Devil/Satan has no place among the religious cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. This may be contrasted with the numerous efforts in the dominant philosophy of religion tradition in the Anglo-American sphere, where efforts toward the establishing grounds for the existence of God have occupied and commanded so much attention. On the other hand, it seems to have been taken for granted that Devil, the One who is antagonistic of God, among the Abrahamic monotheisms, is assumed to exist and does not require serious intellectual elaboration. For my aim, I explore the traditional Yorùbá and Igbo religious cultures to foreground that God. In the traditional belief system of these two religious cultures, there is no place to entertain the idea of a necessarily antagonistic entity, popularly called the Devil. Whereas I recognise previous scholarships that have served to show that Èṣù and Ekwensu in each of these religious cultures are not synonymous with Devil in the Abrahamic monotheisms, I move beyond these to establishing the ontological framework which endorses the absence of a Devil, even when evil lingers in the world. If the argument that there is no Devil/Satan in these religious cultures is proved valid, then it is pertinent to tender the origin and persistence of evil in the world. For this task, I explore the process-relational character of Yorùbá and Igbo theology to reinforce my conviction concerning the peoples' belief in the existence of God in Chukwu and Olódùmarè, the presence of evil in the world, without encountering the philosophical problem of evil.

**Keywords:** Devil, Igbo, Process Ontology, God, *Yorùbá*.

## Introduction

Mainstream scholarship in the traditional Western discourse on religion has been engrossed, over the centuries, with arguments and counter-arguments over grounds upon which the existence of God may be admitted. As a perennial discourse that commenced in the medieval era, various arguments for and against the existence of God, have yet to receive conclusive grounds or finality. On the other hand, it has not been a matter of intellectual inquiry if Satan or Devil exists and whether it is pertinent to establish the existence of this other antagonistic entity in the light of the evil that persists in the world. When the traditional religious cultures in Africa encountered Christianity and Islam, the imposition of the understanding of the idea of God in these non-African religious cultures surfaced, thereby compromising and even frustrating the idea of God among traditional Africans (see P'BITEK 1973). There was the emphasis on the need to provide the name of God among Africans but whose qualities will bear the same with the Abrahamic monotheisms soon became replete, as Samuel Imbo (2004, 369-370) correctly notes:

If God has a name, then the task of the missionary is that of finding out what the equivalent name is in the African languages. *Mungu* in the Kiswahili, *Jok* in Acoli, *Allah* in Arabic, *Rubanga* also in Acoli must therefore be the local names of the Christian God. Okot notes that the missionaries did not carry out the lengthy and systematic studies in the African languages concerned to find out what true beliefs of the Africans where. They were simply looking for a local confirmation of their cherished preconceptions.

In an analogous fashion, there was no serious consideration over the existence of the Devil in African Traditional Religion (ATR, hereafter), but only the invitation of the use of seemingly malicious and trickster deities as the corresponding version of Satan in the Abrahamic monotheisms. For the traditional Igbo and Yorùbá religious cultures, Ekwensu and Èṣù, respectively are the deities that were erroneously passed as the Satan. The task of this research, then, is to show that much as the reality of evil in the world is not a matter of debate, ATR can reconcile the existence of God with evil in the absence or non-existence of God's antagonistic entity – Satan. Hence, the occupation of this research is to argue for the lack of Satan in ATR in a coherence manner that allows for the reality of evil as well as the existence of God to be admitted.

To be able to attain the foregoing aim, it is crucial to examine briefly the history and evolution of belief in the term, Devil among the Abrahamic monotheisms. This exploration is key as it can help to see that strictly speaking, there is no conclusive evidence that there is indeed an entity called Devil/Satan that can exist without human imagination. In other words, even in the mainstream non-African intellectual religious tradition, there is no conclusive evidence for the existence of the Devil. Establishing this thesis is

the commerce of the next section, which is the first. In the second section, this research makes the effort to show that belief in the existence of the Devil has no place in ATR, by using the religious cultures of the Igbo and Yorùbá as a fulcrum. Whereas it must be stated that this study is not the first to divulge that Devil, among the Abrahamic monotheisms is not the same as Ekwensu and Èṣù, in Igbo and Yorùbá, respectively, it is important to emphasise that there has been almost no effort to provide the Afro-metaphysical foundation that makes the belief coherent. This is the objective of the third part of this research. The fourth part of this study is the conclusion.

### **Shifting Narratives and the Identity of the Devil in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic Traditions**

Before engaging the idea of the Devil in these two religious traditions, it is important to state that they share some similarities. They are products of the same region and both, along with Judaism, venerate Abraham as their father-figure. In spite of this apparent common grounds, the dualistic theologies of Christianity and Islam were shaped by the Southern Reformation, a consequent of the clash between Bishop Cyril and Bishop Nestor on the nature of God (OFUASIA 2015). Whereas the former represented the paganizing arm of the Church, the latter stood as its philosophic or scientific counterpart. Whereas the former is willing to admit Mary as God-bearer (i.e. *Theotokos*), the latter grants that Mary can only be Christ-bearer (i.e. *Christotko*). The consequence of this clash led to organised Islam under the Holy Prophet Mohammed, since Jesus, though considered as a prophet of high standing in Islam is usually addressed as “Son of Mary.” This is an aftermath of Mohammed’s interaction with the Nestorians (OFUASIA 2015). In the words of William Draper, “Mohammed is brought in contact with the Nestorians and catholic faith. He adopted and extended their principles of hours of prayer and rosary chanting while rejecting the worship of the Virgin, the doctrine of the Trinity, and everything in opposition to the unity of God. He extinguished idolatry in Arabia, by force, and prepared to make war on the Roman Empire. His successors conquered Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, North Africa, Spain, and invaded France” (DRAPER 1910, 39). This, however is not the focus of this present discourse. It can only serve as an interesting anecdote to some of the feuds that informed Islam’s distinct theology, even when Jesus and Abraham are admitted as Christians do.

Since the admission that a creature that is created yet diametrically and necessarily opposed to the Creator is alien to ATR, then inquiry must take flight via the Abrahamic monotheisms, whose religious influence in the world commands a staggering profile. For the Abrahamic monotheist, the straightforward answer to the question: “Who is the Devil?” will be that the Devil is the “Commander-in-chief of the fallen angels” (CORTE 1958, 7). This is a consensus which the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam admit completely as true. However, it must be said that over the years, due to the experiences of the harsh realities of life as well as the

undeniable place of evil and suffering in the world, the Devil soon became personified. Izak Spangenberg (2013, 213) shares this outlook when he writes that: “Believers consequently resort to belief in Satan (Belial/Lucifer/Devil) as a way of making sense of their world.” It is also the case that “If one wishes to understand the origin of belief in Satan, one has to study the history of Israel’s religion” (SPANGENBERG 2013, 213). On first showing, this would mean that the origin of the belief in the existence of the Devil commenced with the religion of the Israelites. A deeper exploration with the Russian scholar of religion, Sergei Tokarev (1988) underscores how the belief in two opposing forces is displayed between *Ahura Mazda* and *Angra Mainyu* in Persian Mazdaism. It is from Mazdaism, according to Tokarev (1988, 352) that Christians “adopted many other elements as well – the ancient burial cult with the attending belief in the afterlife of the soul; the shaman practice of exorcising evil spirits; magic healing methods; the ancient worship of genies relating to Nagualism and transformed in Christianity into guardian angels etc.; the survivals of ancient totemic rituals and notions (belief in Immaculate Conception, the mystery of communion).”

Much as the belief in the reality of the Devil as an adversary or opponent to a good God as held among the Abrahamic monotheisms, has its root in Persia *Mazdaism*, it is to the credit of Christianity that the Devil became personified in several measures and historical circumstance. This is the case since Christians identify themselves with the one true God and Jesus while they made those oppose to the Gospel to be in communion with and under the Devil’s influence (PAGELS 1995). Before engaging how the idea of the Devil became replete in Christian doctrine, it will be helpful to relay how the idea has developed in Judaism too. On this note, it is important to expatiate that at first the idea of a creature who is an adversary to a good God was foreign to the Jews.

It has been suggested that the Jews encountered this outlook in “Mazdaism when they were ruled by the Persian Kings (sixth-fourth centuries B.C.). Probably this influence explains the concept of the evil spirit – Satan, God’s antagonist. At first this ideas was alien to the Jews, and it is nearly absent from the Bible” (TOKAREV 1988, 237). It is from the interaction between the Jews and the Persians that several popular doctrines that dovetailed into Christianity emerged. Central to the doctrines which Christianity adopted through the Persian-Judaic interaction are:

The Judean idea of the Messiah-Saviour that had been transformed into a spiritual saviour and merged with the images of agricultural dying and resurrecting gods; the Gnostic teaching of the opposition between spirit and matter and the divine medium between them – Logos; the Mazdaist notion of the evil spirit, the Devil; the ancient worship of the goddess mother (the Mother of God). (TOKAREV 1988, 352)

The first terrestrial appearance of the Devil in the Judeo-Christian revelations is represented as a serpent who deceived the first humans to initiate the fall from grace. This story may actually be metaphorical, since there are *only* three books of the Old Testament where the word Satan/Devil refers essentially to a celestial being.<sup>1</sup> In the events recorded in these three books of the Old Testament, not a single one passes Satan/Devil as *Yahweh's* adversary, but a member of what Izak Spangenberg (2013, 216) calls “the heavenly court.” What this means is that originally, Satan was not conceived as an opponent to *Yahweh*. The First Temple period (950-586 B.C.E); the Babylonian Exile (586-539 B.C.E) disclose an idea of Satan that is not necessarily opposed to *Yahweh*. However, from the Second Temple period (539-70 C.E), which commenced with the Persian period (539-333 B.C.E.), the evolution of Judaism into a deeply monotheistic religion with Devil as an entity that is opposed to God became clearer (see SPANGENBERG 2013). It was after this era that three fundamental stories concerning the Devil may be detected in the Judeo-Christian (RILEY 1999).

In the first rendition, the sons of God were said to have had illicit sexual affairs with the daughters of men leading to the presence of giants (RILEY 1999). These giants are said to have been drowned during the Great Flood while “their disembodied souls eventually became demons.<sup>2</sup> The leader of the demons, whose name is Asazel, was none other than the Devil...He was also called Baalzebub, the prince of the demons, and had once been the prime angel in heaven” (SPANGENBERG 2013, 222). The implication of this tale is before the flood, the idea of Devil was unheard of.

The second account of the Devil reflects in the story of the creation of Adam by God (see RILEY 1999). Upon commanding the angels to pay homage to Adam, “one angel rebelled and refused to do so. He motivated his act by arguing that he had existed long before Adam, who should rather pay homage to him. Other angels joined in the rebellion and the rebellious angels under the command of the Devil were then expelled from heaven” (SPANGENBERG 2013, 223). This narrative is also recorded in the Islamic tradition where the Devil is personified as *Iblis* who refused to bow to Adam.<sup>3</sup> According to Charles Mathewes (2021), “Some Islamic thinkers call Iblis an angel, some call Iblis a genie; Iblis is the one who becomes *ash-Shaitan*, the primordial rebel against God.” The consequence of the refusal to bow to Adam is banishment into the terrestrial world and this is what accounts for the origin of evil in the world, according to Islamic theology. As Mathewes (2021) explains, “In the Islamic tradition, Satan himself is only ambiguously a personal agent. Sometimes Iblis appears as an agent, a person, with desires and designs on humanity...”

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<sup>1</sup>See Zechariah 3: 1-2; Job 1: 6-12; 2: 1-7; 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 21: 1

<sup>2</sup>See Genesis 6: 6-6; Jude 6; 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 2: 4. The Apocryphal book, 1<sup>st</sup> Enoch 6-16 also documents this event.

<sup>3</sup>In Al-Qur'an 7:12, Satan is quoted to have justified to Allah his refusal to bow Adam thus: “I am better than he: Thou hast created me of fire, while him Thou didst create from clay.”

Sufi Islam however, has put up a spirited defence of Satan's refusal to bow. The refusal of the Devil to bow to Adam is an act that upholds the Islamic position that the only person worthy of being bowed to is Allah. This reasoning is linked to the conviction that Allah would not want the angels to worship anything other than Allah, especially something younger and even inferior (HOYT 2008). This is the position of the renowned Islamic Sufi scholar Al-Ghazali when he reflects: "Encountering Eblis on the slopes of Sinai, Moses hailed him and asked, "O Eblis, why did you not prostrate before Adam? Eblis replied, "Heaven forbid that anyone worshipped anything but the One...This command was a test" (see HOYT 2008). What this means is that for the Devil, the entire affair was a test and this is why Sufi adherents such as Abdul Karim Jili maintain that "after the Day of Judgement, Satan will be back to the service of God as one of his cherished angels. Besides the personified notion of Satan, Islam views Satan as temptations in the mind described as whisperings and desire to do evil. *Iblis* is accordingly also a cosmic force, leading humans (and jinn) astray from good" (see NDUBISI 2019, 27).

There is no doubt that this second account of the Devil, as portrayed in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions may have registered prior to the Genesis account of creation. However, it is interesting that whereas the Bible only talks about Moses going up Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments,<sup>4</sup> there was no mention of Moses encountering any creature on the way up and down Mount Sinai. This means that an expression of the nature of Satan can get better through a patient exploration of the revelations of the Abrahamic monotheisms. Empirically speaking, one may however argue that no human was there to have witnessed the rancour that led to Satan's banishment and the anthropocentric narratives continue to make one wonder if the Devil is real or metaphorical. In one sphere, the Devil is tangible as one of God's rebelled creatures that presently leads human astray in the actual world. On the other hand, the Devil is passed as an intangible whispering in the minds of humans that lures them into evil thoughts and actions. If the latter position is held strongly, then only moral but not natural evil can be accounted for. Clearly, an incomplete picture of the nature of evil enters the discursive fray. More so, the ground upon which the masculine pronoun is used to refer to the Devil is also circumspect and in the end compromises any fair and reliable efforts at understanding the true nature of the Devil.

The third account which Riley (1999) discusses is taken from actions in the books of Isaiah 14: 4-20 and Ezekiel 28: 11-19. Whereas these "chapters concern the King of Babylon and King of Tyrus respectively...the prophecies served as base texts for a story about the origin of the Devil" (SPANGENBERG 2013, 223-224). In this instance, it is said that one of the

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<sup>4</sup>Even the Ten Commandments are not novel as the Bible would want it portrayed since the tablet that bears them presents great semblances with the Hammurabi Law Code, which had been in circulation hitherto.

archangels desired equal worship and adoration with God. This archangel, along with those who supported him where exited from the celestial realm. According to Greg Riley (1999, 246), this archangel “later on received the name Lucifer, the Latin translation of the Hebrew word for “morning star” used in Isaiah 14: 12.” This narrative is closely related to the account of *Surah 7* in *Al-Qur’an*, concerning the refusal to bow. In this narrative, it seems Satan impliedly commands equal recognition with God, whereas this is not how Sufi Islam comprehends this celestial rancour.

From the exploration on the three narratives of the belief in the Devil in Islamic and Jewish beliefs, it is arguable that existence of the Devil has yet to be empirically established as a physical entity that goes about trying human faithfulness to God. As Elaine Pagels (1995, 39) observes, the Hebrew term Satan connotes an “adversarial role. It does not describe a particular character.” It was when Christianity attained widespread control and recognition that the evolution of the Devil took another shift into full real-life personifications. The New Testament seems to have another version of the Devil/Satan which is in stark contrast with what obtains in the Old Testament.

The Gospels seem to dictate that Jesus was on the side of the good and all other entities that are opposed to his ministry symbolise the Devil. Specifically, the anti-Jewish Book of Mathew, discloses how Judaism and Christianity started to part ways. Since the Jews were resistant to the message of Christ, their plot to killing their own Messiah signifies how misguided they were as they were playing the role of the Devil. As Pagels (1995, 65) puts it: “If Jesus is the Son of God, then, it implies that his opponents, the Jews are the agents of “Satan.”” The Gospel of John portrays the Devil working in the form of Judas, Jewish authorities, and the Jewish people in general. In the long run, Christians possessed the knowledge that all factions waging war against them were agents or instruments of the Devil. In the case of Justin Martyr, one of the first Romans to accept the Christian faith, Pagels (1995, 120) relates: “[For Justin], Every god and spirit he had ever known including Apollo, Aphrodite, and Zeus, whom he had worshipped, he now perceived as allies of Satan...” It is in a related fashion that colonial and post-colonial Africans have almost forsaken their traditional religious cultures to embrace Christ, thereby rendering indigenous deities as agents or manifestations of the Satan/Devil. The overall aim thus far, has been to foreground that grounds for the belief of Devil in the Abrahamic traditions are amorphous or nebulous. In this next part of this research, the errors generated by attempts of introducing Satan into Africa will be given serious assessment, using traditional *Igbo* and *Yorùbá* theologies as paradigm.

### **The Idea of the Devil in Traditional Igbo and Yorùbá Religious Traditions**

With colonisation, civilisation and Christianisation of the Africans became tools to making the African truly human. The influence of not only Euro-Christian aptitudes but Arab-Islamic beliefs concerning the Devil cannot be

easily brushed aside in contemporary African living. Western ethnographic scholars and missionaries, alongside foremost African theologians, in a bid to make sense of ATR, started seeking the equivalents of Abrahamic concepts in ATR. One of the numerous consequences of this move is the ‘creation’ or imposition of the Devil into traditional African theology.

Among the Igbo, Ekwensu, a deity is construed as the Igbo equivalent of the Biblical and Quranic Satan. For the Yorùbá, Èṣù was erroneously used as well. In the Igbo and Yorùbá versions of the Bible, these two entities were drafted in and used to depict Satan/Devil. What do the terms: Ekwensu and Èṣù illustrate that endears them as the direct equivalents of the Satan/Devil, among the Igbo and Yorùbá? A brief articulation of the natures of these divinities is important to establish how they fit into the idea of a Devil that is necessarily opposed to God and also responsible for the evil experienced in the actual world.

Ekwensu, among the Igbos, is the “god of warriors” (see ISICHEI 1969). As one of the arrays of deities that were worshipped among the Igbos, Ekwensu is “in fact the spirit of violence and patron of warriors and not the Christian Devil” (KANU 2013, 548). Ekwensu is also perceived as a trickster deity and has the capacity to create confusions if not properly propitiated (EZEH 2012). As a blood-thirsty deity, Ekwensu is associated with wars and violence and in spite of these qualities, Ekwensu is not shy of worshippers, as correctly noted by Anthony Kanu (2013, 548) that “among the Igbos of Asaba, there was a festival called Ekwensu festival, and it constituted their major annual feast, during which they displayed their military prowess.” It is therefore questionable how this “god of warriors,” who also possesses the capacity to be benevolent, became associated with the nebulous character of Satan/Devil as indicated in the Bible and Al-Quran. This cannot be divorced from the Hellenisation project of ATR, which the Ugandan scholar, Okot p’Bitek (1972) had accused African and non-African theologians of. This Hellenisation project eventually led to the imposition of categories and mistranslation (NDUBISI 2019, 27-28). It is from these two approaches that Ekwensu among the Igbo has been mistranslated as the Devil of the Bible and Al-Qur’an. The attributes of the Devil in these Abrahamic revelations has also been imposed upon Ekwensu thereby rendering the deity away from its original conception. This is evident in the doctrine of Pentecostalism in Igbo society. For instance, Jude Aguwa (1987, 40) appends that: “Ekwensu (the devil) is the most wicked spirit and he does extensive harm even without provocation. He is eternal enemy of Chukwu (God). He and his group are able to manipulate man’s will and emotions and induce him to do evil. Ekwensu is considered so dangerous to handle, so uncompromising and so unappealing that shrines for him do not exist.” Clearly, Aguwa’s rendition of the nature and belief of Ekwensu among the Igbo is both untrue and misleading. The outlook that Ekwensu has a group and is antagonist to Chukwu is a clear imposition of the nature of the Devil in the Abrahamic monotheisms over Igbo ontology and



theology. As a way of correcting this misleading rendition, John Anenechukwu Umeh (1999, 196-197), ripostes:

Ekwensu is also confirmed to be one of the benevolent lunar deities. The Igbo Afa terminology Ora Obala/Oha Obala literally means child of the sun, which means the moon, the Eagle, and Ekwensu,...It is indeed a ridiculous absurdity for any Igbo person to talk of Ekwensu as a devil or an evil spirit as the Eagle and the moon and the child of light have never been associated with evils or evil ones but have always been associated with achievement, good victory, success and beautiful ones.

In a matter of dispute of this nature, the best way of making sense of this belief is to explore the ritual archives of the traditional Igbo as Umeh (1999) does. This discloses the proper belief of the Igbo as it was originally held before colonial and Western civilisation. In spite of the establishment that Ekwensu is not the direct equivalent of Satan, it needs to be said that it is an ontological entity that is usually associated with natural but not moral evil:

The traditional Igbo do not think of Ekwensu as the force that stands in opposition to other supernatural beings. Certainly, evil deeds, especially unexpected and unintentional ones are attributed to his influence. But moral evil is not attributed to him. His malevolence is attributed to bring misfortune. Ekwensu has no nkwa (statue) and is in some areas invoked and extolled during warfares and within three days set apart among the western Igbo as festivals of Ekwensu (Igba oso Ekwensu) (OGUEJIOFOR 1984, 85).

Since Ekwensu commands worship among some Igbos, it is therefore clear that the rendition of Aguwa (1987) is unreliable and nothing other than the imposition of Abrahamic conceptions of the Devil over Igbo ontology, leading to misrepresentation and distortion. Same may be said of Èṣù, among the Yorùbá, who will now be the focus of inquiry.

Like Igbo ontology, Èṣù is one of the deities in Yorùbá ontology that has suffered the misfortune of being passed as a direct equivalent of the Devil as espoused in the Bible and Al-Qur'an.

The word Èṣù is a combination of a prefix 'È' (i.e. you) and a verb 'ṣù' (i.e. to harmonize or bring together). Hence, Èṣù may be seen as "one who brings people or issues together for harmonious existence" (ADEKOLA 2013, 58). Èṣù is arguably, one of the most misrepresented of the òrìṣàs (divinities) in Yorùbá ontology. He is known by different names to different people (AKANDE & OFUASIA 2021, 102). This is why it has been documented that "The Yoruba call him Èṣù, Èḷẹgbàrà, Lanroye and Èḷẹgbà, but he has many names from different homes. To the Fon he is Legba; in African America, he is Papa Joe; in the Caribbean he is Papa Labas and Loa Legba; in Brazil he is Exu. He is the God of duality, multiplicity, duplicity, confusion and evolution.

Èḽgbà is one of the most significant divinities, and his origin texts, manifestations and contributions are innumerable” (WASHINGTON 2013, 315). The renowned scholar of Yorùbá studies, Wande Abimbola (1976, 9) is of the outlook that Èṣù is “the servant or messenger of God and other deities but Èṣù is closer to Ọ̀rúnmìlà than any other divinity.” Abimbola’s (1976) assertion is right since Èṣù is usually depicted at the top of the divining trays (Ọ̀pón Ifá) of the Ifá diviners. Similarly, Shitta-Bey (2013, 79) amplifies that “Èṣù is primarily a special relations officer of Olódùmarè and a messenger of the gods.”

For the sake of the discussion here, it is interesting to understand that the identity of Èṣù among all the Yorùbá divinities has suffered the most from gross imposition and misrepresentation. The exposition of Samuel Johnson (1921, 28), like Ajayi Crowther before him misleads one into taking the perspective that Èṣù passes as the Biblical Satan, the Evil One, the author of all the evil experienced in the world. It is, however, important to disclose that there have been concrete efforts at correcting this wrong equivalent. Emmanuel Ofuasia (2021); Emmanuel Ofuasia and Babajide Dasaolu (2017); Kazeem Fayemi (2013); Danoye Laguda (2013); Oladele Balogun (2009); John Bewaji (1998); Sophie Oluwole (1995) are some intellectual exertions that have shown why the expression of Èṣù as Devil in the Judeo-Christian and Biblical traditions.

The core of their various arguments is that the personification of Abrahamic imposition of Èṣù as Devil has no place in African ontology and theology. For them, the evils in the world cannot be traced to the handiwork of Èṣù. In the words of Oladele Balogun (2009, 31): “The Yoruba do not postulate an all evil being that is solely responsible for the occurrence of evil as we have in the West or in Judeo-Christian thought. Rather, the Yoruba conceive both evil and good as arising from the activities of Olodumare (God,) his ministers (divinities) and other theoretical entities.” Similarly Sophie Oluwole (1995, 20) expatiates that “The Yoruba thinker recognizes evil as real, but he does not regard its existence as proof of God’s incompetence or His limited goodness, since He is not conceived as absolute in any of these sense in the first instance.” In spite of these scholarly exertions aimed at clearing the distortion, it is still clear that in the understanding of the average modern-day Yorùbá, just like Ekwensu among the Igbo, Èṣù continues to be perceived as an agent that directly or indirectly accounts for the sufferings and evils in the world. It is therefore clear that clearing misrepresentations and distortions will not do. A plausible metaphysical framework that admits the existence of God, the reality of evil but which excuses an antagonistic Devil to God, as the effective causation of evil and suffering is important to put the matter to rest. In the next section, this ontological framework is the focal concern.

### **Process-Relational Philosophy and Evil in Traditional *Igbo* and *Yorùbá* Religious Traditions**

The use of process-relational theology for comprehending *Igbo* and *Yorùbá* theologies can be justified on the basis of the recent urgency in African scholarship to cast away the misrepresenting tendencies of substance metaphysics, which is not only steeped in Aristotle's metaphysics, but also the two-valued logic upon which it thrives. In recent times, works of scholars such as Ada Agada (2015) have served to show the emergence of process thinking in African scholarship. However, much as these African authors are bold to state in clear terms theories that their metaphysical theories are not inspired from substance thinking, they have to openly announce their process-undergirding, which I have discerned in their efforts. It is because of this lack of open avowal to process-relational metaphysics that I take to Whitehead's (1978) analysis for the present inquiry. To understand how traditional *Igbo* and *Yorùbá* societies were able to conceive the identity of *Ekwensu* and *Èṣù* respectively in relation to the reality of evil and suffering in the world, an exposition of the core aspect of process-relational thought may be of immense help. This is because the process-relational philosophy, first fully or extensively codified by Alfred North Whitehead (1978) treats the reality of evil and suffering in the world in ways that traditional *Igbo* and *Yorùbá* societies do. This semblance is one of the reasons why this research takes the position that traditional *Igbo* and *Yorùbá* thought systems are ancient models of process philosophy. What then is the core of process-relational philosophy? How does it treat the reality of evil and suffering in the world and how does its treatment consider the Devil?

There are various strands of process-relational philosophy. This study will however stick with Whitehead's (1978) analysis since most of the contemporary discourses on this strand of metaphysics take inspiration from him, being the first to codify the central thesis.

Whitehead (1978, vi) calls his version of process philosophy, "philosophy of organism." He makes this assertion following his conviction that traditional substance metaphysics, which is the dominant metaphysical perspective in Western philosophy, is inadequate on many fronts. Instead of positing that the world is made of substance as Aristotle and nearly all the influential Western philosophers maintain, Whitehead vies for actual entities/occasions. For him, actual occasions or entities are "the final real things of which the world is made. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real" (WHITEHEAD 1978, 18). It is clear that Whitehead is rejecting and replacing substance with actual entities with the aim of showing how consciousness emerged. Substance metaphysics could not account for the origin of consciousness, especially in the light of developments in the fields of electromagnetic and quantum physics. Whitehead, being a philosopher of science, at one point in his intellectual career takes the outlook that it is more sensible to assume that there are degrees "of experience in every entity than to assume there is none on the lower end of being and that

somehow, miraculously, experience sprang from nowhere” (OLAV 2010, 7). This is the development of his theory of panexperientialism – the metaphysical doctrine that all things, animate and inanimate are capable of having experience. With this, the hard question of the origin of consciousness in traditional metaphysics is put to rest. On this metaphysical doctrine, it is clear that the individual tissues and cells that make up plants and animals are individual actual entities with their unique experience, just as the computer that is used to type these words. In a nutshell, thoughts, imaginations, stones, trees, chimpanzees, lakes and water bodies are various manifestations of actual entities, what Aristotle would call substance with various accidents. However, it is instructive to explain that given the understanding that the actual world comprises of actual entities, Whitehead adds that there higher level and lower level grades of actual entities/occasions. He stresses that “God is an actual entity, and so is the trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. But though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level” (WHITEHEAD 1978, 18). What Whitehead implies here is that God is not beyond but bound to the metaphysical laws that dictate events for all other actual entities and the actual world. He stresses: “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save them from collapse. He is their chief exemplification” (WHITEHEAD 1978, 343).

All actual entities or occasions have two parts: physical and mental poles. So plants, humans, waters, stones all have these two aspects of existence, although one is more pronounced in some over others. For instance, among humans the mental pole is more pronounced than stones, where the physical pole is more manifest. This means that the distinction between the mind and the body in traditional metaphysics does not rear head in process metaphysics. God, who is a being of the highest grade, has two natures: the primordial and the consequent natures. In the primordial state, God provides all actual entities in the world with courses of actions and deliberations popular called “potentials or eternal objects” (WHITEHEAD 1978). God’s primordial nature corresponds to the mental pole of all actual entities and this is how the eternal objects given to them by God are prehended.<sup>5</sup> Eternal objects or potentials are options open to all actual entities to admit into their essences or not. The ways that these entities respond, either positively or negatively to these eternal objects establish the consequent nature of God – the reaction of the world back on God. This nature, as Whitehead (1978, 46) puts it “...is the physical prehension by God of the actualities of the evolving universe.” This makes the entire scheme panentheistic in since God is necessarily influences and is influenced by the events of the world. And panentheism, as it functions in process ontology, in the words of foremost Whiteheadian scholar, David Ray Griffin (2010, 163) is summed thus: “What

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<sup>5</sup>Whitehead (1978) uses the term ‘prehension’ to capture the ways through which actual entities come to acquire these eternal objects from God. This is because of the failure of the popular term ‘perception’ to admit other ways of knowing beyond the five sense organs.

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exists necessarily is not simply God alone but God-and-a-world – not our particular world, with its contingent forms of order, but some world or other.” In a related development, William Lawhead (2002, 495) adds that panentheism “is the view that God includes the world in his being (since he is affected by every event within it) and at the same that he is more than the events in the world (God has his own unique aims and actions).” What these points illustrate is that the world is a collaborative effort among all actual entities with God occupying the highest hierarchy for being the only entity capable of positively dealing with eternal objects. In other words, God provides all actual entities in the actual world eternal objects because God, the highest of all actual entities, is capable of diminishing negative eternal objects for the positive ones, to be able to the role of an orderer in the actual world.

On the other hand, other actual entities, owing to their freewill mayprehend positively or negatively. Hence, Whitehead (1978, 345) explains if the prehension is positive, “every entity on its finer side introduces God into the world.” And on the non-fine side, what is introduced into the world is disharmony or disorder, or in clear terms, evil and suffering. It is precisely this factor that is responsible for the disorder or evil that is encountered in the actual world. This means that in process theology, there is no agent of antagonism, such as the Devil that accounts for the persistence of evil in the actual world. A little more elaboration is needed at this juncture.

Being a persuasive agency, if it is the case that God wants what is best for the world, and there is evil in the world, process theology says the evil is a result of deviation from what God intends for the world (OFUASIA 2021). Evil, is therefore, according to the Nigerian Whiteheadian scholar, Martin Onwuegbusi (2013, 259), “as a result of the individual deviating from what God intends for him, which is in fact the best.” The main place that Whitehead gives to God is the role of the actual entity that guarantees order in the actual world and this to him is an adequate reason for maintaining the existence of God. In his words:

...it is not the case that there is an actual world which accidentally begins to exhibit an order of nature. There is an actual world because there is order in nature. If there were no order, there would be no world. Also, since there is a world, we know that there is an order. The ordering entity is a necessary element in the metaphysical situation presented by the actual world. (WHITEHEAD 1957, 104)

God, as understood in process theology, is immanent in the world even when it transcends all other actual entities in the world. Here, Whitehead expatiates further: “The immanence of God gives reason for the belief that pure chaos is intrinsically impossible.” As a result, “God and the World stand over against each other, expressing the final metaphysical truth that appetitive vision and physical enjoyment have equal claim to priority in creation. But no two actualities can be torn apart: each is all in all. Thus each temporal occasion

embodies God, and is embodied in God” (WHITEHEAD 1978, 111). If God is nothing but an orderer, then it means there must be ultimate metaphysical category – the primordial ground which sustains all things, God inclusive. This category is what Whitehead calls Creativity.

According to Whitehead (1978, 21), Creativity is the “universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact.” Creativity, in his word “lies in the nature of things that the many enter into one complex unity” (WHITEHEAD 1978, 31). Hence it may be deduced as Whitehead (1978, 47) does that God “is at once a creature of Creativity and a condition for Creativity.” Due to this God like any other actual entity expresses Creativity but also as “organ of novelty, aiming at intensification” (WHITEHEAD 1978, 104) and the ‘foundation of order...the goal towards novelty” (WHITEHEAD 1978, 135). It is precisely this capacity to play the role of an orderer as a creature of Creativity that makes makes order or events such as cause and effect, in the actual world to be possible.

It is also worthy of adding that the thrust of the exposition provided thus far is that God in process theology is “not adorned with the superlative accidents of might, power and knowledge. This is a persuasive but not a coercive God that breaks the laws of nature at will to save Its people miraculously. When coercive power involves parting the Red Sea, transgressing or upsetting the established law of water bodies, for some chosen people to thread on dry ground into Palestine, process theology proposes that God works persuasively and finds the idea of an all-powerful God untrue” (DASAOLU & OFUASIA 2019, 68). Hence, since God uses persuasive power, God sets before all entities (human and non-human; natural and moral) ideal of harmony, love and dignity, leaving them to either choose or not to act accordingly. It is the frustration of this ideal that accounts for the presence of evil in the universe (DASAOLU & OFUASIA 2019, 68). It is on this basis that the origin of evil and suffering in the world, according to process theology is not to be traced to a Devil that is antagonistic of God. Evil and suffering occurs as a result of the failure to do the right ideals which God presents before all actual entities, humans and non-human to choose from. As a result, the various quandaries which reinforce the problems of evil are absent in process theology, “...since God is neither an absolute nor ultimate being who is usually invoked to save metaphysical theories from rumbling” (OFUASIA 2021, 39).

For the Sufi, this process-relational analysis of the effective cause of evil may actually justify their outlook that the Satan/Devil is an intangible force who presents itself as temptations in the mind described as whisperings and desire to do evil. A related understanding seems to have been held among the traditional Igbo and Yorùbá societies, even before process-relational metaphysics received its inspiring codification from Whitehead. The idea that evil and suffering may be traced to an agent of antagonism against Chukwu and Olódùmarè for the traditional Igbo and Yorùbá, respectively, has no place. It is the influx of mainstream and dominant Euro-Christian and Arab-Islamic

beliefs into Africa that accounts for the introduction of the beliefs of evil as the handiwork of a personal agent. When there was not explicit character in the traditional religions of Igbo and Yorùbá that works against the interests of Chukwu and Olódùmarè, distortions and misrepresentations emerged when Ekwensu and Èṣù, were erroneously invoked. As notable Igbo and Yorùbá scholars have argued in the preceding section, there is no space for a tangible entity that is opposed to God but also accounts for evil and suffering in the actual world. This study has moved beyond these assertions by providing an ontological and theological stance in process-relational philosophy that makes it possible to be able to admit belief in the existence of God, the reality of evil, but the non-existence of the Devil.

Based on the foregoing, to therefore say that there is no entity in traditional African religions that is equivalent to the Devil – an entity that is naturally antagonistic of the God in the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition is valid. The invocation of one deity by the early missionaries and African theologians that translated the Bible and *Al-Qur'an* into non-African languages are to blame for this sort of conceptual imposition. As this research has been able to argue, such an entity that is necessarily evil and jealous of God has no place in traditional African belief system, and the Igbo and Yorùbá religious cultures have been used as fulcrum to make this point clear.

Having used process-relational metaphysics as a metaphysical framework for making sense of traditional Igbo and Yorùbá theologies, a critic may query the appropriateness of this approach as an instance in conceptual or theoretical imposition. On first showing, this may seem valid. However, to respond to this objection, it is helpful to understand that there are two popular ways of conceiving metaphysics – substance and process or becoming. These two ways are for me, no respecter of culture and race. The most popular and dominant approach is substance metaphysics and this has done so much distortion and misrepresentation of African thought systems. For instance, whilst admitting that the Bantu idea of Being is dynamic and becoming, Tempels (1959) was unable to resist his Aristotelian substance framework from not creeping into what would betray his rendition of Bantu ontology. Based on this, this research is convinced that the use of process-relational metaphysics is not an exercise in conceptual imposition since recent works of scholars such as Ada Agada (2015) has been able to show why that African ontology is more of process than substance.

## **Conclusion**

Conceptual superimposition of categories and mistranslation on the part of Euro-Christian missionaries and Arab-Islamic scholars over ATR, accounts for the entertainment of the belief in the existence of the Devil. More so, this research has been able to argue that even in these two popular and global commanding non-African religious cultures, the idea of the Devil is shifting, nebulous and amorphous in relation to historical realities and perception. Two traditional African cultures, have however, been used to argue that there is no

existence of the Devil in ATR. Traditional Igbo and Yorùbá religions have shown that there is an explanation of the reason why evil and suffering persist in the actual world without invoking an adversary to God. The use of Ekwensu and Èṣù in Igbo and Yorùbá linguistics respectively, has been argued to be a result of imposition of categories and mistranslation. More so, as a way of making the outlook coherent and intelligible, the viable metaphysical scheme upon which it is possible to understand that there is God without an arch enemy in the Devil as the source of evil has been explored in process-relational ontology. On this note, this research maintains the position that there is no conclusive grounds for the existence of the Devil as the author of evil and suffering both in African and non-African religious cultures. Whereas this study has explored the traditional religious cultures of the Igbo and Yorùbá for its aim, it challenges the need to explore other African languages and cultures to see whether their understanding of the Devil parallels the ones from the Abrahamic monotheisms. On a final note, I make bold to say that any attempt by any human being who seeks to foreground the existence of an entity that has made the actual world a place of misery and misfortune need only look at the mirror, and there the real culprit appears, in flesh and blood.

### **Funding Acknowledgements**

This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation and the Global Philosophy of Religion Project at the University of Birmingham. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of these organisations.





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