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The Concept of the Person in African Thought and Culture: A Missiological Appraisal

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The pre-theoretical concern about the concept of the person in philosophical and theological discourse challenges us to give a unique and coherent response to various questions including What is the person? How many distinct ontological entities constitute a person? What is the influence of our culture and society on our system of thought and interpretation of reality and 'non-regular causation of things in the universe? What kind of relationship exists between the thinker and his cultural and religious context?

African scholars, especially philosophers and theologians, take seriously the challenge of giving an adequate response to these questions in the African context and perspective.[1] In discussing the concept of the person in African thought and culture, I will explore how African cosmology and ontology have provided insight for an integral response. My approach, partly descriptive and imaginative draws from the pioneering work of Placide Tempels.[2] The foundation of the problem that we are treating derives from the famous proposition of Aristotle, "man is a rational animal." The expression of Descartes' "*cogito ergo sum*" (I think, therefore, I exist), was inspired and built on this Aristotelian tradition. However, Descartes, like many other authors of the philosophy of the Enlightenment (Hegel, Kant Heidegger), did not see the African people as having the ability to think on the ontological level.[3]

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[1]Cf. L. Adeofe, "Personal Identity in African Metaphysics", in *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, ed. L. M. Brown (Oxford: University Press, Oxford 2004), 69.

[2]In the present study I will make use of the third edition of this work published by Présenceafricaine, Paris 1965.

[3]Cf. F.A. Oborji, "African Traditional Religion between pluralism and ultimate reality" in *Pluralism and mission: Challenges and opportunities,* ed. C. Dotolo (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 2005), 116ff.

African philosophy is responding to this historical legacy of so-called classical philosophy and the Enlightenment-era in their comparison with Africa. African authors have already made good progress in this regard. Thanks to them today no one has any more doubts about the capacity of Africans to think at the philosophical-metaphysical level. In many countries, African philosophy and African Christian theology are studied today at the university level. In the first place, the person is a fundamental entity of reality. Therefore, its concept or meaning does not only belong to a people; because other peoples have their concepts of the person. So, what does the African originality of the person consists of? According to Charles Nyamiti (a Tanzania theologian), the African originality of a concept, such as the "person", goes beyond the accentuation of the term to assume a cultural coloring.[4] In Africa, the person is a concrete reality defined in its ontological humanity, existential, and community. Therefore, African philosophy speaks of three constituents of the person: body, mind, and spirit. For example, among the Igbo (Nigeria), the person is a being resulting from the union of his *aru* (body), *mmuo/obi* (mind/soul), and *chi* (a personal genius - the spirit that accompanies the person, destiny of being [selfhood], who one is). *Aru* (body), *mmuo/obi* (mind/soul/spirit) and *chi* (a personal genius/spirit) are integrated constituents and co-relational of the person as a unique being.[5] These three constituents of the person are co-relational without any dualism, and without them, the person no longer has his/her true meaning.

The Context and Historical Background of the Debate

Here we want to emphasise two main currents, which defined the context and historical background as well as the development of the current debate on the African concept of the person: 'Ethno-philosophical Scholarship of African scholars'; and 'The Rise of cultural nationalism among African Intellectuals and Statesmen'.

The Ethno-philosophical Scholarship of African Scholars

In the African context, pioneering work of PlacideTempels, *La*

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[4]Cf. C. Nyamiti, "Approaches to African Theology," in *The emergent Gospel: Theology from the underside of History*, ed. S. Torres & V. Fabella, (Maryknoll, NT: Orbis Books, 1978), 39.

[5]Cf. S.N. Ezeanya, "God, spirits and Spirit World", in, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. K. A. Dickson & P. Ellingworth (Maryknoll, NT: Orbis Books: 1969), 35.

Philosophie Bantoue, published in 1945 was decisive in determining the orientation of philosophical discourse on the then-emerging cultural nationalism in Africa. The main objective of Tempels was to reveal the existence of an arrangement of philosophical reflection of the people, Ba Luba, an ethnic group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). To this African people, Tempels ascribed a collective philosophy, an African ontology:

> I believe that we must faithfully portray the Bantu thought in European language, by saying that the Bantu speaks, acts, and lives as if for them, the beings are the *forces*. The *force* is not for them an accidental adventurist reality. The *force* is more than a necessary attribute of being: The strength is the nature of the being, force is being, being is strength.[6]

The school of thought inspired by Tempels' book and effort is the so-called ethno-philosophy. It is represented in its First Phase, by some African scholars such as Alexis Kagame of Rwanda. *The Bantu-Rwandaise Philosophie de l'être* (the philosophy of being Bantu-Rwandese) of Kagame is a work conceived as verification and reformulations, in terms of more analytical and rigorous propositions of Tempels. Kagame's work increased the importance of local language for the development of African philosophy and theology. Kagame, famous for his historical, linguistic, and literary erudition, and for his writings, postulated an ontology, which spoke of categories of Kinyarwanda being, or 'forces'. Powerful in his linguistic knowledge, Kagame remarked that the Bantu languages are known for their use of the phenomenon of word classes and prefixes, suffixes, and fixtures of a complex nature, on which it had based their unity in the subjective sense of the term. Therefore, these characteristics, which constitute the way of expression of the Bantu, help to emphasize that structural dynamism that originates from a real and safe metaphysical vision of the world. This justifies their way to articulate the function of reality and its meaning, as can be seen from the Bantu philosophy of Tempels.

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[6]Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, 35.

Moreover, the entire linguistic system of Bantu is generally open to concrete abstractions. Starting from any word (noun, adjective, verb, adverb, etc.), the *muntu* manages to build an abstract concept by adding an *ad hoc* prefix. On this basis, Kagame postulated the existence of certain categories of being or some "forces" in the Bantu philosophy. These included *Muntu* (God, spirits, men); *kintu* (animals, plants, and minerals); *Hantu* (time and space); and *Kuntu pouch* (the modes such as beauty, the laugh).[7] Therefore, following the tradition of Tempels, it can be concluded that for Kagame the domain of the ultimate reality of Africa is situated inside the "vital force" that unites the beings that constitute the Bantu cosmology and philosophy. In any case, critics see in the approach of Kagame, a mere sentimental impetus to respond to the colonial injury and scholarship, according to which the African was considered incapable of grasping an abstract concept and incapable of any thought that is systematic and consistent.[8] It is this new awareness of the ontological concept of "*force vitale*" (or "*force-unione*"), that lies at the base of the African vision of the world and the ultimate reality.

Vincent Mulago, also from the DRC, in the region of the Bantu, dedicated his scholarship to exploring what he describes as "*force-unione*." One might say that it is in the person of Vincent Mulago that the real evaluation of the "life" as a basis for assessing the African philosophy in the tradition of Tempels, finds its more eloquent spokesperson.[9] Mulago was dedicated to answering the question: can we speak of an ontology of the Bantu peoples? And if this ontology exists, what are the salient features? Simply put, Mulago was interrogating whether there is a Bantu philosophy.[10]

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[7]Cf. A. Kagame, *La Philosophiebantou-rwandaise de l'être*, Brussels, 1956, pp. 99-120.

[8]Cf. L. Boka of Mpasi, *"The African theology,"* the Journal of Moral theology (RTM) 41, no. 6 (2002): 863.

[9]For this reason, Mulago has deserved the title of African theologian pioneer, especially due to his treatise on the concept bantu of life which he calls "the vital union". He graduated at the Pontifical University Urbaniana in Rome, Mulago wrote a Phd thesis entitled: *The vital union chez les Bashi, Banyarwanda et les Barundiface à l'unitéecclésiale vital*(vital union at the Bashi, the Banyarwanda and Barundi). Part of this thesis was published in 1956 with the title: *The vital union Bantu ou Le Prince de cohesion dans la communauté chez les Bashi, Banyarwanda et les Barundi,* in: *AnnaliLateranensi*XX (1956) 61-263.

[10]Cf. V. Mulago, *A visage africain du Christianisme. The vital union Bantu face to the unité ecclesial vital (*Paris: *Présenceafricaine*, 1965), 147.

Through his analytical investigation of Bantu cultural and religious elements vis-à-vis the religious categories of western philosophy, Mulago places the African ontology in the phenomenology of the Bantu concept of "vital union" (*vital union*). According to Mulago, for the Bantu, the centre of gravity is in the concept of the "vital union" which can be summed up in the family relationship. Strictly speaking, it concerns only the immediate family, but in its wider application includes all the kin. The unit that reigns among people of the same ethnic group can be seen as an extension of the family. But it can be extended to encompass the various treaties and alliances between the different clans. For the Bantu, life as the essence of "vital union" is the communion, 'being with the other.' Such a communion survives even death since the fundamental concept of Bantureligion relies on the bond that unites the living beings to their deceased ancestors, who are the intermediaries between the living and God, the supreme source of all life.

Mulago concludes that the cult of ancestors combines the two worlds of the visible and invisible. Humans can only exist in the community and for the community. The Vital Union, therefore, has a dual function that corresponds to the dimension "vertical" and "horizontal" of religion. It is the connection with God, the supreme source of life, and at the same time the bond between man and his neighbor and the world of things. The vital union is neither exclusively a life corporal nor exclusively a spiritual life. Rather, it is life in the totality of his being, in its full integrity, as this is "above-empirical" because the life here on earth and afterlife are inseparable and interdependent. Mulago incorporates the concept of a hierarchy of being as exposed in the Bantu philosophy of Tempels (even if with various nuances)[11] and developed by Alexis Kagame that modifies the terms. The beings are placed according to an order of power and are divided roughly in two worlds, the invisible and visible. In the first, *Imana* (God) is supreme; then in descending order of the founders and the spirits of the heroes of culture, finally, parents and deceased kinship. The king and the

[11]Mulago considers that the interpretation that Tempels gives the concept bantu of *muntu*is "philosophically unhealthy". However, it seems that it is "justified from the point of view of phenomenological". Cf. V. Mulago, *A visage africain*, 150-15; see also J. Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 134.

queen-mother are located at the top of the hierarchy of the visible world that then widens into a sort of pyramid where they appear in descending order the heads, patriarchs, heads of families, and finally the simple family members. The animals, plants, and objects created and inanimate being considered as part of the global existence of those to whom they belong. The beings may affect one another in good and in evil, which will increase or decrease the vital force.

In this way, Mulago reaches the personal thesis of the *NTU* as "being", which is distinctly different from that of Tempelsthat identified the "being" with the vital force. Mulago says that among the Bantu nothing authorizes one to identify the being (*NTU*) with the vital force (being mean vital force).[12] Mulago retraces all the subdivisions of the Bantu concept of the *NTU: okuntu* (among the Bashi) and *nkuntu* (among the Banyarwanda and Barundi). For him, the *Ntu*is "being", but categorically rejects the notion of Tempels where says that *muntu* is being, for the simple fact that the philosophy "wisdom" does not stop at the causality. Said in Aristotelian terms, there must be a ***causa finalis*** that has a permanent duty to maintain the vital union in its extension to both the ancestors and the clan and the firstborn as far as the rest of the members of the family.[13] Because of this union, this intimate participation, there is a mutual influence between all members of the community. This influence was born through the *Ntu* in the mutual influence that exists between the living and the dead. The *Ntu* may affect one another. In those who possess the same vital source, such influences do not ever stop, even when death occurs.[14]

We can conclude by saying that Mulago has identified the central element of the African vision of the world, namely, the interrelation and the relational nature between beings (divine and human) in the flow of life. Therefore, relationality is at the center of African

[12]However, despite this his criticism, Mulago seems to have followed the same school methodology and the same philosophical categories of Tempels in devising a Bantu philosophy specifies.

[13]Cf. V. Mulago, *a visage africain,* 157.

[14]Mulago used this concept to develop his ecclesiology of the Church as the Mystical Body, influenced by the teaching of the *Mystici Corporis,* Encyclical of Pope Pius XII (1943). Mulago sees the ecclesiology of the Mystical Body of Christ as akin to the Bantu concept of the vital union.

concepts that relate to the reality in the African concept of the person.

The Current of Cultural Nationalism

The ethno-philosophical approach of African philosophy is linked to and influenced historically by the movement of the cultural nationalism then in vogue in the whole of Africa, especially during the colonial period in the nineteenth century. It is from this context and in its background (historical) Intellectual, that the concept of Négritude (of the African person) takes its shape. It was indeed the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (in his article "*Gluck's Orphée noir*" (*Black Orpheus* (1949)) who was the first to extend the meaning of the concept of the négritude, in line with the philosophy of the existentialist Heidegger: "Being-in-the-world-of-negro" (to mean a project of collective freedom of Negro). Also, it was Aimé Césaire (the Martian poet), in his poem "*Cahier d'a retour pays natal*" (*Diary of a return to my native land* (1939)), who gave the concept its broader meaning, denotes as an adventure of the conscience of a Negro freed.

In his contribution to the literary theory of Négritude, Léopold Sédar Senghor widened the definition of Négritude, brought proposed by Sartre and Césaire. Instead of being a factor quota of collective existence of African and conscience, as argued by Sartre (for Senghor this aspect corresponds to what he called 'subjective Négritude'), the concept denoted for Senghor a quality constitutive of the black race. Despite what the African is today under the requirements of the historical process, the theme means a complex of factors' goals that are shaping the African experience, inserted in the forms of life on the continent, and manifested in ways and sentiments of its people. Therefore, Senghor defines négritude as "the sum total of the cultural values of Africa". The Négritude of Senghor represents an effort to offer an understanding of the African.

The concept of négritude of Senghor takes the form of an exposure of a distinctive manner of African to relate to the world. Appropriating the concept of 'participation' of Lèvy-Bruhl, he gives a primary place to emotion as a peculiar way of African for access to the world. For Senghor, the emotion is not simply a psychological

state, but a way of learning, a "capture of being integral and conscience - from world indeterminate."[15] The thought of Senghor is centered on the opposition between the mystical approach to reality determined by emotion developed in Africa and pure intellect that he thought characterised the philosophy in the West; hence, the historical background of Descarte's *cogito ergo sum*. According to Senghor, emotion is governed by intentionality, and thus presents itself as a valid way of cognition.

We have here an epistemological foundation of African world vision and its *collective ethos* interpreted by Léopold Senghor. He sees in the African conscience a total reality that embraces the continuum from the realm of nature to the supernatural. The principle determinant of this *Weltanschauung* (world view) and the system of social organization which derives from it, leads to spiritualism that invests all phenomena with a sacred character. The Nègritude of Senghor represents an attempt to articulate an African ontology and personalism. Despite its limits and its status as a disputed philosophy, the effort of the philosophy of Senghor-négritude, as D.A. Masolo observes, is "the lawful origin of philosophical discussion in Africa". The movement of self-definition initiated by it has generated an African philosophy that has its origin from the anthropological reading that relates to the traditional cultures of the continent. We can say that the ethno-philosophy as directly attributed to the négritude was an effort that wants to define the African identity in terms of an ontology.[16]

However, the theories of Negritude and ethno-philosophy have received some criticisms. Frantz Fanon was the first to formulate a heavy criticism against the Negritude, as the theory of an auto-racial black and the creation of a collective identity that African also had the backing of the ethno-Philosophy. In his works, Fanon bore his radical spirit in its criticism of the négritude, starting with the analysis of the pathology of colonialism in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Its analysis took the form of the thesis of Hegel of the subject of the black man and his conscience, that of the struggle for

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[15]Cited in: F. Abiola Irele, "Francophone African Philosophy," *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux, 113.

[16]Cf. Irele, "Francophone African Philosophy," 116.

recognition in the dialectic relationship between master and slave. The "clinical" perspective of Fanon is focused on the psychological interior of the depravity of colonial domination. The ethics of violence, processed in *the wretched of the Earth* (1961), was inspired by his understanding of restorative value for the colonised natives. His radicalism of non-compromise with its rejection of a mere culturalism confers the violence with the transcendent meaning. According to him, the African culture will take its concrete form only when you build it on the fight of the people, not on the songs, poems, or folklore.

Moreover, the criticism of Fanon against négritude has had its influence on the philosopher Marcien Towa that decided to skimp the school of cultural nationalism (1971). According to Towa, the transformation of the present African condition means for him to fight for the transformation of its essence, what is particular to the person, original and unique to it, to enter the negative report and critical of himself. This disaffection toward Nègritude will lead to a theoretical attack on the Ethno-Philosophy. It was a stage that had an important significance in the evolution of the African philosophy, at least in the French-speaking area. The fact is very evident in the initial objection of Eboussi-Boulaga against the *Bantu philosophy* of Tempels. Boulaga describes the *Bantu philosophy* of Tempels as "an ontological system that is totally unconscious, who wore his philosophical expression in an inappropriate and inconsistent vocabulary."[17] Boulaga'dobjection has consequences on the philosophy of Paulin Hountondji in his book *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality*. The emphasis that Hountondji has put on the methodological procedure of the authors of the ethno-philosophy has made him understand that there is a 'confusion of gender' in their efforts to build a philosophical discourse with an ethnological interest. For Hountondji, ethno-philosophy was "highly inspired by ideological discipline without a status in the world of theory."[18]

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[17]Cf. F. Eboussi Boulaga, *African authenticity and philosophy: The crisis of the Muntu: intelleigenza, responsibility, liberation* (Milan: Christian Marinotti Editions, 2007) (original title: *La Crise du Muntu. Authenticitèafricaine et philosophi* and, Présenceafricaine, Paris 1977).

[18]P. J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 52.

Despite implicit unanimity in the concept of philosophy as a collective system of thought immanent in the culture of the people, Hountondji opposes the criterion of philosophy as an explicit discourse and its strict nature as a critical task. He presents philosophy as a reflection on the science considered as a significant component of modern culture, and whereas the philosophical commitment with the development of science. Due to the lack of a scientific culture in Africa (as he had judged from its western perspective), he concludes that the continent is still too far from possessing the necessary conditions for the philosophical practice. The repossession of the way of thinking of science in the western tradition, the practice in the context of the traditional society of Africa, and the concern for their modernisation and expansion in contemporary Africa gave Hountondji the main orientation for his reflections inspired by an acute sense of the possible relationship of philosophy to public policy and the social practice. Therefore, the role of philosophy, according to Hountondji, includes “Analysis of the collective experience with the aim of a criticism of everyday life" (1992:359).

The political dimension of the critics of Hountondji reached a peak in Achille Mbembe's, *Provisional notes on the postcolony* (1992). Focused on the phenomenology of political life in contemporary Africa, Mbembe emphasises the character introspective and critical of the intellectual activity in Africa in the post-colonial era, as a function of the existential problems inherent to the process of transition in contemporary Africa. This goes beyond what has been called by Oladipo, "the crisis of significance" in African philosophy. This activity has the purpose of preparing a philosophical basis for social development in Africa, in search of a new order of collective life, that Hountondji calls "the Utopia of another company."[19] In this regard, we must not forget the work of V.Y. Mudimbe, his criticism of the discourses of the Africanist. Its contribution to this debate is significant, especially in terms of the question of the relationship between speech and the constitution of thought with ambiguous modernity of Africa. *The Invention of Africa* (1988), the major work of Mudimbe, presents his treatment of the subject, and the

[19]Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 360.

examination of its implications. Moreover, the strength of Mudimbe's works lies in its report of the intellectual adventure African, which in its view is a result of the vision of the African mind in its comparison with the system of the western world.[20]

You may say that it is here that Mudimbe has identified the line of African philosophy today. The intersection between the trends in Western philosophy and intellectual activity in contemporary Africa assumes an important role in the development of African philosophy. Today, African intellectuals have done the philosophical study to further discussions about those problems that have preceded its origins as a science (philosophy) in the West and that today appear to give the direction for the future of philosophical science itself.

The Debate between Ethno-philosophy and 'Classical Philosophy'

The current debate on African personalism owes much to the understanding of man and culture from the contemporary social sciences more than from philosophy (classical traditional).[21] Therefore, both African philosophy and theology discuss African personalism through intercultural dialogue between how culture and African Traditional Religion (ATR) were interpreted in the Western categories and the new re-interpretation by African scholars.

One of such scholars is Okot p'Bitek, the legendary African philosopher of Ugandan origin in his *magnum opus* entitled: *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. He uses western categories to express and analyse the system of African thought. p'Bitek called on African philosophers and theologians to undress from their colonial heritage to be able to express and interpret correctly, in their research the culture and system of African Thought.[22]

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[20]Cf. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[21]Cf. F. A. Oborji, *The African theology and Evangelization*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Leberit Press, 2016), 76.

[22]Cf. Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: Literature Bureau, 1979), viii.

According to D. A. Masolo (Kenya), "a careful reading of the current debate about the concept of "person" in the culture and the African Traditional Religion, reveals to us very heavy baggage of the colonial influence on our way of thinking in the world since I arrived in Africa the colonial institutions."[23] *Juok* is a Luo word (Eastern Africa), which usually translates as "soul" or "spirit". It is clear today that this translation betrays the word *Juok* of the Luo people. Precisely for this reason – some contemporary African philosophers have felt the need to 'decolonise' the African thought from its over-colonial impositions. Among these thinkers, there is the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu. He condemns the colonial heritage, evident in the representations of the African thought. Wiredu sees this as a function of the "historical taxation of foreign categories on African systems of thinking in the world."[24] According to him, the means used for this historic taxation of foreign categories on the way of thinking of Africa are language, religion, and politics.

Okot p'Bitek founded his studies of African religion on this paradoxical problem, i.e., the imposition of the history of foreign categories on systems of African thought. In this context, p'Bitek criticises the cultural and social anthropology as a discipline of appendix created to justify the colonial expansion. He characterises the new discipline of cultural anthropology as a science specialising in the study of problems relating to the cultures and in the affairs of a people that have been affected as less developed from the colonial empire. p'Bitek insists that cultural anthropology was a colonial discipline and that its language and its conceptual system instruments were representatives of the settler. According to him, foreign scholars have never had a genuine interest in the study of African religion as such. Their works have remained an integral part of some controversy or debates in the Western world. Therefore, they were not useful to the people of Africa. We must also add that the same sentiments were expressed recently by some Western anthropologists, according to which the old tradition of cultural

[23]D. A. Masolo, "The concept of person in Luo modes of thought," in *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, ed. L. M. Brown (New York, NY; Oxford: Oxfored University Press, 2004), 84.

[24]Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particular: An African Perspective*, 136.

anthropology demonstrates the self-design community through its representation of the other people as "the one thing that the European person is not." The works of Western scholars such as Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Fischer, and Johannes Fabian have sought to justify the thesis of Okot p'Bitek on the over-imposition of Western categories on the African system of thought.[25]

The post-colonial theory of Okot p'Bitek resonates in the thoughts of some African scholars like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kwasi Wiredu, and John Mbiti, who propose the decolonisation of the African mind.[26] Notably, John Mbiti argues that the concepts and traditional cultural Africans must be interpreted and assessed in the context of their cultural significance of Africa. According to Mbiti, concepts cultural and traditional African usually lose their original significance when they are translated or explained with the concepts and systems of thought of anthropological categories –and foreign languages.[27] The Latin proverb, "Every translator is a traitor", finds in this regard a strong resonance.

However, the problem of translation and interpretation is not only specific to ATR. But the ATR, as a cultural religion, has its peculiarity and poses the problem of being able to induce many translators and interpreters to become—traitors. Therefore, we still have the problem of interpreting and translating the concepts of the ATR and African culture in the concepts, languages, and systems of western thought. For example, can we say that the concepts of God, beings (divine and human), in person, and of life, in ATR and those of Christianity, coated in the culture and the western system of thought, are identical? Or are perhaps different? How, then, can we translate, interpret, and express the meanings of the concepts of the

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[25]Cf. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973); J. Cliford, *The Predicament of Cultures: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); G. Marcus & J. Clifford, eds., *Writing Cultures: The Poetics and politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); G. Marcus & M. M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986); J. Fabian, *Time and the other: How Anthropology makes its Object* (New York, NY: Columba University Press, 1983).

[26]Cf. N. Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986); Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particular: An African Perspective*,.

[27]Cf. J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 1. (Italian Translation: *In addition, the magic*, SIX, Turin 1992.

ATR in the Western concepts and thought-forms, without betraying the original meanings of those African concepts[28]

The Question of Method in Philosophy and Theology Today

The consequence of the above debate is that the African concept of the person leads to the comparison between the method of philosophical and theological research and the interpretation and evaluation of the significance of the various elements of the African culture and ATR. The use of Western categories and thought patterns to interpret and evaluate African culture and religion is questioned today by African scholars.[29] The main reason for such criticism is the prejudiced approach of previous studies on the value of African culture and religion. Precisely for this reason, contemporary African scholars are discussing the universal dimension of culture and ATR in dialogue with Western Culture and Christianity.[30]

According to I. A. Menkiti,

> When we are prepared for a true intercultural dialogue in this field, we would see that in 'non-regular' things of causation in the universe, it is not necessary to conceive things in terms of magic. But what should and must be concluded is that the universe is a complex process. In this sense, the natural powers and therefore the beliefs that can be found between the individual people or groups of people, must be judged in the light of the natural complexity, and in what respect the causal attributions. If we do something of this kind, we would see that there are some degrees of reason for our belief in those things.[31]

[28]Cf. F. A. Oborji, *Toward a Christian Theology of African Religion* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2005), 1-2.

[29]In this regard it is important to remember the pioneering contribution of Senegalese scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop. See for example, some of his works: C. Anta Diop, *Nations nègres et Cultures*, Paris: Présenceafricaine, 1955); Id., *Antèrioitè des Civilisations Negres: Mytheou Vérité Historique?* (Paris: Présenceafricaine, 1967) (in English: *The African origin of Civilization: Myth or reality*.)

[30]Cf. Oborji, *Toward a Christian Theology of African Religion,* 181ff.

[31]I. A. Menkiti, "Physical and metaphysical understanding: Nature, Agency, and causation in African Traditional Thought", in *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, ed. L. M. Brown (New York, NY; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 132. See also, I. A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought", in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. R. Wright (New York: University Press of America, 1979).

Menkiti's thesis evokes questions on African personalism: How do people know? What is the way of knowing on the part of the Africans? What stands inevitable, in discussing the nature of 'personalism' in the diagram of African thought is the epistemological frame of consciousness or self-awareness. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell calls this way of knowing, introspection, stating that: "We are not only aware of things, but we are quite aware of being aware of them."[32]

When we have a sensory experience, we know that we have the experience, thus do the experience itself, how to feel hot during the summer, see the dog home when one arrives at home from work or an object to which it is already accustomed.[33] The Igbo people of Nigeria calls this awareness cozy (introspection) *amamife* (amamihe), which can mean—the process of entering the act of knowing in himself. Also, this awareness cozy (introspection), in the Traditional Igbo Society, is introduced into the mystery of knowledge (*ima-ife*) through the process of initiation from adolescence to adulthood. This means that besides the knowledge of daily experiential, the abstract (metaphysical philosophical), the adult is the one who has been started within his company in the mystery of life, in the tradition and the customs left by the ancestors for the group. These traditions and ancestral customs are a continuing rule of life, a rule that must be known and assumed by the living because it depends on their welfare and their completeness.[34]

'Thinking' or thought is called *echiche*, and you can exercise it in two different ways: *Etu mu chere* (as I think); therefore, the Igbo say, *ucheonyeadinjo* (no one sees evil in his thought). And then, *echicheoha* (community thought). But what we cannot deny is the ratio *ab initio* and co-extensive between the way of thinking, the concepts used in the individual in his thought, and what its society and its culture have provided. There is indeed a personal thought of every individual, but such a thought cannot be understood without

[32]B. Russell, *The Problem of Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), 49.
[33]Cf. Masolo, "The concept of person in Luo modes of thought," 102.
[34]Cf. B. Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992, 17; Id., "A Christocentric Ethic for Black Africa," in *Theology Digest* 2, no. 30 (1982): 143.

taking into consideration the cultural context and empirical thinker. Therefore, within this discourse of the philosophical concept of the person, we must not forget that our concepts of both philosophical and theological thoughts have always been influenced by the cultural context of the thinker. This cultural factor in our philosophy and theology challenges us to open up ourselves to the understanding of the culture that contemporary social sciences have supplied us with.[35]

Any reflection on the philosophy of the person must not ignore the relationship between the person and the culture. It must seek to render an account of the scientific rigor of the term *culture*. Culture is specifically a historic reality. On the historical level, society exists before the individual. It offers him a social environment that is already well experienced, that encapsulates and determines the whole of human activity (including philosophical and theological reflection). The society offers to each individual the possibility of entering a "human universe", already experienced, with its particular face, and that places its existence under the sign of solidarity and communion with others. This discourse on the relationship between culture and the person helps us to overcome the excesses of a certain *personalism* in philosophy that tends to present the human person as a "subject", an ideal that escapes any social constriction and obviate the excesses of a *sociologism* that makes the human person a passive object in the hands of his/her group or society.

Conclusion

I would like to highlight two factors that must be taken into account when we are discussing the African concept of the person within the Western system of thought. The first point is that from what had been expressed up to now, it is obvious that in speaking of the person as a philosophical concept in the African context and his relationship with the Western system of thought, we should not ignore the use of linguistic analysis of Africa and its cultural context. The assistance of the linguistic analysis of African people in this regard may be more useful than the abstract philosophical process offered us up to now.[36]

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[35]Cf. A. Peelman, *Inculturation: The Church and Cultures* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1993), 40ff.

[36]Cf. Masolo, "The concept of the person in Luo modes of thought," 99.

The second point is a philosophical-theological pilgrimage of intercultural dialogue on the part of foreign scholars into African philosophy and theology. According to John Mbiti, 'African scholars have already made their pilgrimages into Western philosophy and theology'. They would like their colleagues in the West to do the same into the African Thought system and theology.[37] Mbiti says that the dichotomy between the young and the ancient churches, between Western Christianity and the Christianity of the southern continents, is real, but it is also a false dichotomy. The possibility of overtaking this false dichotomy, according to Mbiti, depends on our willingness to embark on new philosophical and theological pilgrimages, to tackle new paths in philosophy and theology. The philosophers and theologians of the young churches have made their pilgrimages in philosophical and theological learning of the ancient churches. But the Western scholars were yet to engage in such a philosophical-theological pilgrimage.

The new landscape shift of Christianity toward the territories of the southern continents challenges us to begin a mutual, reciprocal philosophical and theological pilgrimage between the older and younger churches, between scholars from the West and scholars the Southern continents. Mbiti concludes:

> there can be no philosophical and theological conversation or a dialogue between north and south, east and west, until we embrace each other's concerns and widen our knowledge to reach the horizons of one another. The philosophers and theologians of the southern hemisphere believe they know most of the concerns of the everchanging world of the most ancient Christian zone (*Christendom*) of Europe. They would like to see the same from part of the ancient Christian zone (*Christendom*), i.e. that they come to know their concerns regarding their struggling for human survival.[38]

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[37]Cf. J. S. Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and universality of the Church," in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, ed. G. Anderson and T. Stransky (New York, NY; Grand Rapids, MI: Paulist Press; Eerdmans, 1976), 17.

[38]Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and universality of the Church," 17.

In other words, beyond the traditional sources of philosophy, the Aristotelian-scholastic and the enlightenment philosophy of Descartes and post-Descartes "*cogito*", philosophy is called today to take seriously the discourse on Ethno-philosophy, culture and mutual dialogue among different contexts. That is, as philosophical and theological sources, these are valid for modern scholarship and reflection, together with traditional sources (classical philosophy and theology) that we have applied up till today. This is a call to philosophy and theology today to promote intercultural dialogue in all fields of their respective research.[39]

[39]Cf. Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and universality of the Church," 6-18.