

The Spiritual and Philosophical Foundation for African Languages

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Abstract

Spirituality is defined in cultural terms. The African's lifelong sojourn for balance and harmony within himself or herself and within society is the essence of the spiritual being. Therefore, spirituality is defined as the African's search for personal balance and harmony as well as that of society. The concept of Nommo, the power generated from the Spoken Word, is crucial in articulating the spiritual and philosophical nature of language for African people. The fulfillment of Maat is the essence of the spiritual being within the African worldview.

Keywords

Maat, Nommo, oral tradition, spirituality

In this work, spirituality is defined in cultural terms as to show the cultural connection between Africans all over the continent as they conceptualize spirituality. As is revealed, the African's lifelong sojourn for balance and harmony within himself or herself and within society is the essence of the spiritual being. Therefore, spirituality is defined as the African's search for personal balance and harmony as well as that of society. Asante writes,

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It is the quest for harmony that is the source of all literary, rhetorical, and behavioral actions; the *sudic* ideal, which emphasizes the primacy of the person, can only function if the person seeks individual and collective harmony. . . . One must understand that to become human. . . . The person is defined as human by performing actions that lead to harmony; our attitude toward this person creates the dynamism necessary to produce a harmonized personality. (Asante, 1998, p. 200)

For the African, life is predicated on the belief of the attainment of spiritual harmony. In fact, one's humanity hinges on one's pursuit and fulfillment of harmony.

The model that best embodies the African conceptualization of spirituality is the ancient African principle of Maat. Maat is the "Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) quality of order, justice, righteousness and balance," and without Maat, he further maintains, "there is no understanding, no harmony and no possible restoration of balance. . . . [We] are without power or direction" (Asante, 1990, pp. 89-95). Maat is the governing power balancing good and evil. It was the dominant idea that the ancients believed maintained human society, so much so that "when you speak of it as the organizing principle of human society, the creative spirit of phenomena, and the eternal order of the universe, you come close to understanding what the ancient Kemetic civilization understood" (Asante, 1990, p. 89).

The Nature of Maat was righteousness and rightness in the person. Justice, truth, and righteousness were used to symbolize Maat. One could not simply be righteous; it was a continuous process that human beings underwent to obtain the harmony we find in nature (Asante, 1990, pp. 83-84).

For the ancient Egyptians, Maat imposed order and direction and provided adequate meaning of their lives while serving as a major force against chaos. In other words, as we have been discussing, it was "the cosmic principle of harmony" (Asante, 1990, p. 95). Key to our understanding of Maat is the relationship between humanity and the universe. This principle guided the ancients and provided them with an understanding of their role and interdependence with the universe. Maat centered the people of Kemet. It connected them with everything within the universe. Maat provided them with an understanding of the universe. Consequently, it provided the ancients with a sense of divine order, balance, and truth. Maat encompassed the totality of all human and natural experiences and knowledge, which included the sciences (Obenga, 1995, pp. 109-110). To understand the ancient Egyptians' ethical thought, we must understand the concept of Maat. There was no aspect of this ancient society that Maat was not present. For it guided the ancients in all of their daily rituals.

For the ancient Egyptians, Maat seemed to have been the guiding ethical principle at the core of their society. In fact, even “the role of the ruler was to balance the activities of the state so that Maat would be achieved. . . . It became an ethical system which guided the activities of the king” (Monges, 1997, p. 106). In other words, if the Pharaoh wanted eternal life, he or she had to abide by the guiding ethical principles set forth by Maat. The Pharaohs of ancient Egypt were not simply kings, but also the “embodiment of the concept of Maat” (Asante, 1990, p. 90).

The concept of Maat did not confine itself to the borders of ancient Egypt. Nor did this spiritual and ethical principle die with the demise of Kemetic civilization. Maat was the leading concept at the core of Kemetic society, a society that was specifically built on the quest of “knowledge and happiness . . . the word/concept Maat, ‘truth,’ can be found everywhere in Black Africa. It is a key concept throughout the entirety of African culture” (Obenga, 1995, p. 103). Furthermore, there is a profound connection between the ancient Egyptians and other Africans. All African societies owe Kemet for their common source of intellectual and philosophical ideas. Asante illustrates this point when he writes,

These manifestations are shown, for example, in the conversations of the Dogon’s blind philosopher Ogotommeli; Zulu oral poetry, as brought to us by Masizi Kunene; Yoruba Ifa divination rights; Nsibidi texts, and in the practices and words of the Shona spirit mediums. . . . This is the position I take with respect to the dissemination of the Maatic concept throughout the African world. (Asante, 1990, p. 92)

In addition, the principles of Maat extend to Africans in the Diaspora. Africans in Brazil, Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti, and the United States all share forms of the experience, be it Samba, Sango, Candomble, Santeria, or Voodoo. Central to all of these forms of human expression is the same source of energy (Asante, 1998, p. 198).

For most African peoples, all of life is enveloped in their spirituality. African spirituality is at the core of African culture. Prince Nyabongo (1941), elaborating on the African’s spiritual being, proclaims in “African Life and Ideals” that before a person is born he or she is a Spirit. When the individual moves into the world he or she becomes a living soul. When he or she moves beyond the living realm, the individual becomes a spirit. He further explains that “the African holds his life in never extinct—it’s always there. It is there at the top of the globe of man’s existence and we human beings go around it much as the earth does on its axis” (p. 281). African people, so far as their oral history reveals, have always been deeply spiritual and connected to a

spiritual force much larger than humanity. Traditionally, Africans conceive the universe as a spiritual whole. Africans believe that all beings are connected throughout the universe. Richards (1981) notes that we exist based on our relationship to the whole. This gives meaning to our reality. We do not exist in isolation but rather as part of a matrix of relationships and interactions. "Because 'I am,' 'I' affect you. Because 'you are' you affect me." She further maintains that

in the African conception spirit is primary. "Ntu" or universal life force, is the unity that flows through all beings, imparting force and therefore reality to them. In what the European calls "religious" terms (the African needs no separate or distinctive category for this experience, since the universe is spiritual in nature), the cosmic order is sacred and our concern becomes the discovery and maintenance of that sacred order through proper relationship to the whole. (Ani, 1981, p. 219, cited in Richards, 1981)

In this scheme, life itself becomes an ongoing quest for balance and harmony, which is the very essence of African spirituality. Even African systems of education, which are based on the African oral tradition, are designed to instruct the individual on acquiring spiritual balance and harmony. Out of the oral tradition, a dual process of teaching and learning has developed that uses symbols, rituals, ceremonies, proverbs, riddles, wise sayings, memorizing, apprenticeship, storytelling, observation, practicing, singing, dramatizing, and sometimes writing. The lessons taught are enumerable, encompassing all areas of knowledge, which enables Africans to maintain their physical and spiritual life (Tedli, 2002, p. 8).

Language and Spirituality

African orature takes place within a ritual setting. A setting that is created and predicated on shared understandings and beliefs that Africans hold in common. These understandings include explanations about the universe and humanity's place in it and beliefs about humans' relationship to the Creator and with one another. Africans introduce spiritual elements into language events, hoping to reach a higher consciousness during the events. The speaker initiates this process by invoking spiritual entities at the very beginning of the event to establish the ritualistic format (Knowles-Borishade, 1991, p. 492). Furthermore, there is no separation between what is considered spiritual language events and secular ones. All such events are initiated

for maintaining or restoring balance and harmony. Moreover, the traditional African belief holds that a good character improves the art form. The power behind the speaker or orator's words is drawn from its source in proportion to his or her moral character as well as the skill he or she may have (Knowles-Borishade, 1991, pp. 490-491). In other words, the speaker must not only have a profound message, but also possess the necessary skill to captivate the audience (pp. 490-491).

Knowles-Borishade (1991) maintains that traditionally, Africans view humanity as a spiritual force, and as a spiritual force, the speaker is viewed as having the power to access "cosmic forces for a higher truth by merging her/his vibratory forces with the rhythmic vibrations of the universal cosmic energy." The African speaker-poet is "preoccupied with human welfare, and this accounts for her/his profound sense of humanism." In other words, the orator's concern is with the spiritual harmony of the audience or community abiding by the guiding principles of Maat. The Word, set forth by the speaker-poet, demonstrates that "what is morally good is what benefits a human being; it is what is decent for man—what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy to man and to his community." Furthermore, "what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune, and disgrace" (p. 494).

Finally, the "spiritual entities" act as judges, witnesses, and enablers in language events. She maintains that they include the creator God, lesser deities, angels, the Holy Spirit, ancestors, the living (dead), and the living (unborn). Furthermore, Nommo (which we discuss in greater detail in the next section) invokes these spiritual entities. She writes,

The ritualistic format is the initial stage for classical African rhetoric. It is established by the caller's opening remarks acknowledging and often giving obeisance to Spiritual Entities: "I give honor to Almighty God and the Holy spirit;" "All praise is due to Allah, the God of the universe." (Knowles-Borishade, 1991, p. 495)

She provides these examples to demonstrate the African belief of spiritual entities (p. 495).

The African Philosophical Background of Language

Let us consider how Africans view language. The ancient Egyptians or Kemites called their language, *Mdw Ntr*. The translation of *mdw* is "speech," and for the people of the Nile Valley speech was divine—a gift of the

Creator. In fact, the literal translation of Mdw Ntr is “divine speech.” Medew Nefer, however, literally means good speech and was reserved for the realm of humanity. Carruthers (1995) makes this distinction; he writes, “Only Medew Nefer was in accord with Medew Netcher. In fact, it was through the consistent practice of Medew Nefer that human beings finally attained Medew Netcher, Divine Speech” (p. 40).

It is also important to point out that the concept in this ancient language of divine speech also reflects the aesthetic and spiritual value of speech. Asante (1990) writes,

Rhetoric, the theory of authoritative utterance, and oratory, elegant utterance, are intricately related to Egyptian life. . . . The spoken Word was the essential means of cultural and spiritual transmittal of values. Even the transmittal of the dead to the spirit world was accompanied by the spoken word. (p. 81)

Speech or language was not merely a series of codes that fostered communication. It was spiritual, a human quest for what was good and divine.

Nommo, the “generative and productive power of the spoken Word” (Asante, 1998, p. 17), is an African concept of communication rooted deeply in traditional African philosophies. The power of *the Word*, or of speech in general, has always been rooted in Africans’ oral tradition. *The Word* “itself is believed to be the force of life itself” (Smitherman, 1998, p. 208).

Nommo: The Power of the Spoken Word

The Dogon of Mali believe the African concept of Nommo carries the vital “life force, which produces all life, which influences ‘things’ in the shape of the spoken word” (Jahn, 1990, p. 124). According to Ogotemmeli, a Dogon elder who through years of study acquired a vast knowledge of the Dogon spiritual belief system, as told by Marcel Graule in *Conversations with Ogotemmeli*: “The voice of man can arouse God and extend divine action” (Graule, 1970, p. 138). In other words, by human utterance or through the spoken Word, human beings can invoke a kind of spiritual power. But of course, the Word began with Amma or the Creator who created the world by uttering three successive words. According to Ogotemmeli, Graule writes,

The life-force, which is the bearer of the Word, which is the Word, leaves the mouth in the form of breath, or water vapor, which is water and is Word. . . . The Word came from the deepest and most secret part of the being. (p. 140)

He further proclaims,

Words spoken by day enter the bodies of women. Any man speaking to any woman is assisting procreation. By speaking to a woman one fertilizes her, or at least by introducing into her a celestial germ, one makes it possible for her to be impregnated in the normal way. (p. 141)

Therefore, according to the Dogon, the power of Nommo is so great, that it is necessary for sustaining life through procreation.

In *Muntu*, Jahn deeply explores this African concept of Nommo, revealing the paramount nature of the power of the Word for African peoples. He writes,

Nommo, the life force, is . . . a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything. . . . And since man has power over the word, it is he who directs the life force. Through the word he receives it, shares it with other beings, and so fulfills the meaning of life. (Jahn, 1990, p. 124)

As such, all of human creation and natural phenomena emanate from the productive power of the Word—Nommo, which is itself, a life force. For the Dogon, all magic is ultimately Word magic whether the Word is manifested in incantations, blessings or curses. In fact, “if there were no Word, all forces would be frozen, there would be no procreation, no change, no life” (Jahn, 1990, p. 133). Furthermore, “the Word,” or the power of Nommo, does not rest solely with the Creator but also with human beings. It does not “stand above and beyond the earthly world”; after all, he notes, it is humans who have mastery over the Word. Furthermore, he writes,

In the gospels the Word remains with God, and man has to testify to it and proclaim it. Nommo, on the other hand, was also, admittedly, with *Amma*, or God, in the beginning, but beyond that everything comes into being only through the Word, and as there is muntu (human beings), the word is with the muntu. (p. 132)

For the Ancient Egyptians, the power of the Word was linked to the ethical principle of Maat. The Ancient Egyptians believed that the nature of Maat was to be alive. Thus,

to live in Maat is to live the living Word, the *ankh mdw*. It becomes the only path to *ankh nehen*, that is, life eternal. . . . [Maat] is active,

dynamic, and alive in the everyday lives of humans at work, at play and at worship. (Asante, 2000, p. 113)

The Dogon's conception of the Word and its life-sustaining power is no different from the Ancient Egyptians'.

The power of the Word is different from one individual to the next. The Word power of the Creator is more powerful than that of any other being. In African philosophy, individuals have, by the power of his or her words, dominion over things, which he or she can change and make work for their purposes and command them. "But to command things with Words is to practice magic" (Jahn, 1990, p. 135). "The more powerful the speaker, the more fascinated the audience will be. And power is derived from the experience of the 'orality' and spirituality of the presentations" (Asante, 1998, p. 91).

Knowles-Borishade (1991) takes a more spiritual approach in her discussion of Nommo. She contends that morality is the prime consideration for African orature. "Nommo," she asserts, "gains in power and effectiveness in direct proportion with the moral character, strength of commitment and vision of the (individual), as well as the skill he or she exhibits." The speaker "must direct his or her creative powers toward a higher level of consciousness by activating spiritual and psychic powers" (p. 490). Knowles-Borishade also maintains that "Africans traditionally view humanity as a spiritual force and the speaker is seen as having the ability to tap cosmic forces for a higher truth by merging his or her vibratory forces with the rhythmic vibrations of the universal cosmic energy" (pp. 490-491). The Word which is "pregnant with value-meanings drawn from the African experience which, when uttered, give birth to unifying images that bind people together in an atmosphere of harmony and power" (p. 490). She further writes,

The potency of Nommo is drawn from mental and physical faculties. Once the process of mental conception formulates an idea, the attending action is the declamation, the Nommo, the Word that speaks creation into being. Although Nommo is vibrantly potent, that potency evanesces if utterance does not emerge from and apply to the African experience. Classical African rhetoric must address . . . the social, political and religious moments in the history of a society, if it is to be relevant. (Knowles-Borishade, 1991, p. 495)

Ultimately, spiritual harmony is the objective of the language-event. The attainment of harmony from the beginning of the event is the aim of all participants when the community is called together for a common cause.

In the African oratorical tradition, harmony is viewed as the “supraordinate objective of African language-events, because it serves as empowerment for moving or acting on solutions that are presented by the caller, validated by the chorus, and sanctioned by the responders” (Knowles-Borishade, 1991, p. 498). However, solutions are less important considerations, whereas harmony is the principal requirement to solutions. The spoken Word is a powerful instrument that is evident in numerous ways. It addresses profound life circumstances. Furthermore, “the spoken Word create bonds and bring about personal or social transformations” (Abrahams, 1986, pp. 1-2). The Word, in an African sense, is the sacred force of life and creates reality for African people. The preeminence of the spoken Word and, on language in general, is a defining cultural characteristic of African people (Mazama, 2001, p. 139).

The contemporary African preacher in the Black Church is an ideal example of the power of *Nommo*. In order to understand the nature of African communication, one must understand that *Nommo* flows through the African’s existence in the United States as well. Most Africans, given the nature of American history of slavery and subsequent racism and oppression, can immediately recognize the transforming power of vocal expression. However,

it is apparent when a person says, “Man, that cat can rap.” Or one can identify it through the words of the sister leaving a Baptist church, “I didn’t understand all those words the preacher was using, but they sure sounded good.” Inasmuch as the *Nommo* experience can be found in many aspects of African American life, one can almost think of it as a way of life. (Asante, 1998, pp. 97-98)

It is important to point out that although Africans revere the spoken Word, there is an extensive literary tradition in Africa. Nevertheless, according to Mazama,

It ought to be clear, at this point, that African people have not paid as much attention to the written word as Europeans have, due to our worldview and cultural inclinations. The written word is, to a large degree, lifeless. Indeed, it creates distance, not so much between a text and its author as between the writer and the reader, who may never have a chance to interact or even meet face to face. (Mazama, 2001, p. 139)

The Africans preference for the spoken Word over the written speaks to the Word being viewed as a life force. The written word does not have the

transformative powers of the spoken Word. Only the Word that is spoken can engage the human being putting him or her on the path of Maat. Furthermore, the spoken Word creates a relationship between the speaker and listener. The written word cannot facilitate human interaction and is therefore lifeless. The spoken Word “allows us to experience life in the most profound way” (Mazama, 2001, p. 139). The effective African orator understands the transformative power of the Word. We know that words have power when we walk away from language-events invigorated, “ready for revolution” or “praisin the lawd.” The Black Church is the most significant force that nurtures African linguistic and cultural traditions.

Nommo and Naming in the African Tradition

Naming in African culture is also an area in which the concept of Nommo or the power of the Word is ever present. In Ghanaian society, for example, names of people, objects, spirits, and the Creator “emanate from the interplay of religious, mythical, social, and historical realities” (Abarry, 1991, p. 157). Naming is also crucial within the African philosophy of peoples throughout Africa. Naming is an essential characteristic of African philosophy and religion. The Word, is primary to an understanding of the universe. The naming process in Kemet instigated the creation of the present world. After all, it was Atum-Ra, the supreme deity in ancient Kemetic belief, who said, “I the evolver of the evolutions evolved myself which came forth from my mouth” (Saakana, 1995, p. 333).

“There is nothing that there is not; whatever we have a name for, that is,” so says the philosophy of the Yoruba. This proverb speaks to the notion that “naming is an incantation, a creative act. What we cannot conceive is unreal; it does not exist. But for every human thought, once expressed, becomes reality” (Jahn, 1990, p. 133). Gyekye provides this example:

The Akan expression *nkrabea* was developed to depict a reality. Thus, a well-known discussant stated that if there were no accident (*asiane*), the word *asiane* would not exist in the Akan language. He stated, “The situation or matter that is not real has no name.” In other words, anything that is named must be presumed to be real. (Gyekye, 1995, pp. 105-106)

Bentson connects language and naming and puts it into this context:

Language—that fundamental act of organizing the mind’s encounter with an experienced world—is propelled by a rhythm of naming: It is the means by which the mind takes possession of the named, at once fixing the named as irreversibly other and representing it in crystallized isolation from all conditions of externality. (Bentson, 1982, p. 3)

In other words, once a “thing” is named, you bring it into reality. “Name it and you give it life,” referring to Nommo and the productive power of the spoken Word (Hasley, 1988, p. 257). In addition, “If there were no name, all personal forces would be static; there would be no possibility of social intercourse, no growth, no development, and no integration into human society. Naming becomes a creative act, a productive arhitectonic act in personal development” (Asante, 1998, p. 84). Naming, for Africans, is significant because it identifies whom they are and where they hope to ascend. African naming ceremonies are sacred, and each time parents name a child they are commenting on the life path of that child, about how that child will see himself or herself, and about the hope of what the future of African people will be. “They may do this consciously or unconsciously but nevertheless the name goes with the child as a symbol” (Asante, 1995, p. 9).

In ancient Africa, every boy and girl was given a name with some significance. Names are important because many believe they may affect a person’s behavior. A child’s name has a psychological effect on him or her. Names are descriptions for the totality of a person. Therefore, it is important to make the right choice. One’s behavior and one’s attitude are tied precisely to one’s sense of self-esteem and importance, “the choice of name should not be left to chance . . . it should be well thought out” (Asante, 1995, p. 11). Naming is a ritualized rite of passage and is a “theme prevalent in African culture” (Hasley, 1988, p. 259). To have a name is to “have a means of locating, extending, and preserving oneself in the human community, so as to be able to answer the question ‘who’? with reference to ancestry, current status, and particular bearing” (King, 1990, p. 683). Naming for the Yoruba, the Ewe, and the African in the United States is similar. Nicknames in the African community in the United States, while not maintaining the “formalized” response to naming for the Yoruba or Ewe, Asante writes, still “serve as markers of the African presence in the ‘sound sense’ of Black America. Almost all young men and women receive nicknames at an early age, and these names are designatory, referring to one’s physical appearance” (Asante, 1998, p. 85).

Conclusion

The concept of *Nommo*, the power generated from the Spoken Word, was crucial in articulating the spiritual nature of language for African people. Spirituality was defined in cultural terms to demonstrate the cultural connection between Africans throughout the community. The fulfillment of Maat, the African's lifelong sojourn for balance and harmony for himself or herself and for society, is the essence of the spiritual being within the African worldview. For that reason, spirituality was defined as the African's search for personal balance and harmony as well as that of society.

Nommo, the generative and productive power of the spoken Word, is an African concept of communication entrenched in the African worldview. The power of the spoken Word has always been fixed in the African oral tradition. Africans believe that the Word itself is the force of life. The power of the spoken Word, or *Nommo*, reflects African philosophical continuity. African culture is an oral culture. The importance of language is paramount. For a people whose culture is oral, their culture is transmitted through their use of language. The oral tradition provides a starting point with which to study language for African people. Language is not only a regularized code that includes syntax, lexicon, and phonology but rather the nuances of African culture, which assist in defining language.

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Bio

Adisa A. Alkebulan received a PhD in African American studies from Temple University. He is an associate professor of Africana studies at San Diego State University. His research focuses on Afrocentric theory and pan-African linguistics.