

Bewaji and Fayemi On God, Omnipotence and Evil

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Abstract

This paper explores the contradiction of positing the existence of a God who is at once omnipotent and not omnipotent in respect of his power that arises in the thought of two African philosophers of religion, John A.I. Bewaji and Ademola Kazeem Fayemi who accept the limitation thesis that projects a limited God and deny the legitimacy of the transcendence view in Yoruba and, by extension, African thought. I demonstrate in this paper that the contradiction arises from the fact that while Bewaji and Fayemi explicitly deny the legitimacy of the transcendence view in Yoruba and, by extension, African thought, they implicitly accept the view and unwittingly and illegitimately attempt to reconcile the conflicting views through the analysis of the notions of God's creatorship, co-creatorship, and controllership. I conclude by recommending that instead of attempting to reconcile the antinomy of God's existence in African philosophy of religion, African philosophers should acknowledge the legitimacy of the two conflicting theses constituting the antinomy and, accordingly, sustain logical consistency by strictly thinking within either the framework of limitedness or the framework of transcendence.

Keywords: God, Omnipotence, Power, Evil, Creatorship, Controllership, Bewaji, Fayemi, African philosophy of religion

Introduction

This essay explores the logical contradiction that arises in the thought of Bewaji and Fayemi as a consequence of the two scholars failing to clearly recognise the antinomy of God's existence in African philosophy of religion that consists of two conflicting propositions, one asserting the existence of a transcendent God and the other asserting the existence of a limited God. Early scholars of African traditional religion (ATR) and African traditional thought projected a perspective of God that presented the deity in the traditional monotheistic sense as an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being. These scholars reached this conclusion through the analysis and interpretation of ATR and traditional African cultural and linguistic phenomena such as oral literature, proverbs, indigenous African languages, African worldviews, and names given to individuals at birth (see, for example, IDOWU 1962, 1973; MBITI 1969, 1970; AWOLALU & DOPAMU 1979). This framework of transcendence naturally legitimises the problem of the compatibility of the existence of an omnipotent God with evil in the world.

However, there is an emerging consensus among contemporary African philosophers of religion that the problem of omnipotence and evil does not arise in African philosophy of religion because ATR and traditional African thought conceive God basically as a limited deity (see, for instance, SOGOLO 1993; BEWAJI 1998; WIREDU 1998, 2010; OLADIPO 2004; BALOGUN 2009; FAYEMI 2012). The later critical group of African scholars relies on the very traditional African cultural and linguistic phenomena that furnished the earlier group with the data that informed their conclusion.

The plausibility of two opposing interpretations of ATR and traditional African thought or worldviews naturally creates a logical trap into which African philosophers may fall, thus leading them to implicitly assert of God that he is both omnipotent (all-powerful) and not omnipotent (limited) in one and the same respect (power). The possibility of such contradiction arising becomes real in two notable articles written by John A.I. Bewaji and Kazeem Ademola Fayemi titled “Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil” (1998) and “Philosophical Problem of Evil: Response to E.O. Oduwole” (2012). While arguing in favour of the claim that the problem of omnipotence and evil does not arise in traditional Yoruba and, by extension, African religion and thought, Bewaji and Fayemi unwittingly find themselves contradicting their favoured limitation thesis and describing God in terms all too familiar to the traditional theist who believes in the existence of a transcendent God.

This essay has the following specific objectives:

1. Demonstrate that the contradiction highlighted above arises from the fact that while Bewaji and Fayemi explicitly deny the legitimacy of the transcendence view in Yoruba and, by extension, African religious thought, they implicitly accept the view and unwittingly and illegitimately attempt to reconcile the conflicting views through the analysis of the notions of God’s creatorship, co-creatorship, and controllership.
2. Show that the ATR and African philosophy of religion literature clearly establish two opposing theses concerning the nature of God, namely: (a) There exists a Supreme Being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, (b) Only a limited deity exists and this deity is neither omnipotent nor omniscient and not wholly good.

The first and second sections of this essay will highlight the thoughts of Bewaji and Fayemi on God, omnipotence, and evil in the world. The third section will critically examine the coherence of the thoughts of the two scholars within the limitedness framework that they explicitly adopt. I will conclude by recommending that instead of attempting to reconcile the antinomy of God’s existence in African philosophy of religion, African philosophers should acknowledge the legitimacy of the two conflicting theses

constituting the antinomy and, accordingly, sustain logical consistency by strictly thinking within either the framework of limitedness or the framework of transcendence.

Bewaji's Position

Bewaji sides with African philosophers like Sogolo (1993), Wiredu (1998), and Oladipo (2004) who insist that analysis of the religious norms and oral traditions of most African ethnic groups reveals an understanding of God as a powerful deity indeed but by no means the all-powerful, all-knowing and benevolent God of Christianity. The main reason for the adoption of the thesis of a limited God follows from the fact that most traditional African societies conceive God as so remote that lesser deities become worthy intermediaries deserving reverence since these lesser deities directly influence human life (see ACHEBE 1994). If God is a *Deus absconditus*, or hidden God, and the lesser deities efficiently deputise for him, it is reasonable to think that God must be limited, either in power as a result of being preceded by pre-existing matter (WIREDU 1998) or in knowledge since he relies on the wisdom of the lesser deities (BEWAJI 1998) or in both power and knowledge (FAYEMI 2012). Since this is the case, God is incapable of stopping the evil in the world and, in fact, capable of evil since a deity limited in knowledge can make mistakes that cause harm.

Bewaji reaches the above conclusion based on his analysis of traditional Yoruba religion and oral literature. Having rejected the categories of omnipotence and omniscience and the idea of an infinitely good God, Bewaji attempts to avoid the temptation of reverting back to the framework of transcendence which earlier theistic scholars like Idowu, Mbiti, and Dopamu promote as adequately exhibiting traditional African conception of God. To show that the Yoruba lack an understanding of God as an omniscient being, Bewaji analyses portions of the Ifa religious text of the Yoruba, which narrates how Olodumare (God) was disturbed about his longevity and consulted “Wise Men” to know whether he is mortal or immortal (BEWAJI 1998, 9). It was from the Wise Men that God learnt that he is immortal. Obviously, a deity that depends on mortal beings to know whether he is immortal or not immortal cannot be omniscient. The being may be immortal indeed, but it does not have full knowledge of the world and is capable of doing evil, at least inadvertently. In the Ifa corpus, God is regularly depicted as consulting the divinity of wisdom Ifa when unable to solve puzzling matters, an indication of limitation in knowledge (see IGBOIN 2014).

However, Bewaji produces a curious or, better still, a contradictory rationale for a non-omniscient God doing evil. Returning implicitly to the framework of transcendence which he explicitly rejects, Bewaji argues that: “It is part of the attributes of the Supreme Being to be able to utilize all things...He is the most Powerful Being, the Creator, the Wise and Impartial Judge who exercises inexorable control over all in the universe...a being with all the attributes stated above is conceivable as capable of both good and bad

[in traditional Yoruba religion]. In fact, to say that God does not or cannot do evil is to unnecessarily circumscribe His power” (1998, 11).

While it may appear that Bewaji distinguishes the category of all-powerfulness from powerfulness and regards the Yoruba God as possessing only the attribute of powerfulness, he also appears to conflate the two categories. While endorsing the position of the early scholars who basically projected a traditional theistic stance, he commits himself, unwittingly, to defending the framework of omnipotence. He curiously justifies his claim that God is capable of both good and evil by invoking the transcendence claim that God is omnipotent. A God that does both good and evil, such as Olodumare, is a being with unrestricted power. Such a being must be omnipotent. This stance opposes Bewaji's view that Olodumare is limited in power and knowledge. According to Bewaji (1998, 7), “Olodumare has all the attributes which Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, Dopamu, and other theological scholars have annotated, that is, Olodumare is the origin of the universe and in the language of Anselm, He is the being that which none greater can be conceived.” The qualities Bewaji alludes to are those traditionally attributed to the God of monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam. The reference to Anselm's famous ontological argument betrays Bewaji's conflation of the category of powerfulness, which he regards as belonging to the African metaphysical framework of a limited God, with the category of all-powerfulness which he considers an imported Western theological category. Yet, the ontological argument which he invokes to underline the magnitude of the power of the Yoruba God (Olodumare) evolved in Western philosophy of religion as a philosophical demonstration of the existence of the Christian God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. The ontological argument purports to prove the existence of a necessary being by demonstrating that the notion of the greatest being implies the possession of all perfections, including existence (see, for instance, MILLICAN 2004; VAN INWAGEN 2010).

In his resolve to show that a powerful God need not be all-powerful, Bewaji implicitly introduces what I will label the concepts of creatorship and co-creatorship. Based on his examination of Yoruba oral literature and religious texts as well as his familiarity with Yoruba cultural phenomena, he asserts that God is the co-creator of the universe rather than creator. As co-creator, God assigned the task of directly designing the universe and creating the diverse beings in the universe to lesser divinities that, instructively, God either created or fully controls. It is not clear that the concept of co-creatorship diminishes God's creative powers since Bewaji agrees that God is the ultimate cause of the lesser deities (1998, 11). Thus, while the lesser deities are ubiquitous and feared by humans who must, therefore, appease them with sacrifices when necessary, God has sovereign powers over the lesser deities. The deployment of the concept of co-creatorship, therefore, fails to clearly establish that the powerful God Bewaji understands to be the Yoruba (African) God is not, in fact, an all-powerful God. The tension between the explicit acceptance of the framework of limitedness and implicit belief in the

metaphysical rootedness of the framework of transcendence in African religious thought comes to the fore when Bewaji writes in a glaring example of self-contradiction: “It is only natural that the most powerful Being should not suffer any handicap or hindrance, especially in the execution of justice. God is all-wise (omniscient) and knows all things” (1998, 11).

In the next section, I will show how Fayemi also struggles to escape the framework of transcendence after committing himself to the position that the Yoruba conception of God is one of a limited deity that is yet responsible in part for the evil in the world.

Fayemi’s Stance

Like Bewaji, Fayemi commits himself to demonstrating that the Yoruba traditionally conceive God as neither all-powerful nor wholly good and, consequently, do not regard the reality of evil in the world philosophically problematic. The problem of evil arises when one asserts the existence of a God who is both all-powerful and “wholly good” (see, for instance, MACKIE 1955, 200). Fayemi, however, struggles to provide information that further reinforces the emerging view in the fledgling field of African philosophy of religion that traditional African worldviews favour the conception of God as a limited deity. Like Bewaji before him, Fayemi is unable to achieve logical consistency as he uses language and terms that more accurately describe the traditional theist’s God than the limited God he believes to control the Yoruba universe.

Against the claim that God is all-powerful, Fayemi invokes the concept of co-creatorship and against the claim that God is wholly good, he distinguishes between different types of evil and asserts God’s complicity in the fact of physical and spiritual evil. A spiritual evil is harm inflicted on humans by non-material entities such as God and lesser deities for reasons beyond the full comprehension of human beings. A physical evil, for instance, a devastating earthquake, occurs because of the way the universe is structured. God and the lesser deities can be blamed for the fact of physical evil because they co-created the world. For Fayemi, humans are responsible for moral evil which is a consequence of the misuse of human free will. Responding to Oduwole who is of the view that the problem of evil and omnipotence arises naturally in Yoruba traditional thought, Fayemi (2012, 7) writes that “*Olodumare*...is seen by the Yoruba as the ultimate cause of all visible processes in the world. By being the creator, it does not mean that He unilaterally creates everything without the support of and consultation with other divinities.”

As a creator, God is a powerful being indeed, but as a co-creator he is limited. This is the point Fayemi seeks to make. This point follows from the explicit acceptance of the limitation thesis. But his intention is undermined by the suggestion that God, as the ultimate cause of all material effects (for example, phenomena in the physical world) and non-material effects (for example, the lesser deities), is the ultimate creator and the controller of the

ubiquitous lesser deities that are closer to humans. He admits this point directly when he analyses the meaning of an alternate Yoruba name for God, that is, Olorun. The name Olorun means “the Supreme Deity, the sustainer and upholder of the universe” (2012, 7). Here is evidence of a transcendent moment in Yoruba traditional thought that clashes with the non-transcendent moment. By the term transcendent moment, I mean the plausible traditional, theistic interpretation of traditional Yoruba and, by extension, African thought about the nature of God. The non-transcendent moment corresponds to the interpretation of the nature of God within the metaphysical framework of limitedness. The latter interpretation has gained ground recently among African philosophers. Nevertheless, an adequate conceptual framework that allows for logical consistency in the determination of the relation between God and the world is largely lacking in recent scholarship as the contradictory claims of Fayemi suggests.

If God is the ultimate cause of all material processes as Fayemi interprets traditional Yoruba thought, then the lesser deities do not limit God’s power but are merely instruments of the actualisation of his plans. An ultimate being like God in Yoruba thought cannot be limited by beings that he can effectively control. Such a being is the ultimate creator and must be deemed so powerful that the category of omnipotence may well apply to him since this being has no rival in a universe that he controls. Therefore, Fayemi’s recourse to the idea of co-creatorship does not succeed in enhancing logical consistency within the framework of God’s limitedness, which he adopts as the best framework for thinking about God’s nature in Yoruba thought. He unwittingly commits himself to the ultimacy thesis, which attributes supremacy in power and knowledge to God and upholds the framework of transcendence.

Critical Perspective

One way Fayemi and Bewaji can overcome the contradiction inherent in the idea of co-creatorship is to abandon the concept altogether and assert that God does not play any creative role in the emergence of the phenomena of the world. Indeed, Fayemi considers this possibility when he fleetingly entertains the agnostic stances of Sophie Oluwole and E.A. Odumuyiwa who assert that in Yoruba thought the creation of the world is credited to the lesser deities rather than God (see FAYEMI 2012, 11.). Still, the stances of Oluwole and Odumuyiwa do not lead to the notion of an idle God since these two scholars fail to eliminate the idea of God’s overlordship in respect of the ubiquitous lesser deities. As Fayemi and Bewaji insist, these lesser deities only exercise powers allocated to them by God whose own powers are not limited by the powers of any other being and is thus worthily called the Supreme Being. The preponderance of evidence from oral literature, especially the Ifa corpus, and analysis of linguistic concepts reveal the rootedness of the idea of the Yoruba God as either a creator, co-creator, or controller (see IGBOIN 2014).

If it is asserted that a non-omnipotent God is powerful enough to either create the world or co-create the world with help from lesser deities under his sovereignty, then this God is at once both omnipotent and not

omnipotent. He is omnipotent because he has sovereign powers over all other beings. He is not omnipotent because he needs help from lesser deities to create a world. Bewaji and Fayemi will reject this contradictory proposition, yet it summarises their thinking on the nature of God as I have earlier shown. Fidelity to the concepts of creatorship, co-creatorship, and controllership commits these two scholars to explicitly assert that God is both all-powerful in the sense of a transcendent being and merely powerful in the sense of a limited being. Bewaji and Fayemi inconsistently suggest that God is both a creator and a co-creator, Fayemi (2012, 7) asserts that God is “the ultimate cause of all visible processes in the world. By being the creator, it does not mean that He unilaterally creates everything without the support of and consultation with other divinities.” Bewaji (1998, 11) asserts that God is “the most Powerful Being, the Creator, the Wise and Impartial Judge who exercises inexorable control over all in the universe.” Both scholars also suggest that God has the power to control the lesser deities in varying degrees. Indeed, Fayemi (2012, 7) notes that God acts like an executive president who “commissions these deities to administer the universe along with him.” An executive president (God) obviously has controlling powers over his or her ministers (the lesser deities) and may fire them whenever he considers them wanting. Such powers do not belong to a limited deity.

An examination of the notions of creator, co-creator, and controller in the African context is required to reinforce my thesis that the legitimacy of both the transcendent and non-transcendent moments in African traditional thought is responsible for the inconsistency of Bewaji and Fayemi’s defence of the non-transcendent moment as the legitimate interpretation of God in Yoruba and, by extension, African traditional thought. A creator, according to Bewaji, need not be all-powerful, though such a being may be so powerful indeed as to be the cause of everything in the universe. Yet, when such great powers are attributed to a spiritual entity the superlative quality of supremacy is transferred to it, such that the being can be rightfully described as all-powerful. There is support for this understanding of God’s nature in the literature produced by early scholars and writers like Mbiti, Idowu, Achebe, and Awolalu as well as more recent scholars like Gyekye (1995), Njoku (2002), Boaheng (2012), Igboin (2014), and Metz and Molefe (2021).

The idea of a sufficiently powerful but not all-powerful creator would be the undisputed conception of God in traditional Yoruba and African thought if ATR can be unreservedly described as polytheistic. But ATR exhibits characteristics that correspond to those exhibited by typically monotheistic religions, notwithstanding the acknowledgement of the existence of sundry lesser deities besides God. Mbiti (1969, 1970) has noted that not only do Africans use singular names (for example, God instead of Gods) in reference to God but they also clearly regard God as the highest power in the universe. God is considered as so great that he cannot be directly approached but must be accessed through lesser deities under his control. Thus, instead of interpreting the remoteness of God as an indication that Africans lose sight of

the prime position of God in the hierarchy of beings in the universe, the phenomenon of God's hiddenness is best seen as evidence of the essential monotheism of Africans. The image of God behind the veil of remoteness is one of an all-powerful being rather than a limited being.

An analysis of the Idoma name for God, that is, *Owoicho*, buttresses the transcendence view of God. In Idoma traditional thought, *owo* is the fundamental principle of the universe, with everything in the universe having an *owo* as its constituting principle (see AGADA 2020). A human being has its own *owo* in the sense of guardian spirit. *Owo* as a concept can also be expanded to mean the principle of consciousness. *Owo* is a measure of universal activity, rationality, and animation. If *owo* is spirit, or mind, then God is *Owoicho*, the spirit of the sky. Here, the reference is not to the visible sky where clouds constantly float but, rather, the immense physical and metaphysical spaces beyond the earth. These spaces cover the entire known and unknown reaches of the universe. The distance between the earth and the sky is one that cannot be surmounted or bridged by human beings through natural means.

While indeed humans have produced spacecraft that can reach nearby planets and while it can be argued that science will some day be so advanced that it will be possible for humans to realise inter-galactic travels, it is unlikely that human ingenuity will advance enough to enable humans explore the unlimited world beyond the earth in the sense of actualising the capacity to explore the nooks and crannies of the universe. By describing God as a god of the sky, the Idoma people attribute to the deity unlimited powers of exploring the vast universe physically and metaphysically. The metaphysical dimension is the *idango*, or mystery, dimension of the origin and destiny of powers so great that they enable the mastery of the universe. Thus, the name *Owoicho* underlines God's transcendence, majesty, and, therefore, unlimited power and knowledge, from the human standpoint. From this standpoint, the magnitude of power and knowledge that can be described as unlimited must satisfy the conditions of omnipotence and omniscience. Consequently, God's remoteness, and the ubiquity of the lesser deities, does not indicate limitation. God is so far from humans because of his unimaginable majesty.

Responding to the question of God's seeming hiddenness, Achebe makes a simple clarification in his [Things Fall Apart], in a scene where the curious white Christian missionary Mr Brown engages the local sage Akunna in a theological debate. Mr Brown attempts to dismiss Akunna's *ikenga* (a wooden image symbolising mystical powers in Igbo traditional religious practice) as a mere piece of wood, thus implying that Akunna is a polytheistic or even animist idol worshipper. Akunna responds that the *ikenga*, which links the owner with cosmic powers, is indeed carved from wood; but the tree that supplies the wood is made by Chukwu (God), who also creates the lesser deities that appear more visible than God and are, in fact, Chukwu's messengers and representatives (ACHEBE 1994, 179). Akunna compares God to the master of a household and the lesser deities to the master's servants.

Someone wishing to see the master first respectfully approaches the servants. When the servants can no longer be of help, one can then go directly to the master, who must always be feared because of the great powers at his disposal. Akunna asserts that the Igbo conceive the creator-God as so great as to deserve the name Chukwuka, Chukwu is supreme. Mr Brown reminds Akunna that the Christian God, unlike Chukwu, is a loving deity that should not be feared when one is doing his will. Once again, Akunna appeals to Chukwu's unrivalled powers when he notes that: "But we must fear Him when we are not doing His will. And who is to tell His will? It is too great to be known" (ACHEBE 1994, 181). Thus, the multiplicity of lesser deities in the world and their ubiquity do not diminish the oneness and majesty of God.

It may be argued that the God of ATR is far too idle or invisible to warrant the pre-eminent status allocated to him by African scholars eager to establish equivalence between the Christian God and the God of ATR as suggested by Horton (1984). If this God is an idle deity, such that his removal from the pantheon of gods does not affect the cosmic balance of forces that sees lesser deities functioning as usual and interfacing with humans, then ATR is properly a polytheism. There is no one supreme God as Abimbola (2006) has argued and certainly no creator-God as Oluwole and Odumuyiwa have suggested in respect of Yoruba traditional belief system (see FAYEMI 2012). Yet, preponderant evidence shows that what Idowu calls the ultimacy theory is deeply rooted in the metaphysical systems or worldviews of the overwhelming majority of African ethnic groups. The ultimacy theory affirms that God is the ultimate source of the powers of the lesser deities (IDOWU 1973, 135). Since this is the case, the removal of the ultimate factor, that is, God, from the cosmic picture of the universe will mean that there is no operational foundation for the lesser deities. Either these deities are self-caused, with each one constituting a supreme (all-powerful) being, as an *ens causa sui* that cannot be limited by any other being, or there are no spiritual entities but only finite physical entities. The first conclusion that follows from the rejection of the ultimacy theory leads to an absurd scenario where there are many supreme beings in a single universe. This is impossible. The second conclusion is conceivable as it merely replaces monotheism with atheism, the rejection of the existence of God and the lesser deities. The possible rationale for this atheism will be that reality is fundamentally physical and the existence of God and the gods cannot be determined through measurable scientific processes.

One obvious philosophical response to this atheism is to remind the atheist that his or her belief is no less probabilistic than the belief of the theist and polytheist since scientific theories do not exhaust the whole gamut of reality, at least considering the current level of sophistication of scientific knowledge of the world. A general argument in favour of monotheism or against atheism is, however, not the goal of this paper.

Here, I seek to show how rejecting the ultimacy theory of ATR rationally leads to the imagination of a G(g)od-less universe, which science cannot prove to be, indeed, G(g)od-less beyond suggestions of scientific

platitudes. Pro-atheism stances may be rare in the ATR literature, but they are not completely non-existent. As a matter of fact, the writer and ATR scholar p'Bitek (1971a, 1971b) has suggested that the Luo people of East Africa have no conception of an omnipotent creator, or a single supreme being. He argues, like most recent decolonisation scholars of ATR and African philosophy, that the idea that the Luo have a distinct conception of a supreme being is a colonial imposition of Christian missionaries bent on smoothing the path of evangelisation by equating African notions of divinity with Christian ideas of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God. For p'Bitek, traditional Luo society can be described as not markedly religious but regulated by belief in the existence of independent cosmic forces or powers, the *jogi*, that directly influence the lives of human beings. As interesting as p'Bitek's view is, it is undoubtedly an outlier in the ATR literature, as the literature reveals widespread belief in the reality of a divine being that is either the direct creator of the world or co-creator with support from lesser deities that the divine being controls. Obviously, it cannot be asserted categorically that there is only one conception of God in ATR and traditional African thought and that this conception is one that presents God as a limited deity.

While African philosophers like Bewaji and Wiredu who are committed to the limitation framework interpret Yoruba and Akan traditional worldviews as supporting the idea of a limited God, Idowu and Gyekye independently interpret the same Yoruba and Akan worldviews theistically. Wiredu (1998) asserts that the Akan conceive God as merely a cosmic architect or builder who constructs the world from matter that has always existed. The implication here is that the concept of a creator is not necessarily accompanied by the idea of supremeness or omnipotence. The pre-existing matter which God did not cause can have an essence that allows for circumstances that render the creator impotent in some ways, for instance, in the way of stopping the evil in the world supposedly created or designed by God. Such a limited God may be good and just but still unable to eliminate evil in the world (see WIREDU 2010, 195). Analysing linguistic and cultural phenomena of the Akan, again just as Wiredu did, Gyekye identifies the transcendent moment of Akan religious thought and worldviews as an accurate interpretation of the Akan conception of God. Based on his analysis of names used to describe God and the belief system of the Akan, he concludes that the Akan God is infinite, unlimited, immaterial, and eternal (see GYEKYE 1995; AGADA 2017).

Thus, contrary to the views of Bewaji and Fayemi, analysis of the notions of creatorship, co-creatorship, and controllership plausibly leads one to accept the existence of a transcendent God rather than the categorical claim that God exists but only as a limited deity. Whether ATR is understood as essentially monotheistic in the traditional sense or whether one follows Idowu (1973, 135) in calling ATR a diffused monotheism, what is not in doubt is the rootedness of the ultimacy theory. A diffused monotheism, as conceived by

Idowu, underlines the ubiquity and importance of lesser deities within a cosmic system controlled and effectuated by a supreme being, or God.

Nevertheless, Abimbola's interesting perspective on co-creatorship deserves some attention as he seeks to show how the concept leads one to question the assumed monotheism of Yoruba religion and the idea of an omnipotent Yoruba God. He asserts that the Ifa corpus does not recognise a single creator-God but rather four powerful deities occupying the same primordial space and more or less vying for supremacy (ABIMBOLA 2006). The deities are Olodumare (traditionally regarded as the supreme being), Esu, Ifa, and Obatala. Olodumare did not create Esu, Ifa, and Obatala. The three deities are co-equal with Olodumare, with whom they are also co-creators. Each deity has its sphere of supremacy. While, for instance, Olodumare is supreme in the sphere of governance and "political administration of the cosmos," Ifa is supreme in matters of "knowledge and wisdom" and Obatala is supreme in areas of "creation and corporeality" (2006, 72). Abimbola uses the term corporeality in the sense of materiality.

Still, Igboin (2014, 204), in his critique of Abimbola, has noted that while deities like Obatala are allocated important roles in the creation of finite beings like humans in Yoruba religious thought, it is Olodumare that has the unique power to animate, or breathe life into, beings moulded by Obatala, for instance. The significance of life-giving, Igboin notes, indicates the pre-eminence of Olodumare. Against Bewaji, he notes that a God so powerful as to be able to do both good and evil unhindered must be all-powerful indeed. He suggests that one may compare the lesser deities to the angels at the beck and call of the Christian God rather than regard them as rivals of Olodumare. He concludes insightfully that the promoters of a limited God as the authentic interpretation of God in traditional Yoruba thought have failed to "present a uniform account of Olodumare, therefore, it is difficult to assert that their refutation of Idowu's thesis is tenable" (2014, 207).

I submit that the claimed refutation of Idowu's thesis is untenable because there is a clear transcendent moment and a distinct non-transcendent moment in Yoruba religion and thought and, by extension, ATR and African traditional thought. The rootedness of the transcendent and non-transcendent perspectives on the nature of God in African religious thought commits the African philosopher of religion to recognize two equally legitimate theses, namely, 1. There exists a Supreme Being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. 2. Only a limited deity exists and this deity is neither wholly good nor able to end the suffering in the world. Failure to recognise the antinomy of God's existence in ATR as is the case with Bewaji and Fayemi, will lead to the formulation of inconsistent metaphysical frameworks of God's existence and the reality of evil. Bewaji and Fayemi reach the conclusion that in Yoruba traditional thought Olodumare, or God, is both omnipotent and not omnipotent in one and the same sense. Acknowledging the legitimacy of the two theses will enable African philosophers to consistently advance debates in the still fledgling field of African philosophy of religion within the frameworks of

limitedness and transcendence. The transcendental perspective will admit the reality of an omnipotent God and pursue the resolution of the logical and evidential problem of evil in a uniquely African fashion that makes a contribution to issues in global philosophy of religion. On the other hand, philosophers committed to the limitation perspective will want to demonstrate how a limited God interacts with a world that shows clear evidence of moral and physical evil. Non-theists who favour atheism will also make their voices heard and demonstrate how atheism follows from the idea of a hidden God.

It may be objected that I have not read Bewaji and Fayemi charitably since what they set out to do is to simply present cultural facts with a religious hue. This possible objection trivialises the works of the two scholars by situating them in the field of anthropological studies instead of the field of critical philosophical enquiry. As philosophers engaged in the presentation, systematisation, and interrogation of cultural facts, Bewaji and Fayemi are obliged to identify the antinomy of God's existence and, accordingly, navigate the logical trap set by the antinomy.

One may object that if there is indeed an antinomy, then it must be shown that one thesis is right and the other wrong, and this task has not been accomplished. Now, it is tempting to assume that the very fact of the antinomy indicates that one thesis is correct and the other wrong. If God exists, it is either he is a transcendent being or a limited deity. This proposition that captures the antinomy seems to demand justification. However, the task here is not demonstrating the existence or non-existence of God. I am concerned with how Africans broadly conceive God, and I have argued all along that cultural and linguistic phenomena clearly reveal more than one way of conceiving God.

Consequently, asking questions about which perspective is correct will take one nowhere. It is possible that the proponents of traditional theism like Mbiti, Idowu, and Gyekye are positively disposed to the transcendental conception of God due primarily to the influence of Christianity (see, for instance, P'BITEK 1971; KATO 1975). It is also possible that the decolonisation scholars overstate matters when they assert that Africans conceive God as a limited deity. What is not in doubt is the cultural rootedness of the perspectives favoured by both camps.

It is not unusual for dual, and even pluralistic, perspectives on God to coexist in the worldviews of diverse ethnic and racial groups. One can find evidence of pluralism even in the Judeo-Christian tradition which is usually regarded as espousing traditional theism. In the Old Testament there are passages that clearly undermine the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God. Exodus 32:14 states that: "And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people" (King James Version). The New King James Version translates the word evil as harm. Harm causes suffering and a harmful thing is an evil from the human standpoint. If for the sake of argument, one says that the so-called evil is the punishment a just (therefore still benevolent) God hands down to humans with regret, his omnipotence is

called into question since, as a creator, it was within his vast powers to have created morally perfect beings. In Genesis 6:6 one reads that: “And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart” (King James Version). God’s regret reveals not only incapacity to have created morally perfect humans but also incapacity to have known the future from the beginning.

The fact that there is an antinomy in traditional African religious thought should not worry African philosophers. The task before African philosophers is abstracting from cultural facts and sustaining logical consistency as they universalise African cultural particulars through critical thinking.

Conclusion

In this essay, I examined the claim by Bewaji and Fayemi that there is no transcendent moment in the Yoruba-African understanding of God. This claim is supposedly justified by Yoruba linguistic and cultural phenomena such as myths and the Ifa corpus. I demonstrated that dogmatic commitment to the claim that Yoruba belief structure conceives God as a limited deity leads to the kind of inconsistency and contradiction inherent in the thought of Bewaji and Fayemi, where the framework of limitedness is proposed and God is described simultaneously in terms of omnipotence and limitation. I showed that there is clear evidence in the literature on ATR of two legitimate conceptions of God, one supporting the thesis of a limited God and the other endorsing the thesis of the existence of a transcendent God. I submitted that the recognition of the legitimacy of these two distinct theses will enable African philosophers of religion to avoid the kind of logical inconsistency that mars Bewaji and Fayemi’s well-received essays which I critiqued in this paper.

The field of African philosophy is still very much in its fledgling stage. Taking note of the plausibility of the two theses highlighted in this essay will go a long way in advancing the frontier of debates in the field. Philosophers committed to the framework of transcendence will have to reckon with resolving the problem of evil, while philosophers committed to the framework of limitedness will tackle questions related to the evaluation of the concepts of power and powerfulness and establish how powerful a limited God conceived as a creator or co-creator can be in relation to the universe.

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