An overview of African Philosophy

At the heart of African cosmology (study of the universe) is the unwavering belief that **everything is in relationship and in a state of connectivity**. As a result, **African Philosophy (AP) makes the claim that the origins, the nature and the structure of the universe is in relationship with all beings (most notably humans).** It follows that within AP, community and communal bonds are at the epicentre and meaning of life, and thus, both play an integral role within African traditions, community life and the understanding of every individual’s place within the world.

A core belief within AP is that, regardless of whether in the context of the one or the many, ‘self’ is only understood when in relation to other things or other people. **Without the energy of relation, the individual does not exist. In other words, individuals only become real when they are in relationship with a community or a group. It is the community that makes the individual.**

Consequently, when seeking to ask the question ‘What is an African, and by extension human?’, AP redresses and simultaneously responds to this question through stating that, ‘The African can only be understood as being with’.

**The being with**

At the centre of one’s connection and relationship with others, is reverence and respect towards the extended family. Within AP, the extended family goes beyond grandparents and wider family members, extending fundamentally to include ancestors (dead family members)’. As a result, within many African cultures and traditions, **the living and the dead are connected through a complex spiritual network.** Death within African philosophy is not the end. **Consequently, humans can also ‘be with’ spirits (dead relatives-ancestors) also known as the living dead.** AP holds the belief that certain family members and people who hold religious/ spiritual authority within the community can communicate with the living dead.

The writer and disability activist Kym Oliver succinctly captures this through the following:

*The ancestral line that exists within me, allows me to be more expansive on the ideas of self. Even on the surface, I know that I come from people who achieved great things. Thus, I am not an individual, I am a legion -I owe it to all of us. As a result, this creates a collective ‘I’. Through understanding myself as a collective ‘I’, I walk knowing that;*

* *I am not alone*
* *I have dignity*
* *I have purpose*
* *I have the ability and capacity to achieve great things*

*It is in my blood, history and lineage. To learn [and to know this] about yourself is not a privilege, it is a birth-right.*

**Another fundamental principle of ‘being with’ also requires a dynamic with God, a supreme being, supreme beings who are thus understood as the beginning and end of all things.** Such a dynamic also holds the belief that, God is always close and accessible. Although the idea of God and gods are incredibly broad within AP, there is a shared belief that the relationship held between the African/human and the divine, is both constant and active.

Within AP, the belief of ‘being with’ supersedes ideas that the telos (purpose/goal) of all things is ‘for the sake of humans’. Whilst AP maintains that ‘being with’, also includes God, spirits (ancestors), supernatural reality, it also includes nature.

**Honouring nature**

According to most traditions within AP, an ‘African mode of being’ requires the worship of nature, as this further strengthens the unlimited relationship between the two. The African philosopher Chukwudum Barnabas Okolo expands on this tradition;

*The African does not regard the universe or nature as ‘out there’ or merely thrown into being. Nature [is to be understood as a] product of a good God.* ***Nature is not there simply and solely to be exploited, subdued [controlled], or absolutely conquered.***

*For the African, it is to be venerated (respectfully acknowledged) as the source of all his material needs.*

*[It is the] tomb of his ancestors*

*And the shrine of his gods.*

***He obtains his needed material goods, not by conquering or mastering, [but rather by] submitting to it and venerating it.*** *Injury or damage to nature is a breach of cosmic harmony and order. [Doing so will] attract [punishments] from the gods. However, when venerated, good fortune and material and spiritual blessings will occur.*

**Relationship between humans**

‘Being with’ as a relationship between other humans is one of intersubjectivity- it is one of social and physical structure. **Within AP, humans are at the centre of the universe, and as a result of this, are subject to its laws which must be constantly obeyed. When they are not, harsh pain and consequences follow.** Within AP, **the point of interaction and intercommunication, is between the visible created world and the world of God, spirit, and ancestors**. As a result of **being the centre of the created world, and the focal point of the universe, individuals enjoy intrinsic dignity, respect and worth.**

Therefore, **humans ‘being with’ other humans involves a fundamental concern and involvement with each other**, both in terms of inter-personal relationships and with other realities within the universe. Okolo argues that some of the basic human values and characteristics are

*‘Communal spirit (togetherness), hospitality, generosity, acceptance, the practice of egalitarianism and, equality of opportunity for all’.*

Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Senegalese poet and politician believed that as well as the former, ‘*sense of humour, friendship, openness, kindness and trust’* are also key*.* Senghor closed by saying that when all of this forms the basis of human interaction, interconnectivity and exchange, they allow humans to ‘be with’ one another.

**Suggested Further Reading**

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