



## **Hylozoism as an Interpretive Principle in African Metaphysics**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The doctrine of hylozoism challenges the human mind to ponder more profoundly on the question of, and distinctions between ontological categories in metaphysics. In this paper, I have done a cross-cultural analysis of the views about hylozoism. And the result of this study shows that the concept 'hylozoism' is only used as an interpretive principle in African Metaphysics; unlike the widely held assumption by some popular proponents that inanimate beings have *elein vitale*, that is, life-force. This paper equally throws further illuminations on the African Conception of ultimate reality and how meanings can be ascribed to metaphysical categories.

### **THE CONCEPT HYLOZOISM**

Hylozoism is a concept that is derived from two Greek words namely 'hule' and 'zoe' (Rees 240). When translated into English Language, 'hule' means 'matter' while 'zoe' means 'life'. But there is a little problem to grapple with in this etymological definition. First we may note that any attempt to conjoin the two English words, that is, matter and life in order to obtain a straight 'forward' English translation of the definition of the concept hylozoism runs into difficulty. The fact here is that the concept MATTER and the concept LIFE belong to two distinct ontological categories in metaphysics.

However, the problem highlighted above even makes the philosophical study of the concept of hylozoism quite interesting, challenging, and educative. This is simply so because the attempts to make the basic ontological distinction between matter and life-force or other related concepts like sensation and consciousness have, as the history of philosophy has shown, led to numerous philosophical problems. For instance, there is the outright denial of such a distinction by some philosophers particularly those of the materialist

bent.

There are also other issues such as the evolutionary debate on the claim that life, consciousness and sensation are by-products of matter. Hence, no supernatural imputations need be assumed as to the origin of these phenomena. But then, there is the other camp of philosophers who uphold that the spiritual substance that forms the basis of life-force is distinct from matter. But the concept hylozoism seems to merge both the material and spiritual substances, that is, if the etymological root meaning of the concept were to be interpreted literally. Moreso, James L. Christian has aptly explained that "Hylozoism is the theory held by the earliest Greek philosophers, that all matter is alive or in some way possesses life (685)". This is to say that there is zoe (life) in matter. But this is contrary to the common sense notion that matter or material objects are inanimate. Hence, the two entities namely, matter and life, have to be clearly distinguished and given appropriate explanations bearing in mind the diverse metaphysical implications of rubbing off the ontological boundary between the one which is material and the other which is nonmaterial. Now the fruitful explanation for this mysterious ontological divide or barrier between matter and life. In this vein, the issues raised in this essay would also make some contributions from the stand point of African philosophy, to the debate concerning the fundamental distinction between animate and inanimate or living and non-living things which have led to the doctrines of mechanism and vitalism; especially as analysed in Hospers (370-377).

Mechanism as Hospers has rightly explained in the text under reference, emphasizes the continuity and likeness between living and non-living things. While vitalism emphasizes their difference. Advocates of vitalism argue for a special life-force or *elein vitale* present in living things which makes their behaviour different from that of non-living things. On a more general note, however, the concept hylozoism as we had noted earlier, has to do with the teaching that all matter is animate. And according to (Frolov, 180) "the teaching attributes sensations and mental faculties to all forms of matter. In fact, however, sensations are a property only of highly developed organic matter". But then, we should take into account the view of Anton Wilhelm Amo, a renowned African philosopher as analysed in Hountondji (118-130) who opined that "life and sensation are two inseparable attributes of living things". This view shall be utilized latter when we examine the concept of hylozoism in the context of African philosophy.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF HYLOZOISM**

Now from a cross-cultural historical perspective, a French philosopher by name Jean-Baptiste Robinet (1735-1820) is said to have been the

first to employ the term hylozoism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He expounded the details of his views on hylozoism in his main work titled *De la nature*. It is, however, on record that long before Robinet's philosophical expositions on the concept, an Italian philosopher known as Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) had been propagating the doctrine of hylozoism. Bruno in his *Della Causea, principal ed uno*, upheld the belief in the idea of a universal soul which he understood as the principle of life namely, a spiritual substance permeating all things and constituting their motive principle. It was also from this belief that Bruno developed his other views on unity, interdependence and universal motion in nature. His hylozoic convictions as explained here are conceived in the form of pantheism. The only difference is that being a materialist, Bruno did not posit the concept God as to identify him with nature as being one. Thus, a correct hylozoic interpretation of his views is that all things in the universe possess the element of consciousness as an attribute.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to point out that the views on hylozoism as explicated above have a materialist bent having been advanced by materialists who attempted to explain certain behavioural patterns observed in nature that seem to exhibit some element of rationality as though the things in nature were themselves conscious and or possess mental faculties that guide their patterns of behaviour. Consequently, these materialist proponents of hylozoism, in my opinion, employed the concept of animation or consciousness of matter as a way of explaining or designating certain kinds of behavioural patterns in nature just like one could say that the world was rational because it is orderly, or that the stars are intelligent because they kept going round in circles. In this connection, things in nature with particular reference to material objects do not require the component of a soul in order for them to be conscious of their assigned role in nature. For example, we cannot attribute consciousness to the sun or the moon simply because we see these objects in nature exhibiting precise patterns of behaviour. In other words, inanimate objects are inanimate objects all through their perceived existence. A rock or a stone, therefore, does not possess a soul neither does it exhibit consciousness. This position is contrary to the materialist interpretations of the concept of hylozoism. It is also contrary to that of another French philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin who as quoted in Omoregbe (177) also upholds the view that matter is endowed with consciousness, though a very low level of consciousness. And that consciousness is a cosmic property which becomes reflective only at the level of homosapiens. Teilhard further argues that consciousness is there in matter and in all beings in the universe in various degrees.

## **HYLOZOISM IN AFRICAN METAPHYSICS**

In African metaphysics, the seeming consciousness exhibited by the different forms of matter are perceived as the manifest manipulations of some higher beings. There are in fact numerous African socio-cultural and religious practices that confirm this African perspective to the concept of hylozoism or animation of matter as we shall see latter. However, it is important to note that from the standpoint of African metaphysics, the unity, interdependence and universal motion in nature is not seen as the rational activity of animated matter, that is, in the sense of attributing life or sensations and mental faculties to all forms of matter as the French philosopher Robinet or the Italian Philosopher Bruno had variously posited in their Western conception of hylozoism. Rather, the traditional African believes that it is spiritual beings that control and manipulate the material world. In other words, when an African exhibits hylozoic teachings in his interpretation of nature, he intuitively looks beyond the material world, unto the non-material forces whose actions occasionally animate the material world.

Now, to further enhance our understanding of the concept of hylozoism within the African context, let me give the African version of hylozoism the following doctrinal content:

1. Everything in the universe can be animated by spirits.
2. Africans believe in two worlds, visible and invisible.
3. There is transcendence of the invisible and the sacred world.
4. There is fundamental and vital unity; and interdependence of beings;
5. The beings of the sacred world are: the Supreme Being (God) gods, good and evil spirits and the spirits of the ancestors.

Hence, Udo Etuk while being critical of the Ibibio, say the African, for being too religious in a negative sense, also helps out the African conception of hylozoism in the following observations:

I would agree that the Ibibio are very aware religiously. The line dividing the physical, visible world from the spiritual, invisible realms is very thin. Virtually any object may be imbued with spiritual powers and the ability to hurt or convey information. Hence, the Ibibio man swears by ntan isong (sand) curses with virtually any object within his reach . . . some bigoted, antiquated anthropologist took one look at us and the rest of Africans, and decided that we were animists and that our religion was animism because we endow inanimate objects with a soul and worship it.

But we are not pan-psychists; and to call us animists is to introduce an unnecessary semantic noise. We do not worship fire-wood, we have more sense than that (148). These are very fundamental and central elements in African metaphysics that must be clearly understood if the

African conception of hylozoism is not to be devoid of its internal logic. For, in African metaphysics as it has been rightly pointed out by E. A. Ruch K. C. Anyanwu, (148) the mythical world for the traditional African is peopled with invisible forces who are responsible for almost anything that happens in the material world. Another African philosopher namely D. E. Idoniboye has identified these forces under one single category which he designated as spirit.

Accordingly, he has pointed out in his popular article titled "the idea of African philosophy: the concept of spirit in African Metaphysics" that:

Spirit is real.  
It is as real as matter. In its pure state  
It is unembodied  
Spirit is the animating, sustaining creative  
life-force of the universe (85).

The element of animation of the material world by the invisible life-forces is what makes the African conception of the doctrine of hylozoism to be peculiar and a little different from the Western conception of it. And we think that the African version is more convincing because of its wholistic approach to the interpretation of metaphysical realities, since it takes into cognizance the existence of the material and non-material or spirit entities in the universe.

We shall now look at examples of animation of matter or the hylozoic tendencies in African metaphysics. To start with, the traditional African believes that the life-forces, ancestors for example, in the mythical world usually maintain communication with the living and the manifestation of such communications is in some cases passed on by the process of animation of matter. The living through the rightful interpretation of the manifestations exhibited by animated matter of whatever form that the spirits may choose to communicate with. In effect, hylozoism for the traditional African serves as an interpretive principle by which the manifestations of the invisible life-forces are understood and the right responses are relayed back to the spirit world.

Consider, for instance, the Ikom people of South Eastern Nigeria. It is a common cultural practice among the Ikom people that the activities of any important traditional ceremonies like marriage, traditional festivals and burial ceremonies, must witness the pouring of libation either before the ceremony starts or before it ends. During this age long practice, kolanut are used as material objects by which communication link could be forged between the living and the invisible life-forces as well as the living dead or ancestors. In this practice, the most elderly person on such occasions (because the Ikom people believe that it is the elders (Banintema) of the land who are the

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custodians of the culture and traditions of the people), will offer prayers to the supreme god (Ebrokpabi), the gods of the land, who are lesser spirits called (Bokor) in Ikom Language; and then invite the ancestors (Baburebure) to give their blessings to the occasion.

The answer of the ancestors or the living-dead (Baburebure) is interpreted from the way the pieces of kola-nut will fall when they are thrown to the ground by the elder (onintema) who is communicating with the ancestors during the pouring or libation. Usually, it is two or most preferable four pieces of kola-nut that are used for this purpose. Now, assuming the kola-nut which has only two parts or pieces was used, the elder that is pouring the libation, will then throw up the pieces of the kola-nut in the manner in which a referee would toss a coin for football teams to choose sides for their game. It is believed that if the two pieces of kola-nut fall facing down-wards, it means that the occasion has received the blessings of the living dead. But if both pieces of the kola-nut fell facing upwards, it implies a rejection of the prayers or refusal by the living dead to bless the occasion. And this would require a reenactment of the entire process in order to appease the gods of the land and the ancestors.

The obvious question that may arise here, and which is relevant to this essay is this. How do the pieces of kola-nut which are mere material substances get the messages of the life-forces in the invisible world and relay same to the living? Actually, like we interprets the seemingly conscious behaviour of the material objects as manifestations of the manipulations of the invisible life-forces operating in nature. Like in the above case, the answer that is usually given in such African metaphysical puzzles is that the African mind relies on intuition and sign language on such occasions in order to understand the messages of the life-force of the invisible world conveyed through the animated matter.

We can link the above explanation to a very popular assertion in Igbo metaphysics which states that "Oji Adighi Anu Okwu Bekee" meaning that "kola-nut does not understand English Language". When this assertion is interpreted literally, it animates kola nut in that it attributes life or sensation and mental faculties to it by saying that kola-nut which is a material object does not understand English. However, following the African conception of animation of matter or hylozoism, we would understand that the Igbo metaphysical teaching as regards the above assertion rather seeks to remind the one that is breaking the kola-nut not to be misguided by foreign cultural principles. In other words, the breaking of kola-nut and the performance of the necessary rituals that go with it has to be done in line with the Igbo culture and most importantly with the native language or dialect which both the people and their ancestors understand. This, of course, is one of the taboos or sanction devised in Igbo traditional thought in order to safeguard and ensure cosmic

and social order. This is because in the Igbo traditional world view according to T. Uzodinma Nwala, "the influence of the disembodied spirits and duties on human beings, their association with other animate and inanimate matter and all natural phenomena . . . is one of mutual and reciprocal relationship" (57). In effect, the traditional African or the Igbo in particular, is not actually saying that the material object in question namely kola, has cognitive abilities or has life in itself in order for it to exhibit linguistic abilities. Rather, he is following the interpretation of human experience at the level of traditional thought which T. U. Nwala observed to portray a type of unconscious analogy which attempts to view external nature as endowed with human qualities. And as such things are interpreted and explained in personalistic terms and by which traditional peoples ascribed purpose to both animate and inanimate matter. So, the point at issue is not that kola-nut needs to understand English or even the Igbo Language as such, but that the ritual of breaking the kola-nut be performed in the indigenous dialect which the Igbo community comprising both the living and the living dead will understand. After all most of the ancestors existed long before the advent of the white man's language in Africa.

We shall conclude this section by considering another hylozoic tendency contained in a report by Martin Hollis that "certain primitive Yorubas were carrying about with them boxes covered with cowry shells which they treat with special regard; when asked what they are doing, they apparently reply that the boxes are their heads or souls and that they are protecting them against witchcraft" (33). This is obviously an example of an African traditional conception of reality which is giving expression in materialistic terms. It would be irrational to argue that the primitive Yoruba in the above example are actually referring to the wooden boxes as their souls. Rather, an insight into Yoruba traditional thought would reveal that the primitive Yoruba, by the above practice is translating a supersensible reality into physical expression. The interpretive principle here has to do with what the primitive Yoruba considers a move towards finding a solution to a metaphysical problem of the belief in witchcraft and the need to protect oneself from their mysterious evil machinations.

However, following the African view of hylozoism and its doctrines as expounded in this work, one could say that the boxes covered with cowry shells which the primitive Yorubas carried about as their souls, as reported by Martin Hollis in his article titled "Reason and Ritual", may not in themselves possess some spiritual or cognitive sensitivity to react against the attacks of witches. Instead, they could be seen as material objects that were used to foster some psychological and traditional religious attitude that gives the mind some hope of protection from evil spirit. But the fact remains that the holozoic tendency here is to communicate a message of supersensible nature

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through those material objects which themselves are not conscious nor possess a soul. In this connection, we could also make reference to the case of traditional diviners in Africa societies who make use of cowry shells to divine messages from the sacred world of invisible life-forces. Their procedure is similar to that of the use of pieces of kola-nut to discern messages from the living dead. So we will not delve into a detailed description of the diviners practices. But suffice it to say that their art incorporates hylozoic tendencies because of their use of inanimate objects to discern messages from the invisible world, thereby displaying some form of animation of matter.

### **CONCLUSION**

Comparatively, it is clear from this work that while matter is animated and imbued with sensation or consciousness as the materialist French philosopher Robinet and Italian philosopher Bruno had assumed, the African metaphysical position in relation to the concept of hylozoism or animation of matter shows that the belief in the existence of spirits and other invisible life-forces in nature gives the traditional African the leverage to posit that both animate and inanimate matter are made conscious by the actions of these non material life-forces. Thus, when we talk of animation of matter in African metaphysics, we should bear in mind that the traditional African does not attribute consciousness to matter as it were, but intuitively perceives beyond the material objects to discern and comprehend the life-forces that animate matter. It is for this reason that we see the doctrine of hylozoism in African metaphysics as providing an interpretive principle by which the harmony and totality of reality in the universe, both visible and invisible, animate or inanimate, could be given a holistic explanation. It is pertinent to note also that the notion of 'animation' designates a process by which life is imputed or imparted into matter. In other words, animation does not appropriately refer to evolution of consciousness from matter.

In effect the African conception of hylozoism developed in this work has also shown that consciousness is not a by-product of matter rather it is an attribute whose origin is attributed to the invisible world of spirits which African ontology and metaphysics incorporates into our explanatory scheme of existent entities in nature, or the universe as such. Another contribution to knowledge which this essay makes is that it resolves the puzzle created by the materialist conception of reality which holds that the human mind is a by product of matter. The point here is that African worldview upholds that human consciousness is intricately tied to the activities of the human mind as controlled by his spirit or the spirits of higher beings like God, evil



spirits or ancestral spirits. This view correlates with the argument posed by Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) a Cambridge Platonist who affirmed that the distinctively active character of the mind completely defy explanation in purely material terms. (See, Mautner, 118), This goes to confirm that the African belief in the existence of spiritual beings and their influence on the material reality that is visible to our sense perception is, after all, not absurd or spurious.

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