

Personalism in African Cultures and Ethics: The Examples of the Bantus in Central, Southern Africa and of the Mossi in West Africa

Joseph Sawadogo¹, Jacques Simpire²

¹Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Department of Philosophy; Faculty of Medicine, University Saint Thomas d'Aquin (USTA), Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

²Pietro Annigoni Biomolecular Research Centre (CERBA), Université Joseph KI-ZERBO, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
Email: simpore93@gmail.com

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Abstract

Currently, more than ever, the issue of the human being has been at the centre of debates. Each culture, each philosophical trend has been trying to break the mystery of Man and to give meaning and value to human activities. Throughout the world, “personalism” has taken many forms in the history of peoples’ philosophy. Therefore, in sub-Saharan Africa, some communities of the Bantu and of the Mossi developed their own “personalism” based on their cosmogonic and anthropological notion which shaped their ethical vision of Man and his behavior in society. As for the Bantus, there is no dichotomy between the being and the Vital Force which vivifies anything that exists and lasts. Any attempt to reduce or to destroy the Vital Force of a person is gross guilt to be punished. With respect to the Mossi in Burkina Faso who are eager to show both the richness and the ambiguity in the human being, they designed anthropology based on four things: The “*sigré*”, meaning the primary Vital Force inherited from their forefathers; The “*kinkirga*” who represents the private and immortal unearthly vital energy; The “*siiga*”, the earthly vital energy; and, lastly, the “*yinga*”, the Human Body, the carnal structure in which these three types of vital energies join to form the human being who expresses himself in society in an ambivalent manner. The objective of this research was to study the phenomenology of the human being among the Bantu and Mossi, in order to better understand their ethical and social personalism. A synthesis study, based on a specialized scientific bibliography related to their culture and anthropology, will allow presenting their ethical and social personalism. Under the auspices of African anthropology and through the advent of philosophical trends, such as “ontological vitalism” by Tempels and “vitalogy” by N’kafu, who rank life as the primary principle and emphasize and praise man’s action in society, Africa has been developing a “perso-

nalism” of the social brand.

Keywords

Personalism, Anthropology, Vital Force, Vitalism, Society, Mossi, Bantus

1. Introduction

In history, “*personalism*” has experienced three different forms: the relational “*personalism*”, the hermeneutical form, the community-based and ontological form (Sgreccia, 1999: p. 61). Obviously, “*personalism*” is a philosophical system for which the human being is an overriding value. From a historical point of view, Mounier’s “*personalism*” is contrary to individualism (Mounier, 1999).

The concept of “*person*” is derived from the Latin word “*persona*” which originated from the Etruscan word “*phersu*” or from Greek “*prosōpon*” (πρόσωπον) which means drama mask. As a matter of fact, during drama performances in ancient Greece, performers used to wear masks to imitate or represent a given king or slave or notable. Therefore, the concept “*persona*” is a mask which each individual wears, comes into the world, plays his (her) role and disappears. Later on, Western philosophy defined the concept of *persona* as a being with a body and a spirit, “*a subsistent, cognizant, free and accountable*” (Sgreccia, 2004: p. 119). Therefore, as for G. Marcel, “*what is specific to my body would be to not live alone, to be not able to live lonely*” (Marcel, 1940: p. 30). According to Jacques Maritain, “*each part of the human body is human and exists as such, by virtue of the immaterial existence of the human soul*” (Maritain, 1988: p. 91). Based on these philosophical trends, existence cannot be understood but inside an existence and man’s existence originates from the substantive union of a spiritual soul with the body which borrows its existential form from the spiritual soul (Sgreccia, 2004: p. 122). From this perspective, the phenomenological notion of the body which came into life as an attempt to violate both the intellectualist and materialistic visions has experienced developments in the consideration of the human “*soma*” (body) (Husserl, 2002). This is how Husserl introduced the distinction between “*korper*”, organic body and “*leib*”, the lived body or the awareness of the self-body from this perspective, Gabriel Marcel highlights the role of the body in social mediation: “*if human existence is such in so much as it is a ‘being with’ others, a being honest with others, this is possible through the body*” (Marcel, 1944). Therefore, the body has a value of expression and therefore a value of culture, of civilization, of the ability to change the world technologically. It equally has a language ability, as it is the expression, the manifestation, the phenomenology of the “*ego*”, through the spoken, written, artistic or gesticulated language (Mouroux, 1945): shifting from smile to mourn, from a glance of love to hatred, from a happy face to sadness (Sgreccia, 2004: p. 123), the human being wears his (her) masks and expresses his (her) personality. If for the Western philosophy, beyond Descartes’s body-soul, man is a social ho-

listic psychosomatic being, in sub-Saharan Africa, every being is a Vital Force and every Vital Force is a being (Tempels, 1948).

This article refers to the concept of “*personalism*” in African cultures. We must identify anthropological, phenomenological and ethical elements from this mosaic of African cultures which highlight the ontology of the human being, the values of subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and the role of the subjective consciousness of the Human by reviewing cultural data. In order to avoid getting lost in terms of casuistry, given that Africa is a vast continent, we are going to review “*personalism*” in two different ethnic groups: The Bantus who are people living in an area stretching from the Republic of Cameroon (in Central Africa) to Southern Africa, and the *Mossi* (or the *Moose*) in Burkina Faso, one of the West African republics.

The objectives of this research work are to: 1) study the phenomenology of the human being among the Bantus and the Mossi; 2) examine the African concept of the human person and, more precisely, “*personalism*” and ethics among the Bantus and the Mossi, and finally, 3) study social “*personalism*” among the Bantus and the Mossi.

2. Methodology

Tools and methods: By relying on a rigorous world scientific bibliography, we describe not only the phenomenology of the human being among the Bantus and the Mossi based on their traditional cultures, but we also look into their notion of the human person, meaning their “*personalism*” and their ethics on their individual behaviors? Finally, we can present their social “*personalism*” through a specialized bibliography relating to culture, to their anthropology and perception of society. The works of Tempels (1948), Nkafu (2010), Kouam (2017) and Igwebuike (2001) will allow us to gather cultural and anthropological elements for the reconstruction of the phenomenology of the human being (*the bukomo*) among the Bantu. Through the published article by Tosam (2019) entitled “African Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development” we will reflect on the relational trilogy of attunement between man, the environment, and ancestors living in the afterlife. While the publications of Simpore (2002, 2004, 2012) and the manuscripts of Maurier (1959), Ouedraogo (1973), Wedraogo (1973) and Simporé (1986) will enable us to present, through the habits and customs, the social anthropology and phenomenology of the person (*the nisaala*) among the Mossi. The study of the phenomenology of the human being in the two cultures (Bantu and Mossi) in sections 3, 4 and 5 will allow us to better understand their ethical and social personalism.

3. The Phenomenology of the Human being among the Bantus and the Mossi

The Bantu phenomenology of the human being

In an intrinsic manner, the Bantus relate in any existing being the notion of “*power of life*” “*bukomo*”, (the vital energy) to that of the entity itself. In Bantu

thought, as Tempels notes, “*being and force are two inextricably linked concepts, so much so that even the definitions cannot be separated from each other*”. On the contrary, always according to Tempels, the Europeans of the West are able to “*conceptualize the transcendental notion of being by distinguishing it from the concept of force*” (Tempels, 1948: p. 103). The African anthropology being at the antipode of the Western thinking has, generally speaking, a holistic vision of reality in which there is no room for rigid dichotomies between the soul and the body, between the substance and the spirit and between daily life and religious life, because everything is holy. Therefore, the vision of the world encompasses both the visible earthly world, meaning the cosmos, and the invisible spiritual world, notably divinity and forefathers. As for the Bantus, the being is what possesses a Vital Force (Nkafu, 2010: p. 143) and therefore, every being is a Vital Force and every Vital Force is a being (Tempels, 1948: pp. 50-51). The notion of “*Vital Force*” is therefore the fundamental concept of the Bantu ontology. Such Vital Force applies to anything that exists—God, esprits, the dead, humans, animals, plants and even earthly beings. However, even though the esprits and creation all have a vital energy, their Vital Force is dependent and creates. As for the Bantus, God is unrestrictedly the one who possesses vital energy(power) for Himself.

The phenomenology of the human being among the Mossi in Burkina Faso (Simpole, 2004: pp. 253-360)

With the Mossi, many energies act in synergism for the formation of the human being in the wombs of his mother (Simpolé, 1986: pp. 9-23). According to their anthropological notion, the ancestral bloodline, the “*sigré*” (Simpole, 2012) is the ancestral Vital Force which is transmitted from one generation to another, from forefathers to great children, and which plays a determining role in the conception of the human embryo (Ouedraogo, 1973: pp. 43-44). In order to show this fact, the Mossi hold that the great parent who dies is buried like a bean seed you sow, that seed germinates and grows to yield branches and many other grains. Systematically, therefore, every child who is born is linked to a forefather who gives him/her the father’s name (Simpolé, 2002: pp. 168-175). The paradigm of the sown bean seed which grows to yield many other grains specifies the anthropology of the Mossi: “Each branch is in a vital relationship with the trunk, the roots and the initial grain, but does not restrict itself to that” (Maurier, 1959: p. 34). In the same way as the grain differs from the tree, the newly born differs from its father and from its great father. Therefore, the idea of reincarnation does not exist among the Mossi.

The Spirit line (Kinkirsi/Kinkirga): As for the Mossi, “*the human being is an incarnated spirit*” (Wedraogo, 1973: p. 100). The “*Kinkirga*” must not be mistaken for the “*Sigré*”, the ancestral vital energy, because the latter can be shared by many persons in the clan; it must neither be mistaken for another reality which is known as “*siiga*” the earthly vital energy/power which can be eaten by the wizard. The “*Kinkirga*” belongs to you; it is the personal, immortal, unearthly vital

energy.

Finally, the carnal-covering-mother woman receives this extrinsic creature in her wombs to nourish, keep and give birth to it.

There is also the “Totem” (Taboo) of sacred animals which mystically link with each member of the tribe. Every person in the clan personally has his (her) own taboo animal and dies when the animal dies. People say that during the French colonization time, youth from Ouagadougou went to a village near Ouagadougou and killed dogfishes (a type of bats). A fight broke between the youth from Ouagadougou and those from the village. With a view to settling the conflict, the French commandant asked the villagers: “are you saying that you are dogfishes, bats, and that when a bat dies, one of you dies? And the young villagers replied: “Any adult among the Mossi knows it; our forefathers were bats; our great parents and our parents are bats; we ourselves and our children are bats”. Then, the French commandant said to them: “Tomorrow I am going to count all bats in the fields and I will make you pay taxes not only for yourselves, but also for the bats”. And the embarrassed villagers reacted with fearful voices: “Chief, commandant, if this is the case, then from now on, bats shall be bats, and we shall be ourselves” (Simpore, 1986).

Certainly, the ontological origin of man in a tribe is the consequence of many factors of life and, of the intersection of earthly, ancestral and unearthly vital energies in the woman’s wombs.

4. Personalism and Ethics among the Bantus and the Mossi

As the Mossi and the Bantus peoples have no alphabet, their anthropological cultures are relayed by stories, puzzles, enigmas, rituals, proverbs, myths and legends. What is most important with these tribes despite the ontological and existential complexity of man is to teach their children to esteem the Vital Force of each person because it is sacred.

“Personalism” among the Mossi

According to the personalist notion among the Mossi, man who is an intricate being is the life-giving conjunction of the genius-being (*Kinkirga*), the guardian-forefather (*sigré*) and the earthly Vital Force “*siiga*”. This “*siiga*” which is like an added quality is equally an intermediary link, a bridge between the unearthly Vital Force (*Kinkirga*) and the earthly Vital Force (*Sigré*); similarly, it is the bridge between the esprit (*Kinkirga*) and the body (*Yinga*), the connection and the backrest point of being-in-the world with human events (Simpore, 1986). The human being is therefore equivocal and ambiguous in his social relations. It is always difficult knowing the actual thoughts and designs of a man because, according to the Mossi, human interiority is sacred and each person is a personality, a peculiarity. The Mossi do not hesitate to say that “such individual resembles a maybug; he (she) smiles with his (her) mouth and bites by his (her) nape”; or still, “such individual is like a mouse-man; it bites and then breathes as though it wants to heal its bite” (Simpore, 1986). Man is called “*nisaala*” by the

Mossi (smooth, greasy person). The Mossi do not hesitate to say that “*such person is like a catfish in water “saale” which you cannot catch with your bare hands. When you believe that you have caught it is the time when it escapes*”. In short, Man, the “*nisaala*” not only has a sliding body, but it also has a sophisticated and shrewd mind to the extent that it is difficult defining, understanding and comprehending him (her).

Despite these negative aspects which blemish the human being in the anthropology of the Mossi, we are aware of the importance the members of this community give to the human person, to moral values and ethics. As for them, human life, family life and life in community are sacred. Maidenhood before marriage, faithfulness, truth, honesty, loyalty, accountability, solidarity, transparency, courtesy, courage and forgiveness are great values and virtues. As they worship only one God “*Wendnaam*” through the worship of the ancestral traditional religion, they believe in the after-death life and retribution.

“*Personalism*” among the Bantus

As for the Bantus “*energy or power is hidden in each being. This energy or power can grow, become stronger or weaker*” (Kouam, 2017: pp. 195-196). However, these vital energies originate from God who has the Vital Force for Himself. Contributing to make this Vital Force grow in creation is great, whereas, proposing a reduction in this energy in beings is ontologically bad, morally nefarious, punishable by ethics and by law. In the original ontology of the Bantus, morals and law form a sole and same logic. They do not define the good and the evil without ontology and without God. In the primary order, in the order of nature the Good and the Evil are good or bad, first from the ontological perspective, then from the moral, ethical and legal perspectives. In practice, as they rest on the same principles, ontological evil, moral evil and legal evil are the sole and same reality. Therefore, they denounce ontological evil which consists in destroying life which is a gift of God to other living beings, by killing them without any reason. This is a great evil. They consider lies, theft and adultery to be not a social evil, but to be a serious, ontological evil. But the bad influence on the Vital Force of a person is a serious sinful act before the law, and this offense is punished by God and the forefathers after death. From this perspective, legal guiltiness and sin “are believed by people to be like a person infected by a disease, or like an animal caught in a trap.

5. Social “*Personalism*” among the Bantus and the Mossi

The Bantus and the Mossi have built a social “*personalism*” and an ethical “*personalism*”. As for them, the human being is unquestionably an intrinsic value. However, their anthropological notion may be ambivalent. On the one hand, they used to see in Man a body and spirit unity which represents its objective value. Therefore, in their vision the human person and his values cannot be dissolved and liquefied in a set of choices without a source from which such choices originate and without the contents of the values expressed by these choices are

taken into account. On the other hand, under their social organization, the human being is hardly recognized as an entity distinct from the group he belongs to, and the person exists only within his group. This is why, in many hierarchy-based African traditional societies, each individual is socially placed within a group and, because of this status, has well defined rights and duties. As for Tempels “*the Bantu psychology cannot conceive man as an individual, as a full-fledged energy, separated from his ontological relations with other living beings and from his link with animals or animal energies surrounding him*” (Igwebuike, 2001). Therefore, in order to understand the human person, you need to see him not as an isolated individual, but as a person integrated into a set of things and other persons with whom he relates so closely that his nature of person itself has been ascertained. Therefore, “*the notion of person among almost all current African philosophers is basically social. We cannot imagine a person who is not a member of a community*” (Igwebuike, 2001); as a matter of fact, for Ifeanyi Mentiri who adopts an extreme standpoint, there are no ontological features of the person but only social characteristics. “*It is only in relation to others that the individual becomes aware of his own being, of his duties and rights and of his responsibilities vis-à-vis himself and vis-à-vis others. Whenever he suffers, he does not suffer alone, but he suffers with the group...the living and the dead*” (Igwebuike, 2001).

Among many African peoples, there is a kind of relational trilogy with an ethical dimension between man, nature (environment, biodiversity and ecology) and the ancestors. Tosam, has moreover developed this reality well, through the concept of “*Kom environmentalism is holistic and includes humans, the ecosystem, spirits, the living dead, as well as the unborn in the moral community*” (Tosam, 2019).

In that sense, where there is a community, there is an individual and, if the individual exists, the community will remain. From this perspective, Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia, the author of the book entitled “*il pensare africano come vitalogia*”, holds that “*African culture and identity are based on a close and vital union with the family, the tribe and God*” (Nkafu, 2010). And to him, the starting point is not the “I”, but the “you”, the “we”, the collectivity of the community and, of the tribe. According to African philosophical trends, such as, “*vitalism*”, “*vitology* and “*ubuntu*”, the African individual cannot get organized or fulfill himself without the community, the clan and the tribe; he would look like a fish out of water. Community-mindedness is geared towards creating balanced relationships between the individual and the group in which the common interest prevails and must guide each member of the group in his (her) behavior. The search for this balance justifies what is source of injustice to the individual in the individual system. When the cohesion of the group is threatened, an individual will be penalized so that the survival of other members can be guaranteed.

This synthetic study on the phenomenology of the human being in the two

cultures (Bantu and Mossi) made it possible to better grasp the depth of the ethical and social personalism of two peoples living in syntony with the other peoples of Africa, Mother of humanity.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that this type of anthropology based on Vital Force has biased the lives, behaviors, values, personalist morals and ethics of both the Bantus and the Mossi. The African person, who is intricate in his ontology, and enigmatic in his behavior, is nevertheless a social being. In these societies, people do not talk of individualism but of social “*personalism*”, as the human person can fulfill himself in that quality only through his relations with other members of his tribe. The rules of compliance with others’ vital energies are clearly defined; anybody who violates such rules sins and shall be punished by his forefathers, because life which is a gift of God, is sacred. Currently, what do we keep from this traditional African “*personalism*”? “*Africans, what have you done with your Vital Force (Power)*” (Nkafu, 2010)? Martin Nkafu Nkemnia asks. Faced with so many fratricide wars which tear up Africa today, faced with the political violence which, here and there, generates torture and trans-border crime, we raise the following question: where is this Vital Force which used to encourage Africans and make them enjoy and esteem life? Obviously, Africa got alienated by losing or by putting aside her “*personalism*”-based anthropology. From the cultural and anthropological perspective, what can Africa still take to the give-and-take meeting, at the concert of nations? At the time of globalization, we all wish that Africa conquers again her life philosophy and promotes it everywhere for the good, happiness and prosperity of all peoples.

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Author Contributions

Study concept and design: Joseph Sawadogo and Jacques Simpire.

Draft the manuscript: Joseph Sawadogo and Jacques Simpire.

Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Joseph Sawadogo and Jacques Simpire.

Study supervision: Joseph Sawadogo and Jacques Simpire.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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