

ON DIVINE PROVIDENCE IN AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

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Abstract

Within the context of African cosmology, God is a fundamental determining force. In fact, over the whole of Africa, it is believed that God does not just create; he creates, sustains and maintains the world that he has created by providing the needs of his creatures. It is in this regard that the Ewe refer to him as He who does not withdraw his gifts, and the Banyarwanda speak of him as the underlying force that sustains the universe, and that if he should be no more, the world would collapse. The Igbo refer to him as Osebuluwa - that is, the sustainer of the universe or he that carries the universe in his hands. This piece discovers that the African believes that God provides and sustains the universe he has made through the laws that he has put among his people; through the activities of his deans; through magic, herbs, divination and charms, and his provisions, including the natural elements that he has made and the protection that he offers his creation. The phenomenological approach would be employed in the collection and analysis of data on the African

understanding of providence and sustenance. As against the absence of the belief in the divine sustenance of creation by God in Western thoughts, this work argues that within the African parameter of belief, the world is provided for and sustained by God.

Keywords: African, providence, sustenance, cosmology, phenomenology

Introduction

Providence is the act by which God orders all he has made and events within the system of real beings, be they animate or inanimate, spiritual or physical, towards the supreme end for which they have all been created. Thus, providence involves the active disposition and arrangement of things by the divine, with a view to a definite end. The nature of providence was a fundamental theme in the philosophical and theological speculations of scholastic thinkers. Boethius defines providence as:

...the Divine Intelligence itself as it exists in the supreme principle of all things and disposes all things; or, again, it is the evolution of things temporal as conceived and brought to unity in the Divine Intelligence (IV, vi sq. LXIII, 813 sq.)

In the contention of Boethius, providence is expressed in the created order of things through what he called Fate, which does not operate outside of the divine intelligence. Therefore, providence becomes the means through which God achieves his divine plan for his creatures.

St. Thomas further understands providence as the cause of all things. Thus, providence pertains primarily to the intelligence of God, though it implies also the divine will (Summa I, G. xxii, a. 1). Aquinas connects providence with God's omnipresence, and avers that "it points to the nature of God who is able to behold all things together in one comprehensive act" (I, Q. xxii, a. 3, ad 3^{um}). It is by this same

act of comprehension that he conserves and concurs in all things (I, Q. civ a. 1, ad 4 um). He writes that:

Providence is based upon the consideration of the universe as a whole. God wills that His nature should be manifested in the highest possible way, and hence has created things like to Himself not only in that they are good in se , but also in that they are the cause of good in others. (I, Q. ciii, a. 4, 6)

From the foregoing, Saint Thomas avers that God has created a universe, and not a number of isolated realities. Thus, it follows that natural operations tend to what is better for the entirety of reality, and not necessarily what is better for each part, except in relation to the whole (I, Q. xxii, a. 2, ad 2 um; Q. lviii, a. 2, ad 3 um; Contra Gent., III, xciv). It is within this context that John Damascene understands providence as "the will of God by which all things are ruled according to right reason " (XCIV, 963, 964).

These perspectives notwithstanding, this paper studies the concept of providence within the context of African ontology; that is, how does the African understand providence? To understand this, the paper would study African names and titles for God, African proverbs and African mythologies for indices of the African understanding of providence.

Methodology

This piece is an explanatory and analytical research on the concept of divine providence in African traditional religion in terms of their world view. And because the African world view is the animator of the African daily life, it would reflect manifestations of their concept of divine providence in their way of life. Given the very nature and concerns of this research, it would focus on the theological dimension of African religion, as it would be studying different African names with theological implications, African titles for God, proverbs and myths from different African religious backgrounds on divine providence. This work would rely mainly on secondary sources, that is, books, journals, internet sources, etc. The phenomenological and

hermeneutical approaches would be employed in the collection and analysis of data. In addition, through the philosophical approach, with analytical implications, this piece provides a deeper analysis to the concept of divine providence.

Divine Providence in Igbo-African Names

African names are not just given for the sake of identifying a person or a thing. African names are given with the purpose of history, may be, to remember a certain historical event, or as a prayer, in a prophetic sense, in anticipation of a favour, or to explain what is happening at the moment. As such, African names carry so much meanings, and from them, one discovers the culture, thinking, theology and philosophy of the African people. In relation to divine providence, particular Igbo-African names for persons and titles for God would be studied so as to understand from them how the African understands divine providence.

NO.	IGBO NAMES	MEANINGS	PROVIDENCE
1	<i>Chijindu</i>	My life is in God's hand.	An expression of dependence on God's providence.
2	<i>Chinwendu</i>	God owns my life.	This points to the occurrence of an event that expresses the family's or community's dependence on God's providence.
3	<i>Akachukwu</i>	The hand of God	The manifestation of divine providence is always a sign that the hand of God is with his people.
4	<i>Akamnachi</i>	I am greater in God.	It speaks of the joy of reliance on the

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			providence of God. One is better by relying on God's providence than relying on a fellow human being.
5	<i>Akaolisa</i>	The hand of God	This also, like in the case of <i>Akachukwu</i> , points to the manifestation of divine providence, and the experience of divine providence is always a sign that the hand of God is on his people.
6	<i>Arinzechukwu</i>	If not for God	Without divine providence life would have been worse than it is.
7	<i>Belusolisa</i>	If not for the sake of God	As in the case of <i>Arinzechukwu</i> , without divine providence life would have been unbearable.
8	<i>Chibuifem</i>	God is my light.	This attests to the fact that God's providence lights my way.
9	<i>Chibuike</i>	God is my strength.	It attests to the fact that God's providence is my strength.
10	<i>Chibuzor</i>	God leads.	God's providence

			leads the way for me
11	<i>Chideziri</i>	God wrote my story.	God's providence was already in place right from the very beginning of time. God had provided for it, even before I was born.
12	<i>Chidumaga</i>	God leads me on.	God's providence leads the way for me.
13	<i>Chiedozie</i>	God has fixed it.	God's providence has fixed it. His providence is always available to fix my problems and challenges.

Divine Providence in the Names of God

The names below are names given to God by the Igbo-African. These names were not given to the Igbo by God, as we find in the Old Testament Christian scriptures, but are names that the Igbo have given to God from their own experience of him.

NO.	Names of God	Meaning	Providence
1	<i>Okosisi na eche ndu</i>	The mighty tree that gives protection	God, as a spiritual power, is strong enough to provide protection for me.
2	<i>Echeta obi esike</i>	The giver of confidence	God, as a spiritual power, is my source of confidence. With him I cannot be intimidated.
3	<i>Agbataobi nwa ogbenye</i>	The friend of the poor	God's power is a source of

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			consolation to the poor. For, in spite of his power, he is close to the poor. He saves the poor from the treachery and injustice of the rich.
4	<i>Agbataobi onye ajuru aju</i>	The friend of the rejected	God stands for those who are weak and oppressed. He provides love and support to the weak.
5	<i>Olilianya nde ogbenye</i>	The hope of the poor	When the poor remember God, then they have the confidence to face the challenges ahead.
6	<i>Obata obie</i>	He whose presence ends every pain/misfortune	When God comes into your situation, he changes your pain and misfortune.
7	<i>Onye nzoputa</i>	The saviour	God is the spiritual power that can save those he has created.
8	<i>Chukwu na 'kpu nwa</i>	The God that creates children	Through his providence, God continues to bless his people with

			children.
9	<i>Okwere nkwa meya</i>	The one that fulfills His promise	Once he has made a promise, he is a God that is able to keep his word.
10	<i>Odi mma na eme mma</i>	The good God that does good	Through his providence, God does good continually to humanity.
11	<i>Osebuluwa</i>	God holds the world or keeps the world in existence.	Through his providence, God keeps the world in existence. He holds the world in being.

Divine Providence in African Proverbs

African proverbs are the wisdom of the African people borne from several years of experience and handed down from one generation to another. It is a collection of experiences, including their experience of divine providence.

NO	PROVERBS	PROVIDENCE
1	God gave us the seed of every plant, but we must sow it.	Providentially, God has made a provision for each and every one of us for our survival. Our survival, therefore, becomes a cooperation between ourselves and God's predestined plan for us.
2	God pours rain on the sorcerer's garden.	Our being good or bad does not in any way change God's providence. He makes his provision for both the good and the bad. His providence is, therefore, not dependent whether

		we are good or bad.
3	God will prevent flies from stinging the tailless cow.	God always makes provision, even for the weak. It is through his providence that he provides support for the weak.
4	All things are done by God.	God has a hand in the daily events of our lives.
5	God gives you gifts. Do not forget where he took you from.	The provisions that we have are from God. They are gifts from him.
6	God makes the new day when he wishes.	God's providence is not determined by us. He decides and accomplishes as he wills.
7	People make plans but God makes decisions.	God's providence is at the heart of the success of our plans.
8	God lent us his property here on earth so that we too may lend what we have to our neighbour.	What we have are through the providence of God, and must be used in such a manner that we become the channels of the providence of God. There is nothing that we receive through his providence that is only for ourselves. Whatever we have through his providence is meant for others.
9	God keeps your cattle when you are away.	He works for your good, even when you are away or not taking cognizance of his power and providence.
10	God does not sleep.	This connects his provision with his omnipresence and omniscience. That he does not sleep only assures us of his

		providence at all times and in all seasons.
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African Myths on Divine Providence

1. Nri Myth

The story of the Igbo, no matter how briefly considered, would be incomplete if one omits the Eri-Nri contribution (Madubuko, 1994). Tracing this history, Afigbo avers that Eri clan originated from the regions of Omumbala River, in Aguleri; from there they fanned eastward and established various communities (Afigbo, 1981). Uzuoku describes Eri as the father of all Nri; and tradition says that he came from *Chukwu* (Uzuoku, 1994). It is reported that the earth was not firm when he came into it. To solve the problem of flood, he employed blacksmiths from Awka to use their bellows to dry the flooded land. There was also no food for people on earth to eat. To provide food, he prayed to God and God demanded that he should sacrifice his first son and daughter to him. After the sacrifice and burial of his son and daughter, yam and palm tree began to grow out of the place where he buried his first son, while vegetables and cocoyam grew out of the place where he buried his daughter. If yam germinated from where Eri's first son was buried, it means that yam is the resurrected son of Eri, given to man to sustain life. Yam is also regarded as life (Madu, 2004).

In this myth, there is a cosmic drama among God, human beings, land and crops. Eri, the civilization hero, enjoys a special relationship with Chukwu, and through Eri's sacrifice, humanity now enjoys a special relationship with the land which offers food for its sustenance. The ritual act performed by Eri established a covenant between Eri, his descendants and Chukwu. This explains why yam is very prominent in Igbo sacrifice and life, one which warrants its annual elaborate festival throughout Igbo land (Kanu 2018, 2019).

2. Basare Myth

The Basare are of the Upper Region of Ghana. They believe that God created the world in several stages. The first stage was the creation of heaven supported with several pillars. This was followed by the creation of the world which was in the form of lightening and from which the moon and sun were made. However, the sun and the moon quarreled and the sun threw the moon into the mud. This explains why the moon is less bright than the sun and shines only at night for thieves and witches. The third stage was the creation of the clouds and a red cockerel that crows whenever it thunders. This was followed by the creation of the rain and a male and female rainbow. The last stage was the miraculous creation of two assistants by God to whom he gave the earth as a place to work. This came into being before the creation of mountains and valleys and the sending of rain to form rivers and lakes. Then he created human beings and animals (Abanuka, 1999).

3. Fon myth

The Fon people of the Republic of Benin hold in their myth for creation that God, known as Mawu-Lisa, followed a four-day programme in his creation of the world. This explains why they observe a four-day week. On the first day, he made the world and created the human person whom he placed in it. During the second day, he sent a special agent into the world to make it conducive for living for the human person. The third day was followed by God giving the human person the gift of sight, speech and the ability to know the world around him. On the fourth day, he blessed the human person with the gift of mastering over his environment so as to make it a better place for his own habitation and for the good of other creatures (Abanuka, 1999).

Implications for Divine Providence

The reason for the presentation of the above three myths is to locate in them the nature of divine providence within African ontology. The first myth is the Nri myth; like other African myths, it attributes to God or the Supreme Being the source of everything that does exist. This establishes a link between the creator and the creature. Divine

providence thus becomes a manifestation of the operations of the will of the creator in the creature. The creator created the creature not as an isolated reality but as a reality that operates within the context of a community of realities, a web-like relationship and interrelatedness (Kanu, 2019). Through divine providence, the supreme being maintains his relationship with his creatures by not only providing for them but sustaining their being. It is in this regard that Metuh (1987) observes that:

All beings in the universe find their meaning and purpose in the creative plan of the Supreme Being. They are still under his control because he made them and continuous to direct their actions to achieve his divine purpose. The heavenly realm of the deities, the earth an even the deities themselves have their purpose in God's providence (p. 39).

In the Nri myth, when Eri discovered that the earth was not firm when he came into it from Chukwu and sought partnership with blacksmiths from Awka to use their bellows to dry the flooded land, he was making use of the gift of wisdom (the way the world works) which is 'igwebuiké' in character to seek help for himself. This wisdom is a gift given to him by the Supreme Being for his own survival. Another manifestation of divine providence in the Nri myth was at the time when there was no food for people on earth to eat. To provide food, he prayed to God and God demanded that he should sacrifice his only son and daughter to him. Through the death of his son and daughter, God made a provision of food, not only for him but also for generations yet to come.

In the Basare myth, precisely at the last stage of creation, God miraculously created two assistants. The creation of these assistants shows that in the African concept of creation, God does not create and abandon his creation. He continues to provide for his creatures through various means, and from this myth, he provides and guides them through the deities who are the deans of the Supreme Being. He is, therefore, not a God that is away from his people but present to

them through his deans. Thus, in African ontology, there are various deities that provide for the various needs of the human person.

In the Fon myth, precisely on the fourth day, the myth says that God blessed the human person with the gift of mastering over his environment so as to make it a better place for his own habitation and for the good of other creatures. God's blessing the human person with the gift of mastering his environment is a way of providing for the future of his creatures. More so, in the Basare and Fon myths, divine providence manifests itself in the fact that the creation of the universe was done in stages, which means that God had already mapped out the plan of creation in stages before bringing them into being. Each stage was well planned by God for the fulfilment of a particular purpose.

Conclusion

The whole idea of divine providence is connected to the strong belief that the world was created by God. And so, the African does not believe that after the days of creation, or the order in which creation is described, that creation ended or that God abandoned his creation. There is a strong belief in the continuous presence of God in the things that he has created, and it is through his divine providence that he manifests his presence in the world. It is still his world; it is still his creatures. The Nuer tribe prays thus: "Our Father, it is thy universe, it is thy will" (Evans-Pritchard, 1956, p. 7) and the Galla people address God in these words: "O God, thou hast given me a good day. Give me a good night (Huntingford 1953, p. 74). These point to God's ownership of the universe and the indispensability of his presence in the world.

Since creation does not end with the last day or order of creation, Africans believe in the continuous process of creation by God through his divine providence. This is evident in the Twi people's saying: "God never ceases to create things" (Westermann p. 197), and among the Yoruba, when every new day emerges, they say that it is God's offspring (Idowu, 1973). After creation, God established laws and customs that would govern all that he has made and direct their

purpose towards his end. For instance, he created day and night and ordered their continuous manifestation. African proverbs such as “All things are done by God”; “God makes the new day when he wishes” and “People make plans but God makes decisions” point to the fact that God is still part of the daily evolution of his creation.

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