

Genealogies of Vital Force: ‘Ntu,’ ‘Àṣẹ,’ and Conceptual Lines of Descent

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Abstract: This paper relates the philosophical concept of ‘vital force,’ translated and globalized from the book *Bantu Philosophy* by Belgian missionary Placide Tempels, to the Bantu and Yorùbá concepts of *ntu* and *àṣẹ* as conceptual ancestors, arguing that (i) although Tempels in his book did not claim anything other than to understand the philosophy of Bantu peoples, (ii) intercultural connections/crossovers with the philosophy of other African peoples can still be established. Thus, we respond to debates around the concept’s generalizing potential and colonial burden, showing lines of conceptual descent in which living structures of meaning become interconnected with abstracted translations.

Keywords: àṣẹ, Bantu, decolonization, *ntu*, vital force, Yorùbá

Introduction

The concept of ‘vital force’ has been much discussed in connection with the book *Bantu Philosophy* by Belgian missionary Placide Tempels. It was hailed, for instance, as the source of the *négritude* movement¹ and criticized as an instrument of colonial power to maintain African subjects focused on spirituality rather than their rights.² In 1988, Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe declared these varied debates to belong to the past.³ If he is correct, we think it is now appropriate to revisit the concept of vital force as a genuine point of reference in African systems of philosophical knowledge.

As case studies, we will trace the indigenous (Bantu and Yorùbá)⁴ concepts of *ntu* and *àṣẹ* as conceptual ancestors of the globalized philosophical concept of ‘vital force.’ Being a conceptual ancestor does not refer to historical etymological causality but to being perceived as a primordial concept that still influences present-day meaning transfer or creation. We will argue that (i) although Tempels in his book did not claim anything other than to understand the philosophy of Bantu peoples, (ii) intercultural connections/crossovers with the philosophy of other African peoples can still be established. For this reason, we choose the concepts of *ntu* and *àṣẹ* to underline the similarities and differences between Bantu philosophy and Yorùbá philosophy, and we will trace how they can be seen as conceptual ancestors, inspiring the globalized concept of vital force. We take our return to the colonial heritage to be post-postcolonial as we move beyond the postcolonial reactions to Tempels’ conceptual find while we investigate how it is part of today’s African heritage. Our tracing will show the lines of conceptual descent in which pre-colonial structures of meaning have become interconnected with present-day translations.⁵

In the first section, we will focus on the concept of vital force, as it was formed through the different translations of the original Dutch study by Placide Tempels, who used several Dutch concepts, namely *levenskracht*, *levensterkte*, and *sterkte*. Through them, he obviously translated a concept already present in the Bantu languages he knew, especially in Luba Shakandi.⁶ Al-

though Rwandese scholar and Tempels' contemporary, Alexis Kagame, identified *ntu*—the root that is also present in concepts such as *ubuntu*, *Muntu*, and, of course, *Bantu*—to mean 'being,' later and present-day authors seem unified in their conclusion that *ntu* identifies with the Tempelsian concept of *life strength* or *vital force*.⁷

In the second section, we will briefly present the debates around the concept of vital force that were inspired by *Bantu Philosophy* and will track how these were influenced by the changing political force field in which, from the 1950s until the 1980s, African(a) scholars were working to regain epistemic independence after colonial oppression. Our aim in this section is to show how the philosophical hermeneutics of concepts changes through and with historical conditions. As a result, we should be aware that we can never reclaim a pure, pre-colonial African philosophy nor claim a definite causality of meaning-transfer from pre-colonial concepts to current ones. Moreover, unlike the imagination of colonial ethnographical work that projected African cultures as timeless, we will not follow the European Enlightenment philosopher Hegel, who denied Africans any conscious reflected connection to global history. We will rather project present-day African philosophical discussions on *ntu*, Bantu philosophy, and vital force as a globalizing African concept, as live traditions that refer to *ntu* as an ancestor concept.

The third section moves to the Yorùbá concept of *àṣẹ*, which, like *ntu*, has been translated as "vital force" (possessed by living and non-living organisms) by Margaret Thompson Drewal,⁸ Moses A. Makinde,⁹ Andrew Apter,¹⁰ and Rowland Abiodun.¹¹ Deploying colonial and/or post-colonial approaches to the explorations of this concept, these anthropologists and/or Africanists discussed the manifestations of *àṣẹ* through verbal and visual arts in ritual contexts. Moving beyond the ritual contexts, we focus on *àṣẹ* as the ancestor concept of the Yorùbá philosophical tradition, thus relating it to the ongoing postcolonial debates in African philosophy.

In our (brief) conclusion, we will return from the case studies to the meta-discussion of the current statuses of African philosophy and African philosophies, as we are gaining more knowledge about the importance of language for humanity—notably regarding the understanding and adaptation to their lifeworld—whether in its oral or written form. We will also answer our main question as to how the concept of vital force can enter the globalizing philosophical discussion concerning humanity's place in reality while retaining and remembering concepts expressed in different African languages as conceptual ancestors through and beyond histories of colonialism and decolonization. We propose to understand these concepts as non-colonial, which means they are not completely determined by their encounters with Western dominating powers or by the African struggle for liberation. Instead, they express autonomous and continuous ways in which African people relate to the world.

Tracing 'Vital Force' through Its Translations

The concept of vital force, as used in African philosophy today, originates from the different translations of an original Dutch study by Placide Tempels. Tempels' original Dutch words, *levenskracht*, *levenssterkte*, and *sterkte*, were translated into French as *force vitale*, which in English became *vital force*. Taken literally, the Dutch concepts that render a Baluba understanding translate more truthfully as *vitality*, *strength of life*, or *life energy*. Since concepts are open transferrers of meaning that may take on different aspects, not only through time but also and especially through translation, we think that the translations of 'strength of life' or 'life' to '*force vitale*' into French and the later English 'vital force' add elements of modern techno-scientific and industrial understanding of the world that are absent in the original concepts. In European languages, the concept of *force* has become strongly associated with 'natural forces' as understood through the natural sciences' identification of natural laws as descriptors of ontology. Elements of spiritual and social understanding of life that are predominant in Tempels' characterization of the Bantu ontology tend to be relegated to secondary importance.

Another translation issue happens in the influential work of the Rwandese scholar Alexis Kagame, who, in his *La philosophie bântu-rwandaise de l'Être*, identifies the basic philosophical categories in his own Bantu language (Kinyarwanda) as forms comprising *ntu*: those are *ikintu* (the force/being that is foundational of material phenomena), *umuntu* (the force/being that is foundational of intelligence), *ahantu* (*idem* for movement) and *ukuntu* (*idem* for modality). Linguistically, we should be aware that *ntu* is no independent concept in itself; it is an indissoluble root, present in even more concepts than the above, such as *ubuntu* and *bantu* (plural of *muntu*).¹² It has been remarked and critiqued that Kagame relies heavily on the Aristotelian system of categories in philosophy, indicating foundational concepts of reality as well as our understanding of it. He disagrees with Tempels' thesis that Bantu Ontology can be opposed to European Ontology. Being, according to Kagame, is similarly central in all philosophies around the world, while it is differently classified based on different languages (Masolo 449).

Senghor, already mentioned as one of the founders of the *négritude* movement, took a position towards *Bantu Philosophy* quite different from Kagame's. While writing on African arts and culture, he interpreted vital force as the sub-reality driving African artistic expressions, as well as the wisdom telling of African sages. He even held such a view before reading *Bantu Philosophy*, and Tempels' work confirmed his understanding. In the words of Diagne (83):

[Senghor] speaks of an 'ordering force' which is 'the vital element par excellence', thus inviting us to think of sculpture and ontology together. The discovery of Tempels' work [...] allows him thereafter to be more precise [...]: the reality of vital forces, which, he says, constitute the fabric of reality.

Thus, we see the concept of vital force being adopted and re-interpreted by various African philosophers as part of their living philosophical tradition. In Senghor's case, the idea that being is force in African ontology is central, and he sees this force primarily expressed in African forms of art and sagacity.

Before we discuss the debates about vital force among African philosophers in the next section, a few words on the literal translations of the book are in place. *Bantu Philosophy* would never have been written were it not for Émile Possoz, a Belgian colonial magistrate, who stimulated Tempels to write the book.¹³ Possoz was a radical pro-African writer who saw potential in Tempels' attempt to Africanize Christian missionary work and pushed him to express in a systematic study what the philosophical foundation would be of the African understanding to which he wanted to adapt his catechism. After Tempels first published the work in separate chapters in Congolese colonial journals, Possoz immediately started translating them into French. When the colonial publishing house Lovania published the book in 1945 for the Congo, Possoz's version was considered unreadable: too literal and radically pro-African. *Présence Africaine*, which published a corrected version of the 1945 edition in 1949, followed this view as well as the choice for another translator, Antoine Rubbens. While publishers Léopold Sédar Senghor and Alioune Diop both hailed *Bantu Philosophy* as a philosophical foundation for their *négritude* movement that celebrated global Black culture, they preferred the more 'moderate' translation. Rubbens, however, seems to have adapted the text to colonial sensibilities that were still dictating European publishing culture, leaving generations of francophone readers with a book that is racist and colonial in ways the Dutch original never was.¹⁴ Since the later English translation (by King, 1959) is based upon the French rendition of 1949, the same tone and mis-translations persist in that edition.

When we look at just one case, we notice the voice of one of Tempels' African colleagues and discussion partners being completely erased when the text is first mistranslated into French and then even more into English. The French version reads: "*Un indigène expliquait à un confrère: 'Ce muntu, c'est plutôt ce que vous désignez en français par 'la personne' et non ce que vous exprimez par 'l'homme'.*"—describing how an indigenous person explained to a fellow monastic brother how

the concept *muntu* should be translated as person rather than as human being. In Dutch, however, the indigenous person is presented as someone with university training who is not talking to a fellow brother but to Tempels himself: “*Een gestudeerde Zwarte zei me eens...*,” meaning “A university-trained Black person said to me once...” In English, the mistranslation is repeated and arguably worsened when King transforms the “university-trained Black person” into a “Bantu.”¹⁵ From the perspective of epistemic ownership and agency, two disastrous changes happen here: first, the Bantu language expert loses their university degree, and second, they are no longer talking to Tempels himself. This results in the erasure of the *dialogical exchange* whereby a knowledgeable practitioner of Bantu language and mores informs the writer of *Bantu Philosophy* who tries to capture this knowledge for European readers.

It is clear that Kagame’s and Tempels’ early articulations of a Bantu philosophy foreshadow later debates on African philosophy. Some authors contend that African ways of understanding reality, including Bantu philosophies, are characterized by a focus on dynamism that articulates the everyday African understanding present in wisdom traditions, social customs, rituals, religions, and all forms of artful rendering of that understanding. Among them are thinkers such as Senghor and Mbiti¹⁶ and many present-day philosophers who aim to articulate what African philosophy can bring to the global stage as its own. Against them, other authors, such as Hountondji, Towa, and Eboussi Boulaga, underline the universal nature of philosophy and its rational and scriptural approach. While disagreeing in many aspects of their critique, these authors converge in their general accusation that *Bantu Philosophy* is no real philosophical work but, in fact, an ethnological study of philosophy, a form of ethnophilosophy.

Vital Force Contested, Grounded, and Globalized

In an atmosphere of approaching decolonization, it is understandable that those who wanted to keep the Belgian establishment in Congo in power were scrutinizing Tempels closely and even got him removed for several years from the colony. According to some sources, he was penalized for radicalizing the “traditional missionary ideal which postulated the absolute superiority of Western Christianity and actively supported the established colonial order” (Clement 243). On the other side, he was also rejected by leading thinkers of decolonization, such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, for being too soft on the colonial enterprise and uncaring for the bondage and poverty of the indigenous people. In his essay *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire, one of the classic postcolonial theorists, indicted Western civilization for having produced colonization, with the famous words that “[...] out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up, out of all the memoranda that have been dispatched by all the ministries, there could not come a single human value” (Césaire 34). In this criticism, Césaire includes Tempels. Despite his expressed sympathy for Africans, the missionary failed to speak out against the cruelties of colonialism in Congo. Césaire even accuses Tempels of implicitly supporting this situation by focusing the attention of the ‘good colonials’ on philosophy: “Wonderful! Everybody gains: the big companies, the colonists, the government – everybody except the Bantu, naturally. Since Bantu thought is ontological, the Bantu only ask for satisfaction of an ontological nature” (58).

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon analyzes in a similar manner how interest in an African ontology of forces is a dead end as long as apartheid exists. He criticizes Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* in itself not so much but Alioune Diop’s enthusiasm to build the cultural *négritude* movement on it and other works on traditional African cultures. He judges any backward-looking cultural enthusiasm to be obsolete. For him, “In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future” (Fanon 176). One can read this as saying: I am interested in my life as a real existence to be projected

into the future; I have no interest in a philosophical reflection on my life as an expression of vital force. Of course, one does not have to think that reflecting on ancestor concepts makes one stick in the past, but Fanon obviously does think that way.

A different type of criticism, but leaning on the ones mentioned, was put forward by Paulin Hountondji. He rejects Tempels' *Bantu philosophy* for being a work of ethnophilosophy, describing a 'Bantu' philosophy as the foundational ontological structure of a communal life-world. After colonialism, however, we have to see, according to Hountondji, that philosophy is a critical reflection and not a communal enterprise. Hountondji contends that "philosophy, a critical reflection *par excellence*, cannot develop fully unless it 'writes its memoirs' or 'keeps a diary.'" (Hountondji 105). For Hountondji, philosophy exists only in written tradition, and "African philosophy can exist only in the same mode as European philosophy, i.e. through what is called *literature*" (101. Original emphasis). Thus, Hountondji apparently denies the philosophical value of oral knowledge systems, as they were still vibrant in large parts of the African continent not long before he expressed his thoughts on African philosophy.

It should be noted that the decades-long debate around *Bantu Philosophy* by African(a) philosophers was, in reality, a debate with only one aim: to decolonize African Philosophy by reflecting on its nature. In fact, there is no work that discusses the nature of African philosophy and does not, at some point, mention Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, or vital force. Next to Hountondji and other critics of ethnophilosophy, who are mostly critical because of methodological concerns (ethnophilosophy not being *reflective* philosophy), there are also African philosophers of note who have taken up the ontology of vital force in more positive ways and discussed it substantially. Among them is Innocent Asouzu, who holds that Tempels is closer to Kagame than he would admit. While determining 'vital force' as being, Tempels remains bound, according to Asouzu, to the static orientation of Aristotelian philosophy:

If the notion of being can be reduced to such a fixed idea as force, it then means that it is a static immovable idea. In this case, we are dealing with a static Bantu ontology and not with a dynamic one. This force is nothing other than Aristotle's being as being, which is static in its abstractness. (Asouzu 183)

In fact, by proposing his *Ibunya'idanda* philosophy as an alternative understanding of African ontology, Asouzu provides a solution to Fanon's problem that the projection towards the future is more important than understanding tradition. This philosophy, referring to the insight that 'nothing is unsurmountable for ants,' points towards the complementary nature of human beings and their inherent dynamic relationality as foundational instead of pointing to being, namely a static category.¹⁷

Most famous, perhaps, are the interpretations of another Bantu language concept by South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose. Ramose reflects once again on the static-dynamic question of Bantu understanding of reality. In his description of *ubu* and *ntu* as an interconnection of ontology and epistemology, he comes close to what has been called 'process' philosophy¹⁸ or to the understanding of 'being and time' in their intimate entanglement. However, Ramose keeps his understanding on a meta-level, when, speaking of *ubu* and *ntu*, he declares that:

[...] they are mutually founding in the sense that they are two aspects of be-ing as a one-ness and an indivisible whole-ness. [...] On this reasoning, *ubu* may be regarded as be-ing becoming and this evidently implies the idea of motion. [...] – *ntu* may be construed as the temporarily having become. (Ramose 36)

We may conclude, therefore, that through the interpretations of vital force by African(a) philosophers, we see the continuous development of a philosophy that takes *ntu* as the ancestor concept of vital force. The reflections of Ramose, Asouzu, and the younger generation philosopher Ogbonnaya go beyond the decolonizing age of African philosophy that motivated the

reactions of the earlier generation. The discussion now has moved towards an open dialogue, as part of a non-colonial living tradition on ways to think and conceptualize the apparently African understanding of reality and humanity as being dynamic, complementing, relational, and becoming. Thus, *ntu* has become a post-postcolonial and non-colonial concept that, as a projected ancestor-concept, links several related interpretations through time.

Yorùbá Conception of Àṣẹ — Vital Force?

This section is based on popular verbal arts in ritual contexts, discussed hereunder. It is through these arts of/about being and becoming that we focus on *àṣẹ* as the metaphysical basis for present-day Yorùbá philosophy. It is believed that with the verbal and narrative arts, one can activate, command, or manipulate *àṣẹ*, that is, the power, energy, force/vitality of being and becoming in all beings.¹⁹ Whereas verbal art (which colonial writers called ‘incantation’) is contextually ritualistic, we take our interpretation beyond the ritual contexts through the story of/about being and becoming in *Ifá* (the Yorùbá divination and knowledge system). One expression of such verbal art goes thus:

*Àṣẹ iná ni iná fi ùjọ; àṣẹ d̀̀r̀̀ǹ̀ǹ̀ ni d̀̀r̀̀ǹ̀ǹ̀ǹ̀ fi ̀̀r̀̀ǹ̀ǹ̀; àbá tí aláḡemọ́ bádá ni ̀̀ò̀̀sà̀̀ òkè ̀̀nḡbà... it is the force of fire that causes the fire to ignite; it is the force of sun that causes the sun to shine brightly; it is what an *aláḡemọ́* (a green insect that can dance at will on the leaves), proposes, or requests for, that is granted by Olódùmarè the supreme being. To say that whatever an *aláḡemọ́* prays for or proposes shall be granted by the supreme being is to maintain that Olódùmarè is the supreme source of *àṣẹ*.*

The Yorùbá prayer foregrounds that *àṣẹ* is the power or vital force through which a being can interact with and command reverence from other beings. More specifically, the prayer for the Yorùbá foregrounds the knowledge of dynamic forces of command/authority in human beings and ̀̀r̀̀sà̀̀, the Yorùbá pantheon. In Yorùbá society *àṣẹ* was understood to be at work when “the creation of the multiple godheads began a transference of social functions, the division of labour and professions among deities whose departments they were thereafter to become” (Soyinka 28). Thus, the dynamic forces of *àṣẹ* permitted ̀̀bàtálá to nurture his philosophical knowledge through which he became the first Yorùbá sculptural artist, god of creation and morality. Similarly, ̀̀gún the artist, the hunter and blacksmith, became the first acting man, the pathfinder, and the Yorùbá god of creativity through his *ijálá* the choric art of ̀̀gún as well as the invention of gun, cutlass, hoe, and other farm implements. Abiodun (310) aptly explains that “*àṣẹ* pertains to the identification, activation and utilization of the innate energy, power and natural laws believed to reside in all animals, plants, hills, rivers, natural phenomena, human beings and ̀̀r̀̀sà̀̀.” It is therefore salient that the conceptual genealogy of *àṣẹ* is rooted in the Yorùbá knowledge of the natural.

For the Yorùbá, one is born with *àṣẹ* to interact with and/or issue commands over oneself. As the power/force to interact with and command reverence from other beings, *àṣẹ* is developed, nurtured, and activated through personal/life experiences and the ontological journey of Yorùbá ritual and cosmology. Otherwise, the source of one’s *àṣẹ* will be questioned. As Abiodun (311) explains, “It is, therefore, not uncommon to hear a question like, ‘*Tani ó fun ọ ní àṣẹ?*’. ‘What/who is your sanctioning authority (for an action)?’ when the source of an *àṣẹ* is suspect. Even an ̀̀r̀̀sà̀̀’*s àṣẹ* can be queried.” Of course, like the natural *àṣẹ*, the supernatural *àṣẹ* of ̀̀r̀̀sà̀̀ can also be nurtured/developed and activated through the similar ontological journey of Yorùbá ritual and cosmology. It is believed that *Ifá* always provides spiritual guidance/advice in that ontological journey. However, *Ifá’s àṣẹ*, as the power to provide spiritual guidance/advice, was also nurtured and activated through the personal/life experience and ontological journey of ̀̀r̀̀nmilà, the founder of the *Ifá* school, who radicalized the Yorùbá divination system and/or knowledge system.

Another oracular story—told by Babaláwo Ọsitọla to Margaret Drewal—helps to understand how Ọrúnmilà nurtured and activated the spiritual *àṣẹ* of Ifá. The story gives a clear example of how Ọrísà's *àṣẹ* (the vital forces ascribed to Yorùbá deities such as Ifá/Ọrúnmilà the god of knowledge, Ọgún the god of Iron, Ọsun the water goddess, Ọbàtálá the god of morality, Èsù the trickster god, Sàngó the god of thunder and lightning, Ọya the god of the whirlwind, and so forth), are nurtured and activated. Ọsitọla (quoted in Drewal 29) remarks that “in a muddy land, a person slips and falls easily. Those who follow behind beware. These were the words of wisdom spoken to Ọrúnmilà when he was travelling in a strange land of Ejibonmefon.” It goes without a Yorùbá saying that *àgbà se pèlẹ̀, ilẹ̀ úyọ̀*—an elder should tread carefully because the land is slippery. In the story, Ọrúnmilà is advised to perform sacrifice to be humiliated and subsequently be blessed. But on the way, according to Ọsitọla (quoted in Drewal 29), “he first passed through the market on the outskirts of the town. There, Èsù decided to humiliate him. Causing it to rain heavily, Èsù made the land slippery, but Ọrúnmilà persevered. As he reached the marketplace he slipped and fell. [All the sacrificial items, namely] animals' blood, the palm oil, the food splattered all over his body.” The people in the market began to laugh and ridicule Ọrúnmilà as he was so dirty, disgraced, ashamed, and helpless.

If we think of the story as a metaphor for human reproduction, we can interpret the marketplace in the strange land of Ejibonmefon as the world where people from all walks of life compete for *àṣẹ*. This is informed by the Yorùbá belief that *ayé lojà òrun nilé*—the world of the living is a marketplace, while the world of the spirit is our home. In such metaphorical understanding, the outskirts of the town from where Ọrúnmilà falls into the marketplace of Ejibonmefon is our mothers' womb, the doorway to human existence. All the sacrificial items, animals' blood, palm oil, and food, which Ọrúnmilà was advised to carry in a clay bowl on his journey, as well as the heavy rain—probably symbolizing the breaking of the waters during childbirth—can be understood as things that make one easily slip and fall into the world of the living from the world of the unborn. For this reason, the ontological journey to the strange land of Ejibonmefon can be understood as the natural/biological process through which every living being travels from the world of the unborn to the world of the living, where they constantly experience rebirth through the Yorùbá rites of passage.

The marketplace of Ejibonmefon is conceived as a strange land not only because the world is strange to us at birth but also because the world becomes strange to us again when we experience downfall, which always offers a transition into a new world of being and becoming. Ejibonmefon is a strange world where not all the people who laugh when we are born are celebrating our birth. In other words, it is a world where some people are actually ridiculing us because we are helpless, as when we experience a downfall. Thus, the wisdom of the story, according to Drewal (30), “is not to beware of slipping and falling, but has to do with humility, humiliation, and reciprocity. Ọrúnmilà withstood humiliation only to be blessed with fame and wealth. [...]. Ọrúnmilà learned humility through the experience of humiliation, while those who humiliated him suffered most and, in the end, paid the greater price.” This is because Èsù, the Yorùbá trickster God who decided to humiliate Ọrúnmilà, also advised the people (who laugh and ridicule Ọrúnmilà) to consult Ifá for solutions to their various problems.

It is based on the interpretation of *àṣẹ* directly from the oracular story of Ifá that one can clearly see what the difference in approach means for the understanding of the Yorùbá and Bantu ancestor concepts we discuss in this paper. Whereas the concept of *ntu* is mainly discussed among academic philosophers, our interpretation from the oracular story of Ifá/Ọrúnmilà shows that we are dealing with a living tradition of narration. Despite this difference, we claim that in both cases, one can speak of a living tradition, of which one has moved more into academic philosophy, while the other still functions as an oral philosophical practice.

Òrúnmìlà now becomes the first inventor of *àṣẹ* through which Ifá interacts/dialogues with and commands reverence from the world as we know it today. But Ifá remains relevant today because the devotees continue to nurture and activate its *àṣẹ*. It is, therefore, not unpopular to hear from the devotees/Ifá priests that Ifá/Òrúnmìlà is like one's relative who teaches them how to divine and interpret oracular messages. They reiterate the popular saying as a way of affirming or confirming that Òrúnmìlà/Ifá is the source of their *àṣẹ*. That the process of learning through ritual and orature is endless gives credence to Babaláwo Ọsitọla referring to the Yorùbá, in Drewal's book, as "the people of action." Òrúnmìlà remarks that "proficiency in Ifá divination comes from long apprenticeship just as a route becomes familiar through previous exploration. Unfamiliar engagements lead to confusion and disgrace" (Emanuel 203).

It is through personal/life experience and the ontological journey that the various vital forces of òrìṣà and humans are continuously nurtured and activated. The oracular story of Òrúnmìlà provides an example of how òrìṣà's *àṣẹ* are made and nurtured. This made Soyinka (145) assert that

the anthropomorphic origin of uncountable deities is one more leveler of divine class-consciousness but, finally, it is the innate humanity of the [òrìṣà] themselves, their bond with man through a common animist relation with nature and phenomena. Continuity for the Yorùbá operates both through the cyclic concept of time and the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness.

One can therefore say that *àṣẹ* is not only the source of the continuous ontological journey between the Yorùbá ancestors and their descendants but also the source of what Apter²⁰ describes as a pragmatic rather than a semantic opposition between official, public discourses about the world and "deep knowledge" [imò 'jinlẹ] of the Yorùbá world. To further explore the interpretations of *àṣẹ*, we will discuss some further stories and their meaning.

The concept also explains power in society, as we understand from the argumentation that because "like a sceptre, *àṣẹ* must be received from a source outside of, and higher than oneself, which in part explains the Yorùbá custom of consulting Ifá before approval can be given to install an Ọba (ruler) and not infrequently an *olóri* (leader) of a community" (Abiodun 311). What makes kings *al'áṣẹ ikeji òrìṣà* (meaning the possessors or the owners of *àṣẹ* who are next hierarchically to òrìṣà) is *àṣẹ* that comes from a source higher than them. Therefore, Abiodun stresses a Yorùbá saying that *a kì fi ara ẹni joyè*—one does not forcefully issue command over others. *Àṣẹ*, as an authorization, is what makes a king an *al'áṣẹ ikeji òrìṣà*. *Àṣẹ* is the reason for the rites of passage through which a king is authorized to serve, rule, command, and maintain the cosmic balance between the past and the present, the dead and the living, the presence and the absence. In fact, what makes a king popular is deep knowledge [imò 'jinlẹ] about the Yorùbá world, which equips them with critical tools to maintain the cosmic balance between the known and the unknown as a way of avoiding the official, public, discourse about the world to degenerate into chaos. And when there is a crisis, a king willing to restore peace and maintain social well-being has the *àṣẹ* to summon his chiefs to the council of elders for dialogue. In fact, the king has the *àṣẹ* to consult Ìyá Ọba, the king's mother (who is not the king's biological mother but the encyclopedia of history/culture in a Yorùbá palace), for deep knowledge. But if a social/communal problem is beyond the range of knowledge of the chiefs, Ìyá Ọba, priests [àwòrò] and priestesses [olòrìṣà], diviners [babaláwo] and herbalists [onísẹ̀gùn] and other advisers, then the Yorùbá recourse to Ifá to proffer solution to such problem.

Like the councils of elders, the members of the Ògbóni cult (the most powerful cult/society in the ancient Yorùbáland) are interested in *àṣẹ*, which is nurtured and activated through endless searching for deep knowledge, truth, and justice. Babaláwo Ọsitọla (quoted in Drewal 33) recites the foundational text of the Ògbóni cult that *omọ ilẹ tí aḡbé l'óri ẹní, yí ò jábò. Òkè l'eye fọ wùn. A díá fún àwọn aḡbààḡbà, Tí wọn ní ikẹlẹ̀ ọrun bọ wá ilé ayé, wọn ní kìní wọn nílo se? Ènyín ọ̀rò, níbo lò nílo? À nílo wá imò, òtítọ, àti òdodo...*—a child who is meant to sleep on a bare floor will fall even if we place them on the mat. A bird soars high and/or speaks up. The aphorism interprets

the Ifá message for the elders when they prepare to travel from the world of the spirits to the world of the living. They said, what are you going to do? They asked themselves, where are we going? Where will we search for deep knowledge, truth, and justice? Here, we see a further exploration of vital force in the living tradition of the Ògbóni/Òsùgbó, as expressing the search for knowledge, truth, and justice as a continuous and unending journey.

Another layer of understanding focuses on the meaning of women in the dynamic ontology connected with *àṣẹ*. Yorùbá culture views menstrual blood as symbolic of *àṣẹ* and rites of passage. It is believed that the potency of *àṣẹ* can be destroyed when in contact with menstrual blood. But to the Yorùbá, *àṣẹ* must continuously be renewed through rites of passage. This belief is based on the common experience that menstruation marks a transition between the end of a circle and the beginning of a new one. That would explain the reason why Awo Fatunmbi (quoted in Washington 17) argues that "Ifá scripture suggests that women have *ọfọ àṣẹ* [the ability to pray effectively] as a consequence of menstruation. Men receive *ọfọ àṣẹ* as a consequence of initiation. Because the power of the word is a natural birthright of women, this power has been erroneously associated with 'witchcraft' by those who have tried to give it a negative connotation. In line with Awo Fatunmbi, who claims that women are naturally endowed with *ọfọ àṣẹ*, Teresa Washington explains that *àṣẹ* to practice witchcraft is, in fact, nurtured and activated through the rituals of *Àwọn Ìyàmi Àjẹ* who are described as "our mothers, our powers, and our texts."²¹

All the different but intrinsically related meanings and interpretations of *àṣẹ* described above show that, while interpreting directly from verbal lines and/or stories, the concept appears to explain the deeper layers of meaning that relate to the similar concept of vital force or *ntu*. Cross-culturally, both concepts express African understandings of human existence in its life-world, a world that is characterized by a dynamic ontology. While our genealogical tracing of both concepts through different discourses shows their overlap, the older, both the colonial and postcolonial, approaches in religious, anthropological, and philosophical studies have hindered and complicated the understanding of *àṣẹ* and *ntu* as being conceptual ancestors of the now globalized concept of vital force. In both the ongoing oral tradition of Ifá philosophy and the mostly scriptural philosophical discussions on *ntu*, we can conclude that these ancestors inspire living philosophical traditions that remain in the ownership of those who keep them.

Conclusion: Ntu, Àṣẹ, and Lineages of Descent

We can conclude from the above how oral and traditional concepts from Bantu and Yorùbá cultures, despite the 'civilizing' attempts of the colonial systems that were intended to disturb and replace African epistemic traditions, have been of continuous importance, as well in living communities and their sagacity practices, as in their hybrid intercultural translations in scholarly discussions following and eventually moving beyond Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*. Therefore, we have considered them ancestor concepts, which means they are projected as concepts that inspire present-day reflection and conceptual theorizing. Archival research shows that although Tempels did not explicitly claim to describe one general African system of ontology and limited his work to the Bantu cultures he knew, he did believe that 'primitive' or 'primary' thoughts worldwide have certain characteristics in common.²² He concluded that all world philosophies, except the hegemonic modern European thought, focus more on life, vitality, and dynamism as both the moving force of all beings and the focus for human fulfillment/happiness/salvation.

One may contest Tempels' more generalizing ideas on dynamic world philosophies, as they are not based on an intensive study of all these philosophies, except for the Bantu philosophy itself. Two things are worth noting, however. First, Tempels' unifying approach to what one could call a *global philosophy of life force* is consistent with his continuous critique of European epistemic and cultural dominance, as well as his more detailed critique of ethnography as a purely descriptive science, which is not working *for* the peoples it studies.²³ Looking back from

our present age, we can conclude that a strong focus on the detailed description of local differences often does not support anti-colonial resistance but rather the opposite: it helps to keep (neo-)colonial domination in place. Unifying the world epistemic systems against 'Europe' as Tempels did, even if this may be contested as failing in good scholarship, can be understood on the contrary as a politically motivated approach to creating philosophical solidarity among oppressed cultures who struggle for deeper self-determination than the (post-)colonial political situation allows.

The second point pertains to the debate on whether Tempels was right to project from his understanding of Bantu philosophy to a general African philosophy. Especially after the supportive publication of John S. Mbiti's attempt to outline general characteristics of African culturalized religious and philosophical ideas,²⁴ readers of Tempels maintained that he generalized a Bantu concept to the whole of Africa.²⁵ Our investigation into the connections between *ntu* and *àse* may have shown—by means of a case study of a similar concept between two distinct African cultural language regions—that it can be argued meaningfully that different African language groups/cultures share certain basic ontological concepts, as we argued to be the case for vital force.

All the same, it is clear from the differences between Tempels and Kagame that the very articulation of a universal philosophical concept such as vital force already presupposes a philosophy that has become incarnated in writing culture and therefore becomes subject to critical debate about conceptual choices—thus when we speak of *ntu* or *àse* in present-day African philosophy, we cannot claim to speak of pre-colonial concepts in their original form. Neither do we contend that these concepts stand in a definite historical causal relation to the present-day discussions on vital force among African(a) philosophers. However, they can be seen as conceptual ancestors, namely concepts that are projected as primary and inspirational for present-day African philosophies.

We hope to have thus shown that traditional African oral or linguistic concepts are still at work in living narratives and their universalized, written-down, and contested progeny. In this sense, we can say that these concepts work in living traditions while not being entirely determined by their encounters with the Western dominating powers nor by the African struggle for liberation. Instead, they can be seen to express African people's relations to the world, as well as their reflections on the place of humanity in it, in an independently ongoing manner as part of living conceptual traditions. We have proposed to call this effect their non-colonial²⁶ functioning. We hope to have thus made sense of a post-postcolonial and non-colonial reading of the genealogies of vital force.

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Notes

¹ See Diop ("Foreword to *La Philosophie Bantoue*"). *Négritude* was a movement to inspire pride in traditional Black culture, similar to the American Black Consciousness movement. It mainly addressed francophone Africans. The term *Négritude* was coined by Aimé Césaire and popularized by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Alioune Diop from Senegal.

- ² See Césaire (*Discourse on Colonialism*).
- ³ See Mudimbe (*The Invention of Africa*).
- ⁴ Bantu and Yorùbá refer to two major language groups on the African continent. While Bantu languages are primarily spoken from Central Africa to the East as well as the South of the continent (with some areas in West Africa as well), Yorùbá languages are mainly spoken in West Africa (Nigeria, Togo, Benin, e.g.).
- ⁵ It is to be noted that 'descent' does not refer to a causal, historical dependency, but rather to the recognition and ascription of a primordial status, precisely a status of dependency by way of inspiration.
- ⁶ See Monga-Kasimba ("La hiérarchie tempelsienne de l'être à la lumière de la culture Luba Shakandi").
- ⁷ See Senghor, quoted in Diagne (*African Art as Philosophy*); Ramose (*African Philosophy through Ubuntu*); Ogbonnaya ("The question of 'being' in African Philosophy"); Negedu ("Beyond the four categories of African Philosophy").
- ⁸ See Drewal (*Yoruba Ritual*).
- ⁹ See Makinde (*African Philosophy, Culture, and Traditional Medicine*).
- ¹⁰ See Apter ("Que Faire? Reconsidering Inventions of Africa").
- ¹¹ See Abiodun ("Àṣẹ: Verbalizing and Visualizing Creative Power through Art").
- ¹² "However, in Bantu language, the stem without the determinative is meaningless. The stem cannot stand alone and at the same time, it loses all the concreteness that accrues from it" (Negedu 10).
- ¹³ See Tempels' letter to Possoz of February 2, 1946, in the KADOC archive, Letters of Placide Tempels BE/942855/815 – 13–14.
- ¹⁴ Smet provides a good overview of the politics that played in the book publication of *Bantu Philosophy* in his Avant-propos for his online critical French translation of the book (see <http://www.aequatoria.be/tempels/FTCriticalEditon.htm>). The translation problems with *Bantu Philosophy* have only come to light very late, mainly through two scholars proficient in Dutch and the languages of translation in the 1990s and 2000s. In a short article published in *Quest* in 1993, Willem Storm drew attention to the fact that Pastor Colin King's 1959 English translation had not been made from the original book, but from the French, and therefore repeats the omissions, changes in chapter titles, and deletion of Tempels' preface and numerous footnotes. Moreover, it adds new modifications that made the text more condescending in places. Another Dutch scholar, Henk Haenen, noticed unusual details, this time in the French translation, and provided the reader with several significant examples (see Haenen, *Afrikaans denken. Ontmoeting, dialoog en frictie. Een filosofisch onderzoek*).
- ¹⁵ King's translation (55) reads: "a Bantu one day explaining the concept of *mntu* to one of my colleagues...".
- ¹⁶ See Mbiti (*African Religions and Philosophy*).
- ¹⁷ See Ogbonnaya ("The question of 'being' in African Philosophy").
- ¹⁸ Monga-Kasimba (2022, 214–215) discusses the relation between Whitehead's process philosophy and the meaning of vital force in *Bantu Philosophy*.
- ¹⁹ This seems to correspond to Senghor's understanding of vital force as the dynamic reality that expresses itself in African arts and wisdom telling. See above.
- ²⁰ See "Que Faire? Reconsidering Inventions of Africa."
- ²¹ While the discourse of Ìyàmi Àjé is beyond this paper, it is not uncommon to hear from an Àjé that "it is Ìyàmi who gave me àṣẹ" (Washington 20) as a way of affirming and confirming the source of their àṣẹ the vital force and/or the power of reproduction, of creativity, and of retributive justice.
- ²² See Placide Tempels' letters to Émile Possoz from October 29 and November 12, 1946. This correspondence shows that Tempels studied Indian (Hindu) and Chinese (Daoist) philosophy as well as Native American philosophy, through ethnographic descriptions.
- ²³ Thus, he already saw what Edward Saïd (*Orientalism*, especially Chapter 1) later described as the knowledge/power system that defines colonial sciences.
- ²⁴ See Mbiti (*African Religions and Philosophy*).
- ²⁵ The most prominent voice to raise this point was Okot p'Bitek's. For this position and a critique, see Mosima (60).
- ²⁶ We introduced this concept here to indicate the ongoing and living heritage of a certain people and its culture, that may go underground under colonial cultural repression or restrict itself to areas of life the colonials were not interested in to transform through their 'civilizing' projects.

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