

Transcendence in African traditional religions

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Introduction

'Transcendence' is derived from the Latin word *transcendere*, which means to ascend on or elevate oneself above (Mondin 1991:196).

The concept of transcendence is attained by experience and in such a sphere denotes a spatial relation: the relation of surpassing, unboundedness, passing beyond, displacement (in the sense of 'being above', 'being beyond, outside of', etc.). So we have the expressions: 'to transcend one's own confines', 'to transcend every limit', 'transcend the clouds', etc.

Consequently, from material things, the concept of transcendence was transferred into the realm of a spiritual and abstract concept. This concept was able to say that the substance transcends the accidents, the world of the spirit transcends that of matter, God transcends the world, the soul transcends the body, etc. In recent times in Philosophy the term 'transcendence' has acquired a technical meaning and indicates the divine reality: the Transcendence is God. (Mondin 1991:196 & 197)

Today, the term 'transcendence' is more frequently used to refer not only to God but also to man. When it is used in connection with man, the term 'self-transcendence' is usually used. This simply denotes a property of human beings whereby they constantly go beyond themselves in all that they think, will and realise. This is the result of people's observation that

... [t]here is in human action a constant tension to go beyond all the already-acquired results: there is a push to go beyond, to go further; there is a will to reach the most advanced levels. Tending to the realization of a determined man-project, man always finds himself unfulfilled; for this reason, he can never

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be satisfied on the throne of conquered successes, and he feels himself unfulfilled, somewhat constrained to retake the work of his own perfection almost from the beginning. (Mondin 1991:196)

Transcendence with reference to human beings can be seen as either horizontal or vertical. The latter refers to pushing higher beyond the limits of space and time, towards the infinite; while the former refers to going forward towards the future but still remaining within space and time (Mondin 1991:197). The one that is horizontal is sometimes referred to as historical self-transcendence, while the vertical one is sometimes called metaphysical self-transcendence.

This paper looks at transcendence from the viewpoint of African Traditional Religions (ATR). Firstly, the concept is discussed as it applies to human beings who have a tendency to continually surpass themselves in all that they are, all that they wish and all that they have. Secondly, it is discussed as it applies to what Africans consider is the object of their worship, in other words it is considered as relating to God's relationship with the created world.

Transcendence as applied to human beings

In order to understand and appreciate the concept of transcendence as it is applied to human beings in the context of ATR, the traditional African world view should be understood.

The claim that Africans have a common world view has always been a bone of contention among scholars. For this reason, some scholars would rather not speak of one African world view but of many African world views. What these scholars fail to realise is the fact that each group of people in a given region who have more or less the same environment, social influences and experiences, mode of life and so on tend to develop or acquire a distinctive character and personality of their own, which distinguishes the group from people in other parts of the world who have different experiences and environments. Africa's enormous variety of world views has a common view of reality (that is, a world view in its most ultimate sense). Into this core view of reality (which can be found in many places but is ubiquitous in Africa) experience has written a great variety of detail. When he acknowledges the existence of such a world view of Africans, Kenneth Kaunda (1966:28 & 29) says:

Possibly 'psychology' is not the appropriate word, but I do believe that there is a distinctively African way of looking at

things, of problem-solving and indeed of thinking – we have our own logic-system which makes sense to us however confusing it might be to the Westerners.

Africans have a monistic view of reality. For them, what is out there is a closed system of cause and effect. The world, as they perceive it, is real and worth belonging to. This is in sharp contrast with what happens in what has been termed withdrawal religions and secular world affirming religions. According to Crumpsty (1991:115–132), the former (withdrawal religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism) are identified by their adherents' withdrawal (physical and affective) from the immediate world of experience (because they do not consider it real and worth belonging to) while the latter (the secular world-affirming religions such as Judaism and Christianity) are identified by their adherents' strong affirmation of the reality of the immediate world of experience while at the same time denying its ultimateness.

For Africans, what is out there is a single integrated totality of cause and effect in which different components hang harmoniously together like threads of a spider's web and all beings have a bond (an intimate ontological relationship). "Africans do not make the same strict division as Westerners between sacred and secular. Life is more unified, more integrated" (Du Toit 2009:109). For Africans, there is interaction between being and being in the universe. When such interaction takes place, one being might reinforce or weaken the other, depending on the strength of the energy or what some authors have called the vital force or dynamism that each has (Turaki 2006:23 & 24). "For Africans the aim of life is to experience and enhance life force and become part of it. Anything that diminishes this force is evil and anything that increases it is good" (Du Toit 2009:109).

Due to the influence of this kind of world view, traditional Africa excludes chance in reality; hence, everything that happens is understood to have a specific cause in the same system. This is what Tempels (1969:60) means when he says the following about the African world view:

Nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. The world of forces is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network.

In terms of this world view, each specific action of each of the beings (animate or inanimate) in the system is believed (by those who know how, that is traditional medical practitioners such as diviners) to be a revelation of some kind if it is interpreted properly. This is a principle upon which many African divining systems are based. It is believed that from the way that a

certain object, animal or plant behaves, one can know what will happen or has happened. This interconnectedness of beings is also responsible for the existence of the so-called superstitions that are embraced by many in traditional Africa. This kind of world view does, to some extent, discourage self-transcendence because it promotes both conformity and uniformity. Cumpsty (1991:120) says that in this kind of a world view

[t]he ideal person, in relation to nature, is relatively passive fitting himself or herself into the given rhythms. They may build storehouses to bridge the years of dearth and plenty but they do not radically take hold of the world around and seek to shape it, for it is divine, or at least permeated by the divine spirit or spirits, or by some all-pervasive vital force.

In this type of religion...the ideal person is the one who contributes to the maintenance and, where necessary, the restoration of harmony with others (both living and departed) and with nature itself. Social coercion, perhaps in the extreme an accusation of witchcraft, is brought to bear on those who threaten the harmony.

Because the system is a closed one, neither chance nor new beginnings are possible. There is an explanation for all that happens and every action must have its effect.

When something happens that is perceived as threatening the harmony, the question is not 'what' but 'who' because all other corporeal beings in the system are understood to simply follow nature and can therefore never disturb the system on their own accord. Only beings that are endowed with self-transcendence are believed to be capable of disturbing the ontological harmony. Thus the causes of distasteful happenings are often, if not always, associated with spirits or human beings in traditional Africa. In this way, when a cow gets knocked down on the road by a car, the question that is asked is not how the incident happened but: Who caused the car and the cow to occupy the same space at the same time? The car might have a known mechanical problem, but this is not considered a factor. To answer the question, a diviner is usually consulted in order to identify the culprit who will most likely ultimately be branded a witch. Where a cause is identified as spiritual, appropriate rituals are recommended and performed in order to restore and maintain the ontological harmony and to bring about reconciliation (Du Toit 2009:112).

As a result of this world view, even morality in Africa is aimed at maintaining a harmonious relationship in the ontological harmony. Thus African morality has supernatural, social and personal dimensions. This can be explained in the following way: if one member causes a disturbance (through acts that result from horizontal self-transcendence) in the system, the whole community suffers; if one member makes reparation (through acts that result from vertical self-transcendence), the whole community benefits. The gravity of an offence is thus judged by how much disturbance it causes to the ontological harmony. What this means, in essence, is that while the act of horizontally self-transcending is generally discouraged because of its potential to disturb the system, engaging in the act of vertically self-transcending is something that is not frowned at because (through it) reparation and reconciliation can be brought about through the performance of rituals.

Transcendence as applied to God

God's transcendence (as opposed to his immanence) is very prominent in ATR. However, it is important to note that contrary to a *deus remotus* image, which generally portrays the African God, this God is at the same time immanent because of reasons that will become clear later in this paper.

In order to understand and appreciate the transcendence of God from an African perspective, one has to understand what are considered fundamental beliefs in ATR. The root of ATR is belief in the existence of the mystical and mysterious power or energy (popularly known as *mysterium tremendum*, *mana*, the life force, the vital force, the life essence or dynamism). This is an impersonal power that is believed to be present in everything that exists (animate or inanimate, and corporeal or spiritual). Turaki (2006:24) says the following:

The potency, efficacy and durability of this power vary from object to object and from place to place. Some objects are inherently imputed more power than others, that is, they are assumed to be more naturally endowed with power than others are.

Medicine men and women, diviners and seers use the impersonal power associated with natural objects, plants and animals for medicine, magic, charms and amulets. Some believe that the mysterious powers embedded in things or objects can be extracted for specific uses. Mysterious powers can also be transmitted through certain objects or by purely spiritual

means. They can be sent to specific destinations to accomplish good or evil. They can also be contagious by contact with objects carrying or mediating such powers.

The impersonal powers can be used for both good and evil. The existence of wicked human beings and wicked spirit beings, who also have access to the mysterious powers, makes life full of uncertainties – rife with unpredictable wickedness and evil and dangerous to human beings. Thus traditional Africans who believe in the impersonal powers feel that they are at the mercy of benevolent or wicked users of these powers.

It is believed that this power can be tapped from one source to another in order to be used for either benevolent or malevolent purposes. The wicked users tap it to harm other people or manipulate other beings for evil purposes, while the good users tap it to screen or protect themselves against the evil users who use it to harm others. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find people wearing or hanging all sorts of objects that are believed to contain this power around their wrists, ankles, waists, necks or arms in traditional African communities. For the same reason, people engage in ritual murders in search of a being with more potency, efficacy and durability. It is believed that the potency, efficacy and durability of this power vary from object to object, from place to place and from person to person.

The same power is believed to create a special aura around anyone who has acquired it. Depending on the source from which the power has been tapped, the aura around a person can be either negative or positive. People who possess a positive one are generally dignified, respectable and honourable members of their communities. They are often approached for guidance and counselling whenever the need arises. People who have a negative aura are generally inapproachable members of their communities because they are feared and associated with witchcraft.

Apart from the fundamental belief above, there is a belief in spirit beings (Mbiti 1983:213; Idowu 1976: 173). Traditional African communities believe that the world is densely populated with spirit beings which (like the impersonal power described above) inhabit certain trees, mountains, rocks, rivers, lakes, forests, animals, human beings and many other objects; however, unlike the impersonal power, these are understood to be intelligent, purposive and personal beings. The performance of certain propitiatory acts when crossing certain rivers, entering some places or climbing mountains in some places in Africa has to do with this fundamental African belief in the existence of spirit beings. Turaki (2006:25 & 26) observes the following:

Spirits are ranked hierarchically in accordance with their power and the role they play in the ontological order in the spirit world...Humans stand between this host of spirits and the world of nature.

Spirit beings are usually categorized as either the spirits of the dead elders (the ancestors, who are close to humans and serve as their custodians) or non-human spirit beings ...

Spirit beings can be malicious and capricious, so one must be wise and tactful in one's dealings with them to avoid angering, provoking or injuring them ... Consequently if one wishes to be successful, or merely to enjoy well-being, it is important to consult those human specialists with experience of and access to mystical powers. These specialists include medicine men, rainmakers, mediums, diviners, sorcerers, magicians, witches and all others who have the ability to manipulate spirit beings so that they serve humans, or vice versa.

In fact, the so called *juju* or *thokolosi* is nothing more than a tamed spirit being that is manipulated by some of the specialists referred to above to make it subservient to man. Means of ensuring protection in a world so permeated by spirit beings include, among other things, performance of rites and rituals, reverence for ancestors, adherence to certain taboos, and certain beliefs and customs. Excessive performance of these activities or strict adherence to some of the practices in traditional African communities is therefore linked to the African belief in the existence of spirit beings. Only rituals or rites that are performed correctly, observing all protocol, are believed to please the spirit beings. Rituals that are performed incorrectly displease the spirit beings who, in their anger, can turn the life of the culprit into a living hell in many ways (including death as the ultimate penalty that has to be paid).

Care is therefore always taken that rites and rituals are performed correctly, following the correct order of seniority. When performing rituals, juniors are expected to follow after their seniors as a matter of principle. For example, junior members of the community or family cannot jump in before their seniors or leaders to present something to their ancestors. Despite their good intentions, such behaviour will not go unpunished. This explains why traditional Africans are generally very strict in observing the proper performance of important rites of passage such as death and initiation. It is not uncommon to see people pull out of what is supposed to be a joint family or tribal ritual performance because one member failed to observe all that should be observed when performing the rite or ritual. This is particularly

true in the case of rituals that are connected with death and initiation. People's belief in the spirit beings' ability to punish those who fail to perform rituals as prescribed by the elders is what leads to them pulling out. Acknowledging the existence of such spirit beings in Africa, Kenneth Kaunda (1966:22 & 23) says the following:

I believe that the universe is basically good and that throughout it great forces are at work striving to bring about a greater unity of all living things. It is through cooperation with these forces that man will achieve all of which he is capable. Those people who are dependent upon and live in closest relationship with nature are most conscious of the operation of these forces: The pulse of their lives beats in harmony with the pulse of the universe.

Another important fundamental belief is that of the existence of divinities. Some African communities are known to believe in a pantheon of divinities. This is especially true of West African communities in Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and the Republic of Benin (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979:73–114).

The divinities in each area form the pantheon of that area. The pantheon in this case is the total number of the divinities as a group or as one body. Each pantheon is headed by an arch-divinity. Usually, the arch-divinity is the most important spiritual being after the Supreme Deity. He may even share the attributes of Deity. That is why he is often confused with the Supreme Being ...

The divinities being real to the people are believed to exist with definite functions or duties. They are described as ministers or functionaries with portfolios in the theocratic government of the world. God has delegated authority or functions to them, each of them in his own territory ...

The divinities are also intermediaries between God and man, and they are ready at hand. God is frequently worshipped through them and they receive day-to-day sacrifices. They have temples, shrines, priests, priestesses and devotees.

We can thus describe them as semi-autonomous agents, each being the executive head of his department in the Deity's

monarchical government. People, therefore, regard them as the convenient and appropriate channels through which they can reverence the exaltedness of the Almighty (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979:73–76).

Because they have temples, shrines, priests, priestesses, devotees and receive daily sacrifices, some of these divinities have become so popular and prominent that they actually overshadow the Supreme Being. As agents that are responsible for various aspects of nature, people tend to rely heavily on them for solutions to natural problems such as drought, infertility and health-related disasters. They are believed to be able to deal with people's problems.

There is also the Supreme Being (what people consider is the ultimate object of their prayers or worship). The relationship between the Supreme Being and other beings has to be understood in the light of what is considered a common sociological pattern in African societies.

In these societies, the King or the paramount chief is at the apex of the social pyramid. Below him are the other chiefs, the clan and village heads, the ward heads, and the common people. This sociological pattern has context in the theological thinking of the people. Thus in their concept of the super-sensible world, the people conceive the Supreme Being as being at the apex of a theocratic world, into which he has appointed the divinities as the executive and administrative heads of the earthly theocratic society ... (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979:76).

What the above means in relation to God's transcendence

A closer look at what has been said above about the fundamental beliefs in ATR reveals that the kind of God that is worshipped in traditional African communities is a transcendent one. In other words: traditional African communities do not actively worship or direct their prayers directly to this Supreme Being, but instead direct them to the ancestors and divinities. These are the direct objects of their regular sacrifices, offerings and prayers. The reason for doing this lies in what is believed to be the varying degree of the presence of the mystical power (spoken of earlier) in different beings or objects. The higher the being is in the hierarchy of beings, the stronger is the mysterious power or the vital force the being is believed to have. Going too close to a being that is believed to be endowed with a massive vital force is considered fatal. One has to keep a safe distance in order not to be crushed by

the superimposing power of a higher being. Using both ancestors and divinities as mediators is one way of ensuring the worshipper's safety.

Another important reason for this state of affairs is what one can call the principle of identity. The following are believed about this principle:

- The whole and its part are identical.
- The owner and what is owned are identical.
- The representative and what is represented are identical.
- The name is identical with its owner.

For this reason, it is not uncommon in African communities to find that what stands for something else is treated as though it is that which it stands for. As a result of their belief in this principle, many Africans in traditional communities wear or carry around objects that are believed to have certain desired powers or qualities because they were taken from people, animals, plants or objects believed to possess the desired powers or qualities. For example, thieves wear little bottles full of mercury around their necks because it is believed that just as it is difficult to catch mercury drops, they too will not be caught easily by the police. Sometimes siblings who fight over a certain garment or a family item because they believe it represents their late mother or father. For them, the item does not only represent the mother or father but makes her or him present around the person who owns the item or garment. This belief is the underlying principle of what is generally known as presentational symbolism in Africa.

The above means that there is no urgent need to call upon God or the Supreme Being for traditional Africans as long as they have their ancestors or divinities around. For many Africans, God is a *deus remotus* while ancestors or divinities (in some African communities) remain generally very immanent.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has made it clear that the traditional African concept of God is a complex one that cannot be explained easily. In order to understand it, one has to take all the variables into consideration. Most scholars tend to look at one variable and emphasise it, more often than not, at the expense of a more comprehensive understanding of what the real situation is. To those who put more emphasis on spirit beings, ATR are seen as nothing more than mere animism. Those who regard divinities as central to the African belief system have reduced it to polytheism. In some parts of Africa (such as Southern Africa) the general tendency is to reduce AFR to what many have called ancestor worship or cults. The truth is explained by Turaki (2006:59):

In the traditional worldview, the Supreme Being appears to be ontologically transcendent. He occupies a hierarchical position in the pantheon of the spirit beings and may assign roles and functions to the lesser beings. He himself is inactive or does not get involved in daily communal affairs. However, this transcendence and aloofness must not be interpreted in absolute terms. He is also present in the community and in the hierarchy. Sometimes the gods, divinities, spirits and ancestors are seen as mediators acting with the sanction and knowledge of God himself although at other times they act as independent agents.

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