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## **Holistic Ontology, Social Capital and the Quest for Social Harmony in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

Contra western ontology which is marked by an emphasis on the primacy of the individual and material, African ontological universe is not only deeply spiritual, but also valorises the unity and the interconnectedness of all beings. Consequent upon reflections on the all too well known, but sometimes disputed, difference between western and African ontological orientations, this paper demonstrates how African ontology provides a solid metaphysical/epistemological foundation for the creation of social capital and the promotion of social harmony on the continent. Paradoxically, however, social relation in Africa today is characterised by a deficit of social capital, mutual distrust and antagonism which often culminate in violent conflicts. The glaring disconnect between African holistic ontology which points in the direction of solidarity and social harmony, on the one hand, and social relations which has been fraught with antagonism and conflict, on the other, certainly stands in the need of explanation. The paper explains this disconnect in terms of two devastating effects of the colonial domination of Africa, namely, the erosion of the African worldview by the imposition of a foreign one, and the deliberate cultivation of parochial identities which is today manifested

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in the form of misguided ethno-nationalist sentiments within the artificially constructed states on the continent. The paper concludes by contending that the reclamation of the African spiritualistic ontology represents the viable way forward for Africa and Africans in their quest for sustainable development.

**Keywords:** ontology; epistemology; African; western; socio-capital; socio-harmony.

### **1. Introduction**

It is now a generally well known fact that Africa holds the dubious distinction of being the continent with the highest number of wars and violent conflicts in the world. From Liberia to Rwanda, millions of lives have been lost, wanton destruction of natural resources have been wrought and hundreds of thousands have been internally displaced. Thus media report on Africa, (electronic and print) constantly inundate us with unsavoury images of violence, human brutality, and pictures of skinny emaciated remains of Africans who have been ravaged by famine and civil wars.

This disturbing state of affairs certainly provokes a number of fundamental questions which calls for sober reflection: is the African a brute savage incapable of living in harmony with others? Is he a blood thirsty vandal who revels in the suffering of others? Are there socio-cultural factors responsible for the unprecedented violence that have characterised group relations in Africa? Is the African worldview or ontology one that promotes belligerency and mutual antagonism between the diverse ethno-linguistic groups on the continent?

It is certainly beyond the scope of this paper to examine all the questions raised above in a comprehensive fashion. Our preoccupation, therefore, will be limited to the last question. Our primary concern is to examine whether African holistic ontology

has the propensity to engineer and fuel violence on a monstrous scale. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to show that the ontological architecture in traditional Africa is one that conduces to the creation of social capital and social harmony, and that if the latter eludes the continent in the post-colonial era, it's only because traditional African ontology has been significantly eroded. To proceed systematically, the paper has been divided into four main sections. The first sets forth the fundamental elements of the African holistic ontology. The second demonstrates the connection between African ontology, social capital and social harmony, while the third explains the obvious disconnect between the solidarity-promoting nature of African worldview and the reality of the crisis of group relations in contemporary Africa. The last section advocates the reclamation of the African traditional ontology as a fundamental strategy for the reduction of violent conflicts on the continent.

## **2. Conceptual Clarification**

Etymologically the term “ontology” derives from the concatenation of two Greek words namely *Onto* meaning “to be” and “Logos” meaning “word”. Ontology therefore is the study of being. Beyond the etymological meaning however, in philosophy, ontology has come to refer to the study of being and existence which forms the basic subject matter of metaphysics. Although the terms metaphysics and ontology are often used interchangeably, it should be clear from the above definition that strictly speaking they are not one and the same. Metaphysics is a broader terminology which encompasses ontology, cosmology and cosmogony (Momoh, 2000:8). Heidegger's (1962) famous division of metaphysics into two broad aspects puts the distinction between Metaphysics and ontology into bold relief. According to him, metaphysics consists of *Metaphysicaspecialis* and *Metaphysicageneralis*. The former refers to the

fragmentation of philosophy into regional ontologies or specialised sciences which deal with the specific parts of being or particular aspects of “what is”. Examples of such specialised sciences include subjects such as History, Theology, Physics, Sociology, Mathematics etc. The latter (i.e. metaphysicageneralis) represents the branch of metaphysics concerned with the systematic and holistic study of being. It is this systematic, holistic study of being that is properly designated as ontology. As the most significant division of metaphysics, ontology seeks to describe or posit the basic structure and nature of being as well as the relationship of elements and entities within its framework. Within the context of this paper, “African ontology” is used in the immediately preceding sense. We would, however, take the liberty of employing the terms metaphysics and worldview as semantic equivalents of ontology.

Since Loury (1997) introduced social capital into the academic lexicon, the concept has been adopted across disciplines in the social sciences as well as the humanities. Unfortunately the success of the concept is also the source of its weakness. As it is deployed by disparate disciplines, the nuances and meanings attached to the idea continue to proliferate, creating a vagueness and complexity that must be taken into account in any attempt at its definition. Narayan (2000) for instance, defines social capital as the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively. For Putnam *et al* (1993) social capital refers to the features of social organisation such as trust, norms and networks that improve the efficiency of society. Yet, another conceptualisation sees it as the resources of information, insurance, influence and identity inherent in social relations. One common thread that connects all these definitions is that social capital promotes positive group externalities (2004), and its existence makes for solidarity, cooperation and harmony

within the society, Within the context of this paper, social capital shall refer to specific beliefs, values, norms and practices which promotes the internal coherence of a community of people (Bahvanni and Becker, 2007).

Having shed some light on the concepts central to this discourse, we may now examine the question why African ontology is described as holistic? To do justice to this question, there is the need to briefly describe elements of the African worldview.

### **3. The Constitutive Elements of Africa's Holistic Ontology**

African ontology is defined by three main features, namely, engagement, a communal concept of the self and a profoundly spiritual orientation. It is often noted that African ontology is marked by engagement, a perspective that recognises the fundamental unity of all things. Thus, there is unity between the mind and the body, the subject and the object, the individual and the community, and even the material and the spiritual. In short, rather than conceive himself as standing aloof from the "hierarchy of beings" (Tempels, 1959), the African recognises and celebrates his connection to the other. This is why African ontology is described as holistic or as one that "valorises the interconnectedness of being" (Anthony, 2005:8). In his celebrated philosophical articulation of Bantu ontology, Tempels argued that the concept of separate being in which individuals find themselves independent of one another is foreign to Bantu thought system (Akbar, 2003). Indeed, according to Tempels, the Bantu understand being holistically as a network of a hierarchy of vital forces interconnecting and interacting in system of mutual interdependence.(1959) Polycarp Ikuenobe (2104:2) Corroborates Tempels' thesis when says traditional African ontology views reality as "a composite, unity and harmony of natural forces".

Another essential feature of African ontology is the communal conception of the self. African ontology does not obliterate or deny individuality or “Uniqueness” of entities, it rather discourages the isolation whereby every individual is considered an island to self (see Harris, 2003:115). This idea of communal notion of the self is captured in the expression “We are therefore I am”. This emphasis on the communal embeddedness of man certainly differs from the Eurocentric orientation which is best characterised by the Cartesian dictum “I think therefore I am” (Ibid, 115). In essence, while the “I” enjoy primacy within the Eurocentric Weltanschauung, it is the complementarity between the “I” and the “We” that is privileged within the African worldview. Below is Myers James evocative description of the communal element of the African ontology:

Africans of traditional culture apprehended a sense of self extended in time to include all of the ancestors, the yet unborn, all nature and the entire community ... thus they identified themselves at the level of permeating essences rather specific outward manifestation, i.e., consciousness or spirits rather individualised material form. According to Zahan (1979), from this point of view the individual does not constitute a close system to the outside world in order to better secure her or his own substance or limitations. On the contrary, the individual enters into the surrounding environment which in turn perpetuates her or him.

It instructive that Myers describes the African communalistic conception of the self in the past sense: this immediately

suggests that the communalism that characterised traditional Africa has been heavily eroded.

The last and perhaps the most significant aspect of the African world view, which we have highlighted above, is its profoundly spiritual or mystical orientation (Tedros, 2016). While not being anti-materialist, the African world view is one in which the spiritual takes precedence over the physical. Unlike modernist conceptual system, Africans do not make a sharp distinction between spirit and matter. Instead, he sees a continuum that runs through and connects all categories of beings. Frye (1978) put this observation differently but poignantly when he declares that the first construct of traditional African philosophical thought is the notion of an all pervasive “energy” which is the source, sustainer and the essence of all things. Different scholars of African philosophy have provided various terminologies to describe the all pervasive energy. For Tempels (1959), it is “force”. Kagame (1976) calls it “Ntu”, while Idoniboye (1973) christens it “spirit”. Irrespective of the terminological differences exhibited by these philosophers, there is a consensus that the spiritual is the essence and the root of all things. It is this metaphysical assumption that explains why:

African people are concerned about the invisible more than they are about the visible... they are concerned about the forces that operates on a higher plane... that is the nature of the spiritual orientation of the African people. African people are more concerned about the infinite than they are about the finite. (Harris, 2003: 115)

In other words, while the African comprehends the distinctness of the planes of existence bifurcated into the visible and the

invisible, they are acutely aware of the interactions that take place across these planes, as well as the fact that the spiritual takes precedence over the physical. Armed with this view of the relative importance of the planes of existence, Africans naturally gravitates towards the higher plane, i.e., the spiritual realm where they can initiate effects which are visible in the physical realm.

#### **4. African Ontology and Social Capital**

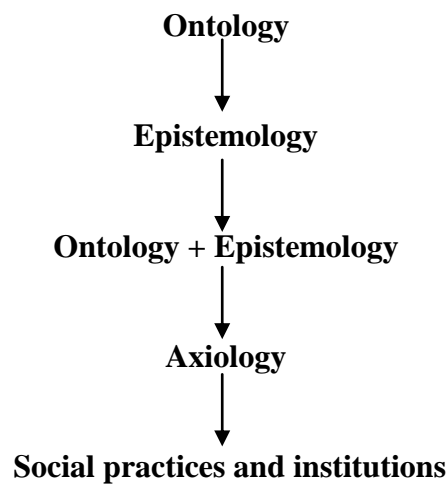
If African ontology emphasis engagement, communality and the primacy of the spiritual and social capital is construed as the norms, beliefs, values and practices that promotes the internal coherence and cohesion of a people, it becomes easy to see the connection between African ontology and social capital. Elvis Imafidon (2014: 43) highlights the implication of African ontology in the following assertion:

Since the African community is an aggregate of interacting cosmic forces, it would imply that such a community, conscious of the nature being, would establish structures to foster and sustain the much needed interaction among entities. Such structures that will foster communal harmony become more imperative since forces find meaning only in the space of their dwelling, the community of beings.

Beyond mere affirmations, it is pertinent that we make more explicit the theoretical connections between ontology and social practices, between the ontological order and social order. A people's ontology as we hinted earlier, defines the ultimate nature of reality and the categories of being that exist therein, which by extension partly determines their epistemology (i.e. a



conception of what can be known and how possibly it can be known). The combination of the people's ontology and epistemology then determines the axiology of the people. Axiology here refers to the values and the value system to which the people subscribe. Ultimately, the value system finds expressions in the social practices as well as the institutions that are developed by the people. The causal line of connection between ontology and a people's social practices/institutions can be shown thus, in a schematic form.



Interestingly, quite a number of social practices within African and non-African settings amply illustrate how ontology influences social practices and institutions. There is a marked difference in assumptions of Western medical science and in African traditional medicine, for instance. Given the centrality of materialism in the Eurocentric ontology, Western medical science proceeds with the assumption that "the mind and the body are separate things and that the body can be understood as a complex machine made up of tissues, cells, bones tissues and

so on” (Smith, 1998:13). On this reading, illness is simply viewed as a mechanical malfunction, which can be corrected by appropriate prophylactic intervention. In contrast to mechanistic view of the body and illness, African traditional medicine operates on the assumption that the mind, the body and the spirit are intimately connected. Thus, traditional African medicine tends to be holistic in its approach. Thus, it does not only seek to treat the physical, but also pays attention to the underlying emotional and spiritual, causes of illness. Beyond medical practice, the impact of ontology can also be seen in the marital relationships. Since the character of the West is partly defined by individualism, marriage in the west is often perceived as legal contract between two consenting adults. Matters are however, not that simple in African societies. The communalism inherent in African ontology demands that marital relationship is not just the concern of the individuals directly involved. Hence, the family or entire community is often responsible for initiating and sustaining the process that culminates in marriage.

Although, traditional Africa was not a paradise, it was evident that its societies were built on the principles of brotherhood solidarity and cooperation. These principles featured prominently in the economic activities of traditional African societies. Thus, among the Yoruba, as many others African societies, there was the system of *owe*, a cooperative endeavour in which people helped one another on specific tasks such as building a new house or clearing a farmland, required the help of others. Such was freely given on the basis of reciprocity (Gbadegesin, 1998:295). As is to be expected, the ethos of solidarity did not only inform economic activities, it was the principle that underpins the entire gamut of social relations. It is for this reason that Nyasani observes that:

Virtues like patience, optimism, mutual sympathy and empathy are eminently characteristic of the African way of life and certainly point to a peculiar mode of existence that extends the realm of the individual potentialities to embrace the life of others and their concerns ([http/home.concept-ict.nl](http://home.concept-ict.nl))

With an ontology that promotes mutual sympathy and considerable concern for others, traditional Africa was characterised by strong social ties, norms of reciprocity and a relatively peaceful coexistence at the intra-tribal and inter-tribal levels. Of course it could be argued that the mutual sympathy and sense of solidarity which we have alluded to is restricted to the kinship group or community to which one belonged, the reality is that the African ontology as described above defines being in complementary all-inclusive fashion.

... the ethics of solidarity and hospitality is extended to the whole universe, for Africans feel kinship with the flora and fauna and the whole natural world. Indeed, African ontology believes in the intimate relationship between “Bantu” and “Bintu.” To grasp this notion, it is worth noting that the first principle of African philosophical anthropology is not the concept of Muntu, but rather that of Ntanda. God created first the world, the whole universe, and then humans. God did not create only one village, but ntandayonso, the whole world, and all its content. All human beings have but one single source of existence, and not only human

beings, but all other creatures. (Mutombo,  
[www.congotimes.com/news](http://www.congotimes.com/news))

The notion of the unity of being, animate and inanimate, inherent in the African worldview clearly provides the metaphysical foundation for hospitality and solidarity which characterised traditional African societies. Herein lies the connection between African ontology and social capital: the ontology of unity or the metaphysics of interfusion (Okoro, 2007) ingrains the sense of universal brotherhood and an ethic of solidarity in the African which then creates of social capital.

### **5. Paradox of a Conflict-Ridden Africa**

Conflict, the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups is inevitable in human relations (Francis, 2006). Thus conflict expectedly is a phenomenon that cuts across time and clime. *Ipsa facto*, pre-colonial traditional Africa had its own share of conflicts. But the intensity and frequency of those conflicts are nothing compared to the avalanche of conflicts that have inundated the African continent in modern times. The intensity, frequency and scale of these conflicts in Africa today are not only disruptive of a peaceful social order but are also responsible for the retardation of the development that is required to provide the burgeoning population in Africa with decent living conditions. One only need to look back at the carnage and wanton destruction of lives and property in Rwanda about a two decades ago and at the intertribal wars of the pre-colonial era to see the marked difference in the scale of the wars that took place in traditional Africa and those that are currently ravaging the continent.

One question becomes pertinent at this point: if African ontology as has been depicted above, promotes engagement, communality and the notion of the unity of humanity, why is the

African continent today the epicentre of the most violent, internecine conflicts rocking the world? Various explanations have been furnished from different theoretical perspectives, the details of which we will not bother ourselves with. Suffice it to say that the explanations for the prevalence of violent conflicts and the disruption of social harmony in many parts of Africa often reflect political, economic, social and environmental factors (Dixon *et al*, 1993). Beyond these factors, however, at a much more fundamental level, we contend that the erosion of African ontology of solidarity and the deliberate cultivation of ethnicity by the colonial officials is at the root of Africa's socio/political instability. To substantiate this point, we need to provide a more elaborate analysis to show how colonial rule in Africa eroded Africa's ontology and cultivated divisive ethnicity which in turn laid the foundation for the tidal wave of violence blowing across the continent today.

The colonial conquest and the decades of colonial rule that followed it, did much to weaken African ontology and the sense of community living that characterised traditional Africa. Colonial anthropologists and others did not only disparage African worldview as animistic, illogical and unscientific, more decisively, colonial rule introduced a colonial capitalist social order, which encouraged individualism, crass materialism and class competition. It goes without saying, that the values inherent in the colonial capitalist order were certainly antithetical to African value system, which was eminently characterised by the ethics of solidarity. Thus, the introduction of alien values which were derived from the individualism and materialism of Western ontology, colonial rule initiated a process that is responsible for the systematic erosion of the African holistic ontology. This is what partly explains the prevalence of violence in Africa today. Assuming that African ontology has not been unravelled or partially dismantled in the

way colonial rule did, many of the trigger factors behind the eruption of violent conflict could have been better managed within an environment of conviviality, solidarity and social harmony. Unfortunately the social harmony that characterised pre-colonial African communities has largely been eroded by what Ogundowole (2002:146) describes as the “doctrine of opposites” and the “cult of individualism”. Ogundowole minces no words about the effects of these doctrines, which according to him are at the core of the euro-philosophical tradition:

the cult of individualism ... has grown to become an impediment in the way of collective efforts directed at genuine human cooperation. This cult (of individualism) is opposed to societal togetherness as the doctrine of opposites. ...In Africa, and indeed in other backward areas of the world, where the abilities and the cooperation of everyone and every segment of the society is required for the rapid development and social progress of the society, the doctrine of opposite and the cult of individualism hinder efforts to attain social harmony, and so of attaining fundamental social objectives (Ibid. 146)

If the introduction of western values and the consequent erosion of the African worldview destroyed the foundation for social harmony and peaceful inter-group relations in Africa, the deliberate cultivation of parochial identities along ethnic lines by the colonial officials sowed the seed of the civil conflicts which we are now witnessing.

On the last point there is near general agreement (see Posner 2003, Sharma & April 2013, and Keller 2014) that the colonial

construction and reconstruction of ethnic identities created conditions conducive to the prevalence of ethnic conflicts in Africa. Motivated by their political and mercantilist interest, the imperial powers did not only encourage the development of distinct ethnic identities even where there were none, they also went ahead in the Berlin conference of 1885 to carve up the continent into administrative units with little or no regard for the regions cultural geography. Thus, “in some areas antagonistic groups were thrown together in a single colonial unit, while elsewhere individual tribes were split between two future countries” (Handelman 2006: 80). To facilitate the exploitation of their holdings further, the colonisers deployed the sinister strategy of “divide and rule” which played one ethnic group against another, thereby exacerbating the tensions between the diverse ethnic groups which were forcibly lumped together in the colonial state.

Unfortunately, this dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that was set in motion by the European colonisers is still at work today in contemporary Africa. Not minding, or ignorant of, the artificiality of the colonially imposed ethnic boundaries, many ethnic groups are today embroiled in violent conflicts over real or imagined ethno-cultural distinctions. Undoubtedly, what is suggested by the myriad of conflicts raging in Africa today is that the “doctrine of opposites” has overtaken the celebration of interconnectedness that is inherent in the African ontology. The pertinent question then is what can we do to reduce the frequency of the outbreak of ethnic violence, if we grant that they cannot be completely eliminated?

## **6. Conclusion**

In the light of the preceding explanation of the prevalence of ethnic conflict on the African continent, the outlines of the solution should be fairly obvious. More precisely, if as we have

argued, the pervasiveness of conflicts in post-colonial Africa must be understood in the context of the dilution of the African ontology and the manipulation of ethnic identities by the European colonisers, the logical response to the breakdown of social harmony in Africa necessarily requires a two-pronged approach: first, at the philosophical level, we must institute a plan of action for reclaiming the African worldview; second, at the more practical level, we must devise viable means for managing the ethno-cultural diversity of the African continent. Fortunately, quite a sizeable number of scholars, particularly social scientists have grappled with the question of how to manage the cultural diversity in multi-ethnic societies (Horowitz 1985, kyimicka 1995, Lijphart, 1977 ) as a result, a couple of useful prescriptions on how to manage ethno-cultural diversity have been provided. These include federalism, confederal system of governance, consociational democracy and some form internal self-governing arrangement for vulnerable ethnic minorities. What is missing, however, is an ontological construct or a worldview that promotes the creation of social capital and as such, is supportive of harmonious inter-group relations. Traditional Africa used to have such a worldview but, as we have demonstrated in this paper, its influence has been considerably weakened by the imposition of alien values that came with colonial rule. Reclaiming the African traditional metaphysics, which espouses the interconnectedness of all beings and the universal brotherhood of all man then, becomes an imperative if we hope to minimise frequency and intensity of the violent conflicts that have deepened the crisis of underdevelopment in contemporary Africa.



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