

## 'The idea of transcendence as a factor in African agency today'

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My recent work on African spirituality and on the historical comparison of myths and systems of symbolism (largely available at the above website), has prompted me to explore the presence and specific nature of ideas of the transcendent in African contexts.

A possible hypothesis is that major, agency-related structural characteristics of contemporary Africa (such as relatively failing formal organisations including the state; personalised conceptions of power; and multiple, latticed strategies of individual survival) are informed, not only by the recent history of African communities under devastating hegemonic global impact from the 19th century CE onward, but also by an ideological condition of much longer historical depth: *a relatively weak idea of transcendence pervading African cultures.*

The idea of transcendence is historically associated with the emergence of a globally decisive package of symbolic technology, comprising writing, the state, organised religion, and science in the Ancient Near East including Egypt, just over 5,000 years ago. Here several questions emerge, each enough for a life's work: Can we trace the trajectory of the idea of transcendence through to its first classic formulation, in the hands of Plato? How briefly can we summarise the trajectory of the idea of transcendence in the subsequent history of European philosophy (where it has been a central theme with enormous impact on the shaping of general European, and subsequently North Atlantic, and increasingly global culture)? What can we say about the history of that package throughout subsequent African history?

An examination of one African setting that is well-defined in space and time (Nkoya culture, western central Zambia, mid-20th century CE - a rather standard Bantu-speaking context) will help us recognise, in the first place, that transcendence as such is not an alien idea in the African context. However, it is transcendence of a particular kind - the standard kind, I am inclined to say. In the Ancient Near East, with Plato, and among the Nkoya (as probably in many other recent African systems of thought), the typical movement implied in transcendence is as follows: the initial departure from the concrete here and now, flexes back and ultimately finds its completion in a (usually somewhat transformative) return to the concrete here and now.

This insight, if it has some validity (it needs to be deepened in many ways, e.g. by a collateral discussion of the sublime), may help us to appreciate, in the second place, what seems to be the peculiar North Atlantic twist to transcendence: *after the departure the movement is frozen.* As a result, the vectorial sense of continuity implied in the more original and general notion of transcendence, in the North Atlantic version as given way to the idea of a firm boundary between absolutely different states of being. The institutions that have facilitated North Atlantic hegemony (highly effective formal organisations including the state, science, the notion of a public domain as absolute distinct from the private domain, etc. - in short: the social construction and maintenance of firm boundaries) appear to be predicated on this idea of frozen transcendence. Which, having been, so far, rather (though far from totally) unsuccessful in capturing African societies, may be illuminating to understand, value, and - if that is what we want - eventually transform, current social and political performance in Africa.