

THE COSMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRITS IN AFRICAN THOUGHT: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper examines the cosmological significance of spirits in traditional African thought system. It explores the ontological, moral and metaphysical roles of spirits in sustaining existential unity within the traditional thought system. In many African traditions, the cosmos is not split into mutually exclusive realms of materiality and immateriality but conceived as a continuum of interconnected forces. The question that looms is; how do spirits function within African metaphysical system as relational beings in order to produce moral order and ontological coherence? Adopting the analytical and hermeneutic methods, this paper aims to provide a critical understanding of African spiritual cosmology, its epistemological foundations, ethical implications and metaphysical commitments. It involves a critical engagement with historical and contemporary African philosophical debates. The paper argues that spirits, whether ancestral, divine or natural are understood as mediating agents that link the Supreme Being, humanity and the environment together in a dynamic web of existence. The findings reveal that in African thought system, spirits are integral, and not marginal to the ontological architecture, shaping causal-explanatory models, communal morality and ecological interdependence. The paper concludes that the spiritual dimension of African cosmology is not simply a cultural superstition but a coherent philosophical category rooted in lived experience and a relational being. The implications extend to contemporary philosophical and theological discourses, offering alternative paradigms for understanding being, community and moral order in a pluralistic world.

Keywords: African Thought, African Cosmology; Spirits; Ontology; Relational Being; Ancestral Mediation.

Introduction

The idea and cosmological significance of spirits occupy a central place in the intellectual, religious and philosophical landscape of African thought system. Contrary to the dualistic worldview prevalent in the Western metaphysics, where spirit and matter are conceived as ontologically distinct and often opposed, African cosmology depicts existence as an interrelated continuum. Within this vision, the material and the spiritual are not contradictory but complementary dimensions of reality.¹ Spirits whether ancestral, natural or divine are therefore not peripheral entities but active agents within the structure of being, influencing both visible and invisible realms of existence.

The African understanding of the universe is fundamentally holistic, in which all beings living and non-living, visible and invisible participate in a network of vital relationships. This cosmological vision, sometimes described as a “vitalist ontology,” holds that the universe is animated by a universal life-force emanating from the Supreme Being and coursing through all entities.² Spirits occupy an intermediate position within this ontological hierarchy. They serve as mediators between the transcendent and the immanent, facilitating communication between the divine, humanity and nature. This mediating function of spirits reveals an African metaphysics that is participatory rather than hierarchical, dynamic rather than static. In this sense, spirits represent both a cosmological and ethical category, shaping how communities interpret causality, moral order and the meaning of life.

Philosophically, the concept of spirit in African thought resists simple classification within Western categories of idealism or materialism. Rather, it embodies what some scholars characterise as “becoming” a philosophy in which being is always relational and processual.³ Spirits, as expressions of vital force, are manifestations of continuity between seen and unseen worlds. They are neither ghosts nor abstract essences but ontological realities that demonstrate the permeability of cosmic boundaries. The presence of spirits is not restricted to religious experience but extends to social ethics, ecological balance and epistemological processes. Through their participation in human affairs, spirits maintain moral and cosmic harmony, affirming the African belief that disorder in one realm reverberates throughout the entire web of existence.⁴

The role of spirits in African cosmology can also be interpreted as an expression of the epistemological orientation of African societies. Knowledge within this framework is not merely empirical or rational but experiential and relational. Spirits serve as both objects and sources of knowledge. Divination, for instance, operates on the assumption that spiritual entities disclose hidden dimensions of reality inaccessible through the senses.⁵ This epistemic openness to the spiritual realm challenges the reductionism of modern scientific rationality and widens the horizon of what can be deemed valid knowledge. In African societies, knowing is not only to perceive but to participate and be attuned to spiritual vibrations that permeate the universe.

Historically, African philosophers seem to have approached the concept of spirit from various interpretative perspectives. Although early ethno-philosophical works adopted the metaphysical vital-force model, however more recent scholarship appears to critique and refine such frameworks. For example, contemporary analyses of the African philosophy of religion examine the concepts of God, ancestors and supernatural entities from analytic and decolonial perspectives.⁶ While these newer treatments call for greater analytical rigour and caution against conflating theology with philosophy, they nonetheless affirm that African thought cannot be thoroughly comprehended without acknowledging the pervasive influence of spiritual dimensions in anthropology, ethics and epistemology.

The significance of spirits in African cosmology also extends into moral and political domains. Spirits are believed to uphold communal values, reward virtue and punish moral transgression. Through ancestral veneration and ritual observance, the living maintain a moral relationship with the spiritual world, thereby sustaining communal integrity. In this respect, the cosmological order mirrors an ethical order an alignment between metaphysical harmony and moral responsibility.⁷ The presence of spirits serves as a metaphysical reminder of human accountability not only to society and nature but also to unseen custodians of moral law. Thus, African ethics cannot be separated from African cosmology; both are grounded in the same participatory conception of existence.

Moreover, the spiritual dimension of African thought offers significant implications for contemporary philosophical and theological discourse. In a global intellectual environment often dominated by secular materialism, African cosmological visions challenge dichotomies that separate science from spirituality, reason from faith and humanity from nature. They propose an integrative account of reality in which the spiritual and the material are interdependent. Recent edited volumes on African eco-philosophy underscore this integrative vision, emphasising that earth-based spiritual traditions and ecological consciousness are deeply entwined in African cosmology.⁸ Through this integrative outlook, African cosmology contributes not only to comparative philosophy but also to global conversations on ecological ethics, inter-faith dialogue and the philosophy of religion.

This paper therefore situates spirits within their cosmological and philosophical context and aims to demonstrate that African spirituality far from being a relic of pre-modern religiosity offers a coherent and sophisticated vision of reality, one that remains deeply relevant to contemporary African thought system and existence.

The Ontological Structure of the African Cosmos

In African metaphysical thought, the cosmos is envisaged as a living, unified field of existence in which all beings visible and invisible participate in a network of interdependence and vitality. Reality is not a static construct of separate substances but a dynamic order animated by spiritual energy and moral purpose.⁹ Being, in this framework, is relational and participatory: to exist is to share in the flow of vital force that emanates from the divine and circulates through the cosmos. Existence, therefore, is not defined by substance, as in classical Western metaphysics, but by vital interaction and continuous becoming within the web of life.¹⁰

Recent African scholarship reinforces this understanding by emphasising participation as the essence of being.¹¹ African ontology integrates both the spiritual and the material dimensions of existence within a seamless continuum. Entities whether divine, spiritual, human, or natural have order of hierarchy considering their degree of participation in divine vitality. Yet this hierarchy does not denote separation, but expresses relational complementarity. The visible and invisible worlds interrelate, forming a holistic cosmos where spiritual forces mediate between transcendence and immanence.¹²

Also, African ontology is both spatial and temporal. The cosmos encompasses the living, the ancestors, and the unborn, constituting an existential continuum that transcends linear temporality.¹³ The living serve as mediators within this continuum, linking the spiritual realm with the material order through rituals, morality, and community. Philosophers

advancing a *becoming ontology* interpret the concept of spirit not as an immaterial abstraction but as an active, ontological reality affirming the permeability of cosmic boundaries.¹⁴

Crucially, African ontology cannot be detached from its ethical and communal dimensions. Since all beings exist in mutual dependence, morality arises from the responsibility to maintain balance within the network of life.¹⁵ A rupture in this moral-spiritual fabric manifested in conflict, illness, or environmental degradation is viewed as a disturbance of cosmic harmony. Spirits, ancestors, and divinities are regarded as custodians of this order, intervening to restore equilibrium when moral or spiritual imbalance occurs.

The ontological structure of the African cosmos therefore presents reality as an interconnected moral and spiritual order animated by divine vitality. It is a participatory universe where the sacred and the secular, the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead coexist in continual dialogue. This vision provides the metaphysical foundation for understanding spirits not as peripheral entities but as indispensable participants in the ongoing dynamism of existence.

Role and Hierarchy of Spirits in African Cosmology

Within African metaphysical system, spirits occupy a central and functional role in sustaining the unity of the universe. They act as mediators between the Supreme Being and the material world, ensuring the continuity of divine energy across all levels of existence. In this participatory ontology, the spiritual and the physical are not discrete realms but interacting dimensions of one living reality. Thus, the realm of spirits is immanent within nature and society, shaping moral order, communal welfare, and cosmic equilibrium.¹⁶

Empirical research among the Igbo and Yoruba peoples shows that spirits are conceived as moral agents embedded in the community's social and ecological lives.¹⁷ These include divinities associated with natural phenomena, ancestral spirits who oversee familial wellbeing, and territorial entities inhabiting rivers, forests, and mountains. The hierarchy among them is based not on power or subordination but on functionality and complementarity. Each class of spirit contributes to the maintenance of cosmic unity and moral coherence.¹⁸

Spirits serve as channels of divine vitality, transmitting sacred energy from the transcendent source to the human and natural orders. Through rituals, sacrifices and prayers communities maintain communion with these spirits, thereby ensuring moral integrity and cosmic stability.¹⁹ Their function is therefore both metaphysical and ethical since they animate existence and uphold the moral laws that govern it. Wrongdoing is not viewed merely as a social infraction but as a rupture in the moral and spiritual fabrics of the universe which necessitates spiritual reconciliation.²⁰ Therefore, all existence is bound together in a sacred continuum of being.

Spirits as Mediators of Moral and Cosmological Order

In African cosmology, spirits function as mediators, ensuring harmony between the divine, the human and the natural world. This mediatory role is central to the moral and ontological coherence of existence. They bridge the transcendent and the immanent, the sacred and the secular, thus sustaining the rhythm of life through relational participation.

From a hermeneutical perspective, this mediatory function reveals the African conception of truth, justice, and knowledge as participatory rather than abstract. Knowledge arises not through detached observation but through communion with the sacred order of being. Contemporary African philosophers extend this interpretation to address global ethical challenges environmental degradation, social alienation, and spiritual disconnection by reasserting the cosmological principle of interconnectedness.²¹ This participatory ethics challenges Western dualism and individualism, proposing a moral philosophy rooted in communal harmony and relational ontology. Thus, to live morally in the African worldview is to live attuned to the spiritual energies that sustain life itself. Spirits, as mediators of divine and moral order, safeguard the rhythm of the cosmos and the moral destiny of humanity.

Spirits, Human Destiny, and the Continuum of Existence

In African metaphysical thought, human destiny is understood as a spiritually mediated and relational process rather than an autonomous or strictly deterministic journey. Existence unfolds within a dynamic interaction between the visible and invisible realms, where divine intelligence, ancestors, and spiritual forces guide both personal and communal life. Spirits function as ontological custodians of destiny, ensuring harmony between individual existence, moral order, and the broader cosmic structure.²²

Unlike rigid fatalism, African cosmology conceives destiny as dynamic and negotiable. The Yoruba notion of *ori* illustrates this: destiny is chosen before birth in the presence of the Supreme Being, Olódùmarè, yet its fulfilment depends on moral alignment and spiritual attunement.²³ When disharmony occurs, practices such as divination (Ifá) and sacrifice (ẹbọ) serve to realign human intention with spiritual order. Similarly, the Akan concept of *nkrabea* affirms divine foreordination alongside moral responsibility, interpreting misfortune as a sign of ritual or ethical dissonance rather than arbitrary fate.²⁴

Central to this worldview is the continuum of existence linking the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. Ancestors, often regarded as the “living-dead,” mediate between the human and divine realms, guiding and protecting the community through dreams, omens, and ritual communication.²⁵ Their presence underscores that destiny is communal as much as individual, extending across generations and sustaining moral continuity.

Divination systems such as Ifá, áfà, and bágr function as sacred epistemologies through which divine intention and existential guidance are interpreted. Contemporary scholars interpret these systems as dialogical forms of rationality grounded in participatory knowledge rather than empirical abstraction.²⁶ Through such practices, humans engage in metaphysical dialogue with spiritual agents, rendering destiny a living hermeneutical process rather than a fixed decree.

Ethically, this relational cosmology situates human action within a framework of cosmic accountability. Moral transgressions, ritual neglect, or injustice generate ontological imbalance that manifests as misfortune or social disharmony.²⁷ Thus, moral integrity and metaphysical harmony are inseparable, reinforcing a vitalist ethics grounded in relational existence.²⁸

More broadly, African cosmology conceives reality as an interconnected moral and spiritual field in which spirits act as mediators between the transcendent and the material. The spiritual and physical are co-extensive dimensions of one reality, and spirits ranging from divinities to ancestors sustain, regulate, and transform the equilibrium of existence.²⁹ Communication with the Supreme Being is often mediated through these spiritual intermediaries, who render the transcendent accessible within communal life.³⁰

Spiritual forces may be benevolent or disruptive, and rituals, sacrifices, and moral conduct function as mechanisms for restoring harmony when imbalance occurs. Offences against spiritual or moral order are therefore seen as disruptions of both cosmic equilibrium and social cohesion. Diviners, priests, and elders interpret spiritual realities, providing ethical and practical guidance that often informs restorative justice and communal well-being.³¹ This extends to the justice system in Africa which is restorative in nature.³²

Contemporary African philosophy has critically reinterpreted the spirit world in dialogue with modernity, science, ecology, and postcolonial thought. Rather than dismissing spiritual ontology, scholars such as Chimakonam, Agada, and Ofuasia argue for its rational and systematic significance, presenting spirits as metaphysical principles linking ontology, ethics, and epistemology.³³ This shift from descriptive ethnophilosophy to analytic engagement affirms the philosophical legitimacy of African spiritual cosmology.

Recent ecological, feminist, and intercultural perspectives further expand this reinterpretation by viewing spirits as custodians of environmental balance and relational justice. Thinkers such as Nkiru Nzegwu and Munamoto Chemhuru highlight the ecological and moral implications of spiritual ontology, while advocates of epistemic pluralism argue for dialogue between scientific and spiritual modes of knowing.³⁴

Overall, the African conception of spirits and destiny reveals a cosmos animated by spiritual intelligence, moral interdependence, and relational continuity. Destiny is not a static decree but an ongoing dialogue between human agency, ancestral mediation, and divine order. Properly understood, the spirit world is not a residue of pre-modern belief but a dynamic metaphysical framework that integrates ontology, ethics, epistemology, and contemporary philosophical reflection.

Conclusion

The cosmological significance of spirits in African thought system represents far more than a metaphysical curiosity or an anthropological record of indigenous belief. Rather, it embodies a profound philosophical vision that conceives

reality as relational, participatory, and imbued with moral intentionality. Across African cultures, the spiritual dimension constitutes the very grammar of existence one that binds the visible and the invisible, the human and the divine, the living and the dead within a unified moral cosmos.³⁵ This holistic worldview challenges the dualistic ontology of Western metaphysics by affirming that being is always already interconnected, and that existence itself is a spiritual enterprise grounded in participation and moral reciprocity.

Synthesising the diverse perspectives discussed throughout this work reveals a coherent philosophical pattern and important implications. The early ethno-philosophical notions of Placide Tempels and John Mbiti provided the metaphysical scaffolding upon which later African philosophers built.³⁶ Although sometimes criticised for essentialism, these foundational models remain indispensable for articulating the African vision of vital interdependence and ontological unity. They reveal that African metaphysics is not merely descriptive of cultural belief but a coherent philosophical system capable of addressing fundamental questions about being, causality, and moral order.

Later scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, and Paulin Hountondji advanced this discourse by applying rigorous analytic and decolonial reasoning to African metaphysics.³⁷ Their work demonstrated that the study of spirits and cosmology could be critically engaged without reducing it to theology or folklore. Wiredu's conceptual decolonisation, in particular, liberated African metaphysical thought from Eurocentric frameworks, allowing it to emerge as a field of independent philosophical inquiry.³⁸ This intellectual reorientation contributes to the field by establishing African philosophy as a space of epistemic creativity, where spiritual and rational modes of knowing coexist without contradiction.

Furthermore, contemporary scholars such as Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh, and Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator have reinterpreted the notion of spirits in light of religious pluralism, ecology, and intercultural dialogue.³⁹ Their work underscores the enduring relevance of African spirituality in addressing modern challenges especially those concerning environmental ethics, intercultural theology, and social cohesion. By linking the spiritual ontology of African thought with global discourses on sustainability and relational ethics, these scholars extend its applicability beyond the continent, enriching global philosophy of religion and ecological thought.

Philosophically, the findings of this study suggest that African metaphysics offers a robust alternative to both materialist reductionism and transcendental abstraction. Against materialism, it asserts that reality cannot be exhaustively understood through empirical data alone; existence possesses a qualitative, spiritual dimension that informs moral and ecological harmony. Against idealism, it resists the separation of spirit from life, affirming instead that spirituality is lived, immanent, and experiential. This metaphysical insight has practical implications for contemporary philosophy of mind, moral theory, and environmental ethics by proposing a non-dualistic model of being grounded in relational ontology.

From a moral perspective, spirits function as guarantors of justice and harmony. They symbolise the interdependence of moral and cosmic order, showing that ethical responsibility in African thought extends beyond interpersonal relations to include ancestors, deities, and the natural world. This moral ecology offers valuable contributions to applied ethics and sustainable development discourses, encouraging modes of life that prioritise communal balance and ecological respect over exploitative individualism.⁴⁰

The contributions of this analysis are therefore threefold. First, it advances the philosophical systematisation of African cosmology, positioning it as a rigorous metaphysical framework rather than a cultural curiosity. Second, it highlights the ethical and ecological dimensions of African spirituality, demonstrating its relevance to current debates on sustainability and global ethics. Third, it identifies practical applications of African metaphysical thought in fostering intercultural dialogue, postcolonial epistemology, and holistic models of development rooted in spiritual consciousness.

This study therefore shows that the African conception of the universe animated by spiritual presence and governed by moral balance challenges the disenchanting worldview of modern secularism. It calls for a reawakening of metaphysical imagination and ethical responsibility, one that views humanity not as an observer of the universe but as an integral participant in its sacred rhythm. The cosmological significance of spirits, therefore extends beyond

African metaphysical thought, thus contributes not only to the understanding of indigenous spirituality but to the global philosophical project of reuniting knowledge, morality, and being.

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