
Spirit Being In African Indigenous Religion: The Mbembe Perspective

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Abstract

This work on Spirit Being in African Indigenous Religion was undertaken to find out the place and significance of spirits in Mbembe religious ontology. The work adopted the culture area approach used to infer information via primary and secondary sources. The research discovered in the process that the Creator called Ubinokpabi existed in a spirit form, the same as divinities, ancestors and other common spirits. The work further revealed that the spiritual beings in Mbembe religious ontology as replicated in Africa indigenous religion are hierarchically stratified in accordance with their role and place of abode. The lesser spirits were particularly discovered to be ubiquitous, malevolent and benevolent as the case may be but under the absolute control of Ubinokpabi, the Creator who is Himself both transcendent and immanent.

Keywords: Mbembe, spirit being, religion

Introduction

The concept of spirit being occupies a vast space in African indigenous religion. It comprises the Supreme Being, the divinities, ancestors and other innumerable lesser spirits. African traditional religion had absolute dominance in the African soil before the advent of foreign religions particularly Islam and Christianity into Africa, though, this trend has changed. According to Encyclopedia Britannica in Wikipedia (2013) the available statistics provided the Muslim population of Africa in 2010 at 421, 938, 820-40% and that of Christians at 488,880,000-47.32%. That of traditional religionists was 109, 592,000-10.6% leaving only 12,532, 200 -1.22% for other beliefs from the total African population of 1, 033, 043, 00 (100%). These records show that African traditional religion has lost firm grip of her home worshippers who now embraced more of the foreign faiths.

All world religions believe in the existence of spirits in various ways. To some religions spirits constitute attractive sermons which draw more adherents to them. This cannot be said of Africans who take to Islamic religion that claims to be peaceful more in principle and convert “infidels” through the application of Jihad (holy war) or Christianity that thrives on fascinating messages particularly those of eschatology and imaginary blissful home. The messages of these two foreign religions easily catch on the underdeveloped, timid and disadvantaged Africans, while the ethico-religio teachings of the African indigenous religion (AIR) which emphasizes continuous recycling of dead and rebirth into this adulterous world only impoverish the home

religion. Every mortal hope for better live, after all. The authors in this work considered the Mbembe view of the spirit world to present a clearer picture of the spirit world in African religious ontology.

Mbembe Spirit World

Most sects in African Indigenous Religion have developed at their local levels and unique to peculiar societies. Common elements among them included the belief in a creator God who is rarely, if ever represented in arts and directly approached by worshippers. Instead, the Supreme deity is petitioned through intermediaries, or lesser spirits. These spirits may be related to the natural world and have control over powerful natural phenomena.

The Mbembe nation is the most populous ethnic nationality in present day Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State of South-Eastern Nigeria. She occupies the geographical expanse from the northern borders of Yakurr Local Government Area of the state and terminates at the Ipolo axis of Yala Local Government Area of the same state. She speaks a single dialect, ‘Mbembe’ from where the name is derived. She has a world - view which is replicated in almost all African societies.

Among world religions there is a strong belief that the cosmos is populated by a whole array of spiritual beings with various degrees of power and influence. Their presence and conduct impinge on human life such that every human misfortune and suffering is almost always explained in terms of the spiritual world. Mbiti shares this opinion saying the spiritual world of African people is very densely populated with spiritual beings; spirits and the living-dead (75). The Mbembe spirit world is most pervasive and contained within it, the Supreme Being or God. Other occupants are divinities, ancestors, and many other spirits which are collectively anonymous. The Mbembe holds the view as vividly illustrated in the diagram below.

Ofhon kw’ ubinokpabi	5
Okha’ fhon	4
Oyabgin	
Ofhon’ kwakpakpa pibha	3
	2
Uvfura’ fhon	1

Fig.1: Mbembe spirit world

Source: Authors’ fieldwork, 2017

Mbembe cosmology view the universe as illustrated in Fig. 1 above. Mbembe people hold the view that the universe is in a square - structured form, sub-divided into layers which are separately occupied by the different forms of spirits (HRH.Ovarr Clement Ubugha Ewona, 7/1/2017). From the four ends of the universe is a solid and formidable brick wall which is surrounded by water. It is conceptualized that if for reasons of human continuous inordinate cravings and perpetuation in high degree atrocities also by the lesser spirits, *Ubinokpabhi* may at his time and convenience open up the wall for man and lesser spirits to get drowned in the endless water. *Ubinokpabi* it is further believed may repopulate the world to sooth his whims. The accurate knowledge of the perceived world is beyond human comprehension.

From the above diagram, at the bottom of the pantheon is the home of the dead known in Mbembe language as *uvfura’ fhon*, (home of the dead). All the dead are buried, and ordinarily

should inhabit *uvfura fhon* as their permanent abode. However, the Mbembe ontology believes that those who had bad deaths when they are buried soon transform into a division of lesser spirits and ascend to the evil spirit world *ofhon kw'akpakpa pibha*, (home of the evil spirits) where they dwell and operate in the land of the living, *oyagbin* (Chief Ajah Igbege, 8/1/2002). The spirits are invisible and immortal. Their operations or activities are mostly that of manipulating their living relatives and others in retaliation for their denial of good burials. They can be manipulated by man using the superior powers of diviners, sorcerers or witchdoctors to render havoc on fellow human they regard as enemy (ies). The spirits in a manner beyond scientific proof can enter into pregnant women and reincarnate into *ogbanje*, and *ogbanmana*, evil child. (Chief Ejope Igwe, 31/12/2016) shares this opinion but added that, they can also reincarnate into trees, anthills, dangerous animals just to perpetrate evil in the society.

The Mbembe people also believe that ancestors on their own volition or request by the human being can return in their form to the world of the living, *oyagbin*, to perform several functions which include protection and regulation of the conducts of the people. Furthermore, spirits return to the world of the living, *oyagbin*, by reincarnating into normal human beings (Chief Asan Irek, 29/12/2016). This Mbembe belief in reincarnation is fundamental and extant. Even today many people without equivocation claim to show proofs of life before. This one aspect adds glamour to the uniqueness of the Africa culture. The divinities and Supreme Being however have unlimited access to the ancestral world particularly on appeal from man to help regulate the activities of the ancestors.

Second from the bottom of the pantheon is the home of the lesser spirits that engulfs the earth, *oyagbin*, into one. It encircles and forms part and parcel of the home of the living, *oyagbin*. There is no clear demarcation separating *oyagbin*, the earth, from *ofhon kw'akpakpibha*, (world of the lesser or evil spirits), and the inhabitants co-exist with the invisible beings wielding more influence and power. The infiltration of *oyagbin* and perpetration of evil by the evil spirits is one reason why the Mbembe man is often either seeking help from divinities, *akha*, or control from *ubinokpabi*, Supreme Being, to ward off evil spirits (Ch. Mrs. Ayabing Okey, 29/5/2016)

The next layer up after *oyagbin* is *okha' fhon*, that is (home of the divinities). The evil spirits have no access to this realm. It is only the Supreme Being with utmost control that has unlimited access to *okha' fhon* to check and regulate the activities of the divinities. In situations where divinities or a divinity is lured into evil deeds by evil-craving human beings, only the Supreme Being, *ubinokpabi* on human appeal or personal volition can restrict and in extreme cases punish both human being and the divinity, *okha*.

At the apex of Mbembe religious pantheon is *ofhon kw'ubinokpabi, erong*, the heavens. The sole occupant of this realm is the Supreme Being. Divinities who report their functions and challenges to God, *ubinokpabi*, do so through communication and dare not attempt entry as they cannot access the domain. His Highness, Chief Otaba Obeji (4/1/2017) informed that the Mbembe people believe on *okha' fhon* and *ofhon kw'ubinokpabi* situating quite far off, though *ubinokpabi* is himself immanent. Consequently, the people build shrines as local abodes for the divinities to be handy and exert their roles on *oyagbin*, the earth and promptly carry out messages from man to the Supreme Being.

Spirit being in African indigenous religion (AIR)

Africans generally have a spiritual universe that is populous with spirits which are diverse in nature. In a narrower perspective, the world is said to be divided into two categories of non-

human spirits and spirits of the dead. Non-human spirits are regarded in a hierarchical order dependent upon their powers and roles. In another view however, theologians and scholars have classified the African world of the spirits into four broad categories of beliefs.

- Belief in the Supreme Being (God)
- Belief in the lesser divinities (gods)
- Belief in ordinary spirits
- Belief in the ancestors (Turaki, 11)

Even though the Africans have a great pantheon of gods, which are divers as earlier stated, belief in Supreme Being is common and very strongly held in Africa.

According to this latter view, at the apex of the hierarchy is the Supreme Being - the Creator, followed by the deities, object-embodied spirits known in the Mbembe spirit world already discussed as *akha*. The ancestors' spirits and other sundry spirits are non-human, comprising both good or harmless spirits and evil spirits. Man stands between this array of spiritual hosts in the spirit world and the world of nature.

Africans see the Supreme Being as self-created. He is the Creator of all things, protector of beings and giver of goodness (Kalu, 41). Ejizu asserts that, traditional Africans believe that success in life; including the gift of off-spring, wealth and prosperity, are all blessings from the gods and ancestors (5). The Supreme Being lives in a home up above the sky but despite his transcendence, He is also immanent. This is what is emphasized in Nupe song, "God is far away, God is in front, He is in the back" (Awolalu&Dopanus, 15). Yoruba of Western Nigeria have the same notion in their saying, "what can you do in concealment that God's eyes do not reach" (Awolalu & Dopanu 5). The Ashanti people of Ghana do not just worship Him but have temples, priests and altars dedicated to his worship. The Mbembe people of Cross River State, Nigeria have temples for the Supreme Being. The above saying reveals the immanence of God in African religious ontology.

During sacrifice or worship, the Africans demonstrate this first with their hands and eyes towards the sky and to the earth after-ward. This is interpreted to mean that, the God who occupies the heavens and earth. This is duplicated by foreign religions in the land. When votaries of foreign religions make their spontaneous prayers and incantations, they brandish their hands in the air with faces fixed towards the sky. Thereafter, their heads are bowed repeatedly all in acknowledgement of the transcendence and immanent attribute of the Supreme Being.

The Supreme Being is the divine king, self-existing, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all caring, immortal, incomprehensible and immutable. In the African ontology, God's attributes are also reflected in names, adages and aphorisms like '*Mebee*' (the one who bears the world),

'Ebari' (the omnipotent father), *'Twedu-ampon*' (the dependable), *'Totrobonus*' (the one who causes rain to fall) and *'Nyinyi*' or *'Nyi*' (He who is everything, He who hears everything), (Fatokun, 32). The Africans believe that the Supreme Being is the most powerful in heaven and on earth and that He is able to do everything. He is the enabler of all who achieve any end, and that all things are feasible through Him. He is the author of good as a reward for virtue and evil as punishment on the wicked.

Divinities

The divinities form another category of spirit beings second only to the Supreme Being at the apex of the African spirit world. On the directives of the Supreme Being the divinities superintend over God's theocratic administration. Onuoha refers to them as gods' ambassadors

or deans (11). Each of these divinities professionalized in a special line of action, hence, they are assigned special responsibilities.

An example of divinity in Mbembe religious world is *Igwo*. *Igwo* is the arch divinity responsible to wipe out witches and wizards and rid the society of evil activities particularly witchcraft. To some communities like Ofat in Mbembe nation the society is associated with *ezeng* python (Ebinda, 123). The sphere of her operation known to man is that, it traverses the spirit realm hunting witches and wizards. When a witch is caught in its ominous acts, the culprit is not killed immediately but allowed time within which to publicly confess in its 'natural form'.

A witch or wizard who wishes to confess is taken before the *Igwo* shrine. After series of incantations and sacrifices by the human instrumentalists or agents of the divinity, the witch or wizard is brought right before the entrance to the shrine within public view. He or she is then provided with concoctions and mixtures to drink. Items in form of grounded native chalk or black powder are smeared slightly on his or her forehead, wrist, feet, back and chest. Those who confessed and their atrocities are considered milder in magnitude are on volition of the divinity forgiven and offered a second chance. Others caught in grave misdeeds involving human blood are most often inflicted with terrible and incurable diseases where the culprits suffer excruciating pains before finally giving up the ghost as ultimate prize. Some who refuse to face the shame that trails public confession simply and adamantly seal their lips and await the consequence. *Igwo* is believed to derive its power and authority for service from *ubinokpabi*, the Supreme Being.

Ancestors

These are the spirits of dead parents who had good deaths and burials and had lived to ripe old ages. The ancestral spirits which are originally of lesser cadre and inhabit the place below the "home of the living" as per our figure 1 above on Mbembe spirit world, can transform into higher spirits. This is when a particular dead father or mother assumes greater prominence and he or she is deified. In that case, the deified dead father or mother becomes so great in power and influence. At that juncture man can only curb its excesses through super human manipulations.

Apart from the near-common eligibility requirements known in Africa for an ancestor, some African cultures recognize ancestors soon after their funeral rites are concluded while others allow longer time to elapse. This is why an ancestor is also seen not only as a dead father or mother but as one from whom a person is descended and who is usually more remote in the line of descendants than a grandparent.

One aspect where the belief in ancestors strongly held in Africa has defied sciences is not only the age of an ancestor but whether the ancestor who continually enjoys reverence from his kin even after acclaim reincarnation is ideal. The Baule people of Cote d'Ivoire believe that when humans are born, they remain members of the spirit families who reside in the ancestral home called *blolo*. During their life time, individuals are never entirely free from the spirits they leave behind. Indeed, spirit families could sometimes look benevolent on their human kin. However, *blolo* family members sometimes interfere negatively with life on earth. Clarke says a spirit wife may become jealous if her husband on earth marries. In that case, her displeasure may manifest in discord between the earthly spouses, infertility or lack of prosperity (26).

Common or lesser Spirit

A more common idea of Africans on the composition of the universe is a “two sided” whole - the visible inhabited by man and the invisible which is the abode of the spirit. Among the Yorubas of Western Nigeria, divinities and spirits are considered together as they do not make too clear a distinction between them; but Mbiti sees them as common spiritual beings beneath the status of divinities, and above the status of man (78). In the diagram above, the spirits live with men in the home of the living, *oyagbin* and could very easily be identified as spirits of men and women who during their lifetimes on earth lived bad lives and died bad deaths (Kalu, 41) and given awful burials. They are the common populace of spirit beings and regarded as most populous among categories of spirits.

These spirits may be related to the natural world and have control over natural world phenomena as earlier stated. For instance, the *Agbodo* masks used by the Appiapumtet people, a community in Mbembe of Cross River State, Nigeria represent various spirits that inhabit the natural world and can offer protection. They are believed to take physical forms as insects or common water fowl. The *baga* belief in Guinea describes water spirits, called *Niniganne*, to associate with both wealth and danger that take symbolic form as snakes (Clarke, 24). Nature spirits particularly in the Mbembe culture area are conceived of as grotesque beings associated with untamed wildness.

Source

This group of spirits in relation to their source can be broadly classified into two: nature and human with each having a myriad of sub-groups. African world-view on the source is not only at variance between communities but also ambiguous. Some spirits are created and exist as a race and procreate with time (Emeke & Ekeopara, 2010). Nature spirits are personification of some powers associated with natural objects like the earth, wind, sun, sky, moon, stars, rain and storm which are believed to influence the activities of man.

Furthermore, the spirit world is populated through the remains of human beings when they die physically. The souls after dead become ghosts or free spirits wholly disembodied and live in the world of men, (Madu, 25). Anyacho says they are “ghost spirits” who died accursed and abominable deaths (248). Bad deaths are through small pox, falling from palm tree, leprosy, drowning, elephantiasis, dying in pregnancy, suicide, lightening and other such inexplicable circumstances and are denied burial ceremonies by their kin. These spirits are rejected from the ancestral realm and exist in this spirit sphere with others. They can vent their anger on unsuspecting relatives and other persons in retaliation for improper burials.

What constitutes bad death particularly through lightening remains controversial in the African’ culture. The Yoruba believe that only the wicked people are struck by Lightening (Awolalu, 36). Consequently wherever lightening strikes a person dead or descends upon a house, such a person has committed some atrocious deeds and the members or occupants of the house so affected are evil. This sharply contradicts the stance of the Nupe people of Sudan who rather believe that a victim of lightening did not die the death of a sinner, but have been called away by God who urgently needs him (Parrinder, 52). With the least misgiving however, death by lightening is largely associated with evil among Africans to this day.

Another group of these spirits is the born-to-die. These spirits transform into children to be born. They are believed to enter into pacts to have brief life spans on earth. The recycling: birth, death and rebirth bestow excruciating pains on the parent families. They are known as *Agbanmana*, evil children among the Mbembe people. The Igbo call them *Ogbanje* while the

Yoruba call them *Abiku* (Awolalu & Dopamu, 6). Most children who are incarnations of these merciless spirits are almost always comely in facial appearances.

Most often they die abruptly but some prefer to feign persistent ill-health that could siphon away the family's economic fortunes with no favour on sight. They are detected through meticulous study and understanding of certain signs and divination. The traditional method of severing such children from this spirit world is through powerful charms prepared by highly qualified native doctors or at worst cutting to pieces or cremation of the corpse.

Abode

Residence of the common spirits is variously conceived in the African culture. Although, they are ubiquitous which is one of the reasons why man fears at all times yet man still designates regions to the respective spirits. For instance, the sea spirits are believed to be attached to waters. Other spirits either dwell underground, in the air, on top of highlands, boulders, in tick forest, on top or inside huge trees etc. The Igbo in Nigeria among other tribes also believe that the spirits dwell underground. This belief is not unconnected with the practice in Africa where the dead are buried underground.

Ordinarily, the terrible height of highlands creates fears in the imaginations of man and commonly regarded as abodes of the spirits. Many African myths tell of how on several occasions hills and highlands have offered protection to people living nearby from undue incursion of enemies. Victories at such events are attributed to the spirits that are believed to dwell in the hills whose superior powers have warded off their enemies.

Still on the abode of the spirits, the Africans also believe that spirits live in woods, bushes and or forest. Certain high trees are believed to be out of the ordinary. Trees like silk cotton, African *salin* wood, Omo and Iroko which are high and towering over and above many other trees in the vicinity are held as sacred and inhabit some powerful and dangerous spirits. Witches, which are other species of common spirits hold their meetings at the foot or top of these trees and at intervals exhume terrible noise. Awolelu says that furniture produced from the wood can make some disturbing noise and doors made of them can fling open on their own accord (49). To appease the spirits that dwell on these trees and avert impending catastrophe, sacrifices are usually offered before such trees are felled. Among the Mbembe in Nigeria, certain rituals are performed. Occasionally people carry out elaborate eating, wining, dancing and all of such around the trees particularly the ones closer to the villages.

Spirits are invisible but may on their volition or in unconscious adherence to strong and forceful manipulations of magic men or diviners be seen by men. Stories of physical encounter of men with spirits physically showing their presence are usually ephemeral. The spirits are said to have shadowy form of body and assume different shapes like human, plants, animals and other inanimate objects. While some spirits can appear like aged women and men, others carry the pictures of young and dazzling looking boys and girls and can be identified as so or so person. The evil-minded spirits appear with terrifying posture which in most cases arrest the mental disposition of the victim who only recuperate to normal life by God's divine grace. The activities of these spirits are viewed differently by Africans. Some are said to be good and play significant roles in community source of likelihood. Madu says they provide security and fortunes to man and man dare not annoy them without appropriate punishment from the gods (6). Others are however malevolent (Tasie in Ilega, 81), inflicting harm on human beings.

Conclusion

To de-emphasize the concept of Spirit Being in African traditional culture is to proscribe African religious belief system. Africans believe that spirits are superior to man and so are not subject to hunger, taste, fatigue and age. They can transform, are immaterial and corporeal beings with the possibility to assume various dimensions. Spirits are inseparable component of existence. To the Africans ‘no spirit no universe’.

List of Interviewees

S/N	NAME OF INTERVIEWEE	AGE	SEX	PLACE OF INTERVIEW	PROFESSION	DATE
1.	Chief Ajah Igbege	72	M	Appiapumtet	Village Head	8/1/2002
2.	Chief Madam Ayabing Okey	67	F	Mile One, Obubra	House wife	29/5/2016
3.	Chief Asan Irek	76	M	Appiapumtet	Farmer	29/12/2016
4.	Chief Ejope Igwe	67	M	Appiapumtet	Pensioner	31/12/2016
5.	His Highness, Chief Otaba Obeji	81	M	Ogama	Clan Head	4/1/2017
6.	HRH.Ovarr Clement Ubugha Ewona	89	M	Ogurokpon	Paramount Ruler of Obubra	7/1/2017

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