African Philosophy of Religion from a Global Perspective: Deities, Ancestors, Relationality and the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

In this essay, we explore what the African Philosophy of Religion would look like from both a mono-disciplinary and comparative perspectives. To do this, a few concepts such as Gods, ancestorhood, relationality, and the problem of evil that appear in the essays in this special issue will be highlighted. Our aim here is not to provide a lengthy and rigorous analysis of the field of African Philosophy of Religion or even some of its main concepts, but to offer a platform for continuing discussion and development of the field.
Keywords: African Philosophy of Religion, Gods, Ancestors, Relationality, Problem of Evil.

Introduction

The broad field of African metaphysics has yet to attract sufficient attention from African philosophers. Even though some African philosophers have been contributing ideas to develop the field in recent times, more is still required. This makes our effort here both timely and relevant. African Philosophy of Religion is one of the components of African metaphysics, which like the other components such as African Philosophy of Mind, African Ontology, etc., is still in its nascence. The aim of the Global Philosophy of Religion project is to develop the discipline of Philosophy of Religion from a multi-cultural perspective, and thus initiate comparative discussions on the subject matters of the discipline. Our contribution to that project has two arms: the first consists of two separate international colloquia we organized in November of 2021. The second is this journal's special issue to put in print the papers presented at the colloquia. Our expectation is that both the colloquia and publication would spur debates and reactions that can generate further research in the field.

In this short essay, we will take a panoramic view of the field of African Philosophy of Religion. We will touch on some of the main concepts and issues in the field. We will show the potential of a comparative exercise in

Philosophy of Religion between Africa and China to motivate healthy and fruitful intercultural exchange. Finally, We will provide a summary of all the articles that appear in this special issue and show their promises in extending the frontiers of knowledge.

African Philosophy of Religion from a Global Perspective
The decline of the epistemological empire of the West has been announced in several fields of philosophical inquiry (SANTOS 2018; CHIMAKONAM 2019; CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES 2021). For example, today, in normative fields such as ethics and political philosophy, it is crucial to approach issues from a global viewpoint rather than just through the straw lens of one cultural particular. Nonetheless, it seems that the more theoretical fields of philosophy, such as philosophy of religion and metaphysics, have not yet become as global as other fields. With the Global Philosophy of Religion Project led by Professor Yujin Nagasawa, it may be the first time in the history of philosophy that there is a global and serious engagement with philosophies from the South regarding philosophy of religion ("The Global Philosophy of Religion Project" 2021). This special issue results from two conferences that we have organized funded by this project and they try to look at philosophy of religion putting African philosophy at the center of a global debate. Both conferences were focused on African philosophy and the problem of evil, but with slightly distinct sub-focuses. Our first conference focused on the existence of deities, ancestors and other supernatural entities. Broadly speaking, the papers focused on exploring the meaning and nature of such entities. Thus, several papers were presented discussing what ancestors, deities, sacrifice, the devil mean, taking mostly a comparative view and exploring how these definitions relate to questions of evil.

The second conference more directly tackled the problem of evil in the African philosophical context. The problem of evil results from a specific understanding of God, but the way that Africans understand Gods may not be the same and different problems of evil may result from this. The result of these two conferences was a series of articles that either tackles the issue directly or contributes to its understanding by offering a comparative perspective with Chinese and Western philosophy.

Thus, our project centers on unbundling the field of African Philosophy of Religion from a global perspective. Why is such an approach important? It is one thing to theorize on a discipline and quite another to bring such theories to the global marketplace of ideas. Our focus is to explore what most of the ideas on the concepts and issue in the discipline would look like when considered comparatively from the viewpoint of another culture like the Chinese. What, for instance, are the similarities and differences between the African and the Chinese conceptions of God? Rouyan Gu addresses this concern in his contribution to this issue. In reading Gu, one can see that some of the ideas of God present in the Yoruba traditional religion are also present in some ancient Chinese religions.

The same is the case in Pao-Shen Ho essay that compares monotheism in Igala and Christian religions. Certain nuances abound that indicate that the concept of monotheism might not mean precisely the same thing in both religions. This speaks to how much cultures of the world share in common, but also how much differences exist between them. What is implicated here is the need for mutual respect and recognition of the validity of each other's epistemic standpoint. Part of the problem that engulf intercultural relations between diverse peoples is the error of each side, supposing that its epistemic formation is the best. In this way, epistemic marginalization (see CHIMAKONAM & DU' TOIT 2018) or even outright epistemicide (see SANTOS 2014) could become a serious problem militating against fruitful intercultural relations.

From the above, one can argue that veritable benefits of comparative exercises include testing one culture's ideas against another's, but also creating an avenue for fostering intercultural communication and understanding. For example, Wei Hua in his contribution on Augustine, Ancestors and the Problem of Evil discloses an interesting connection between Augustine's theory of evil largely accepted as Western and the various ideas latent in African traditional religions. He was able to demonstrate that Augustine may have seriously been influenced by various African cultural worldviews of his time. Part of the benefit of this discovery can be seen in colonial and decolonial discourses where arguments are rift on whether Africa has contributed any ideas to modern civilization or not. Comparative exercises, thus, enable us to learn about other cultures, what we share or do not share in common with others, and how such knowledge could be useful in forging healthy intercultural relations.

Further, even though artificial borders and presumed racial differences have widened the gap between cultures, digital technologies are demonstrating their capacity to make the world a "global village" (MCLUHAN 1962, 1967). But is it necessary that the world should become a global village? This is not a trivial question. It is easy for a careless observer to dismiss such a necessity, but what would life led in isolation be like? At the individual level, it can be poor, lonely and sad, perhaps, but it is the same at the group or cultural level. Human beings are social animals, in that they require the interaction of others to flourish. This is also the case for societies. No culture or people can thrive alone. Otherwise, many nations today would prefer to be isolated from the rest. In fact, after the construction of the global matrix of modernity that brings all cultures of the world together economically, socially, politically, and otherwise, isolation is increasingly being used as punishment.. The untold suffering and hardship in the countries that are isolated prove that it is as difficult for nations to survive alone as it is for individuals.

To substantiate the above, Naomi Thurston in her contribution, compares the ideas of communal relationships using ancestor commemoration in both the Akan and East Asian cultures. We can look at the common traits in both cultures, as things that underscore the importance of cooperative and

complementary living not just for human beings but for diverse cultures. Nowadays, people of diverse nationalities emigrate to other culture areas. The cultural shock that stems from such often leads to conflicts, xenophobic and otherwise. Sociologists often study ways of averting such conflicts, which mainly consists of disseminating knowledge on the things that unite people (TAVERNARO-HAIDARIAN 2021). Thurston uses the Akan and East Asian contexts to unravel the metaphysical, moral and social dimensions of communal living through ancestor commemoration.

Indeed, various forms of comparative exercises shed light on the significance of cultural diversity and uniformity. This point is made manifest in the contributions of Bony Schachter on the polythetic definition of sacrifice from the African and Chinese cultural worldviews; Jiechen Hu on the comparison on divinities and ancestors from African and Confucian perspectives; Jun Wang and Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues on the Problem of Evil from an Intercultural Perspective. These essays, in more than one way, demonstrate the shared values between African and Chinese cultures. The knowledge of these values has the potential to strengthen Afro-Chinese relations in a world beset by differences. These are the sort of things we can look at to promote comparative exercises such as the one in the area of Philosophy of Religion. In this project, our center-piece may have been the African philosophy of Religion, but an approach from the global perspective that allows philosophers from Africa and China to debate and share ideas remains critical in forging an intellectual basis for healthy intercultural relations.

Deities, Ancestors, Relationality and the Problem of Evil

The first eight articles of this special issue offer African perspectives on God and the problem of evil. Aribiah Attoe addresses the problem of evil by reconstructing an idea of God (grounded in African philosophy) as material and depersonalized. Amara Ani Chimakonam explores the evidential problem of evil taking on board African religions. By using the Igbo concept of Ejima, she contends that the evidential problem of evil does not necessarily pose a problem to African religions. Ada Agada criticizes two prominent philosophers (John A.I. Bewaji and Ademola Kazeem Fayemi) who have addressed the problem of evil from an African viewpoint. In his paper, he contests these philosophers' approach of endorsing a limited God in their discussions on the problem of evil, and then offers an alternative view. Although these philosophers amply disagree on the nature of evil, their views represent new intellectual platforms for debates in the burgeoning field of African Philosophy of Religion.

Emmanuel Ofuasia discusses the existence of the Devil in African religions using Yoruba and Igbo philosophies. He contends that there is no place for the existence of the Devil in these religions. His argument is that references to the Devil that abound in various African languages may have stemmed from the influence of the Judeo-Christian religion. Zubairu Bambale

explores the Hausa worldview and the idea of the death penalty by looking at the concepts of after-life through the prism of African relationality. Although he concluded that the death penalty is warranted for certain offences in traditional Hausa religious culture, it is abhorred. Jonathan O. Chimakonam uses the same relationality principle to look at the problem of tolerance from the viewpoint of Indigenous African Religions. He contends that the ideology of the African traditional religions is more tolerant than Christianity and Islam, and that this has to do with their concepts of God. L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya offers an account of the nature of God from an African metaphysical viewpoint. He contends that God is not pure spirit, but spirit and matter. This account challenges the dualist view that spirit is good and matter is evil. This is because if God is good and God has matter, then matter cannot be evil. These ideas generate questions for current and future debates in more than one way.

Crucial for contemporary philosophy is that an intercultural approach is taken. Without such an approach, philosophical methodology is poor and incomplete. Hence, being inclusive of many world philosophies seems to be a necessary condition for good philosophical practice (WAREHAM 2017; MA & BRAKEL 2016). The second group of papers tackle comparative questions in philosophy of religion that are relevant for the problem of evil. Wei Hua offers a new interpretation of Saint Augustine's account on evil by considering the influence that African religions may have had on his thought. By doing this, Hua provides a new perspective on the problem of evil. Rouyan Gu compares concepts of God in Yoruba and Chinese religions (with a special focus on Buddhism). Through this inquiry, Gu clarifies the meaning of God and how we can formulate a more intercultural concept of God. Pao-Shen Ho looks at Igala religion and discusses, in comparison with Christianity, whether the Igala ought to be understood as monotheistic or polytheistic. Naomi Thurston tries to look at definitions of ancestors by comparing the concepts in the Akan traditions with East-Asian perspectives. These ideas constitute intellectual forder for further comparative reflections.

Bony Shachter looks at sacrifices for ancestors in Chinese (especially Daoism) and Igbo religions. By exploring comparisons, he then offers an intercultural way to define sacrifice. As Shachter notes, sacrifice is closely connected to how humans relate to ancestors. Given that ancestors are at the center of supernatural good and evil, to understand sacrifice is, therefore, crucial to understand good and evil in Chinese and African religions. Jiechen Hu reflects on the meaning of divinities and ancestorship by comparing African and Confucian cosmologies. He contends that classifications such as 'monotheism', 'polytheism' and 'animism' do not capture the meaning of deities and ancestors in Confucian and African traditions. Finally, Jun Wang and Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues offer pathways to a methodology to address the problem of evil. They contend that it is indispensable to address the problem of evil from an intercultural perspective in order to find a satisfactory solution.

This rich special issue offers innovative views on the problem of evil, God, deities, ancestors, sacrifice, Saint Augustine, African and Chinese religions, the devil, and the methodology of philosophy of religion. It is, to our knowledge, the first special issue that addresses and compares in length African philosophy with different traditions. This is a great step to overcome epistemic injustices and to the formulation of new philosophical theories. Let the conversation begin!

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