



The Metaphysics of Ancestral Spirits in Nso Cosmology

Abstract

The Nso people of Cameroon maintain a distinctive worldview in which ancestral spirits, known as Nkfe or Vibai, play a central metaphysical role. These spirits are believed to possess powers that can either benefit or harm the living, and their presence is tied to sacred spaces such as the fon's palace, ancestral shrines, and forests. This article critically examined the metaphysical dimensions of ancestral spirits in Nso cosmology, exploring how they embody a relational ontology that situates being within continuity across past, present, and future generations. Adopting a hermeneutical method, the study drew on African philosophical thought and ethnographic accounts to interpret the ontological status of ancestral spirits and their socio-moral significance. The analysis demonstrated that, within Nso cosmology, ancestors are considered ontologically real as "living dead" who mediate between divine and human realms, reinforcing communal identity, and serving as moral exemplars. Their metaphysical presence shapes socio-moral behaviour, embedding metaphysics within a framework of interconnectedness and communal responsibility. The Nso experience illustrated that ancestral spirits are not merely venerated figures of the past but active participants in contemporary life. This study contributed to African philosophy by highlighting the metaphysical traditions of the Nso people and offering insights into the nature of being, continuity, and communal identity.

Keywords: Nso cosmology, ancestral spirit, African metaphysics, relational ontology, communal identity, Cameroon.

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Introduction

The Banso are a Bantu-speaking community in western Cameroon. For many generations, agriculture and village dwellings have been sustained by the rich soils and undulating hills of the mountainous regions that make up their country. Due to long-standing interactions and shared ancestral customs, the Banso are a part of the larger cultural cluster of kindred communities in the Bamenda Foothills that share ethnic and cultural affinities. In African philosophy, the philosophical

discussion of ancestor spirits holds a prominent position. The ancestors are ontologically real beings whose presence influences the community's moral, social, and spiritual fabric; they are not just symbolic figures. According to Mbiti (1990), they are the "living dead," people who stay involved in the concerns of the living and act as a mediator between the divine and humanity. Their everyday lives revolve around the idea of ancestor spirits, which is central to their philosophy. Ancestral spirits, according to the Nso

people, are the spirits of their departed ancestors who still remain in the spiritual world and communicate with the living.

A particularly rich background for investigating the metaphysics of ancestor spirit is offered by the Nso people of Cameroon, who live in the Northwest Region. Their cosmology is firmly rooted on ancestral reverence, where the ontological presence of ancestors is affirmed through rituals, oral traditions, and group activities. The importance of ancestor rites in Nso society is postulated by Chem Langhëë (1995), who points out that they are metaphysical affirmations of continuity between generations rather than merely cultural acts. Moreover, Nghoh (2001) places these customs in the context of Cameroon's larger historical development. Despite colonial and postcolonial disturbances, he hypothesized that they are robust. However, the structure of reality that represents continuity between the past, present, and future is inextricably linked to the ancestral spirits.

Ancestral spirits are respected and adored in Nso metaphysics for their protection, knowledge, and direction. They are thought to have spiritual authority and powers that have a variety of effects on their descendants' life. Ancestral spirits are thought to be able to provide blessings, wealth, and good fortune, but they may also bring disaster, illness, and death if they are not properly appeased or if the descendants abandon the right way. The Nso people's conception of ancestor

spirits is closely linked to their cosmology, which views the world as a complex network of connections between the material and spiritual. From this perspective, ancestral spirits act as go-betweens for the living and the Supreme Being, conveying the needs and worries of the latter to the former.

Understanding Ancestral Spirits in Nso Culture

The Nso folklore holds that ancestral spirits actively guide and safeguard their descendants, frequently thought of as a link between the material and spiritual realms. Depending on how they are revered and venerated, ancestral spirits are believed to have the ability to affect the living and bring either good or bad luck. The Nso people believe that preserving positive ties with their ancestors is essential to guaranteeing the success and well-being of the family and community.

Ancestral spirits are honored in Nso through rituals and offerings, which could involve presenting food and drink, pouring libations, or carrying out certain rituals to please the ancestors. The Nso people expect that these actions can enable them to access the blessings, wisdom, and direction of their ancestors. Additionally, it is believed that ancestor spirits can interact with the living through a variety of channels, including visions, dreams, and divination. This enables the living to ask their ancestors for protection, knowledge, and guidance. According to Nso tradition, ancestral spirits are the spirits of departed ancestors who live on in the afterlife. They are believed to have authority and

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spiritual abilities that affect their descendants' lives.

Although God looms so large in Nso life and metaphysics, the belief is that humans can only reach him through multiple intermediaries-ancestral spirits and various classes of deities associated with specific mundane objects, places, and phenomena. Black ants, known as "*vilii*," and white ants, known as "*vise*," represent the ancestors' contact with the living. In Nso, this metaphysical metamorphosis is cosmologically acknowledged in the interpretation and evaluation of the rite's outcomes. While white ants consume the doorstep plank that blood pours on during sacrifice and thereby participate in the sacrifices, black ants come to taste the blood after it falls to the ground. This supports Nso's cosmology's metaphysical connection between the living, the living-dead, and the gods (Nsamenang, 1992, p. 90).

Moreso, to Nso culture, ancestral spirits are the spirits of departed ancestors who live on in the afterlife (Mzeka, 1980). They are believed to have spiritual authority and powers that affect their descendants' lives (Nsamenang, 2006). Ancestral spirits are said to live in a spiritual world outside from the material world, yet they are still related to and able to communicate with the living, according to Nso cosmology (Fisiy & Geschiere, 1993). They can be either good or bad based on how the living treat them (Mbiti, 1969); thus, they the ancestral spirits are said to bring blessings, protection, and direction if the living honor them and

make sacrifices to them (Wiredu, 2004). According to the cosmic beliefs of the Nso people, as described by Taa woo Kuinseh, who helped Taa woo Faanjang perform *ntaḍri* rituals in the Faanjang compound, the living are compelled, by their religious practices, to make sacrifices in order to maintain that spiritual bond for their safety and their continued existence (Fonyuy, 2022, p. 7). Ancestral spirits are also believed to have a deep awareness and understanding of the natural and spiritual worlds; therefore, often consulted for guidance and wisdom (Nsamenang, 2006). According to Mzeka, ancestral spirits are seen as the custodians of traditional knowledge and cultural values, playing an important role in maintaining social order and promoting community cohesion (Mzeka, 1980). An ancestor is not only revered after death, but is one who has left a legacy for their progeny. During their lifetime, an ancestor may have been a soldier or warrior and be remembered for traits like courage, bravery, and fearlessness. They may also be remembered for traits like a distinctive physique, strong physical power, or a personality that exudes energy, high endurance that could be considered supernatural or distinctive. Throughout their lives, the family and community may have relied on an ancestor with these qualities for safeguarding, safety, and security, or for ensuring the protection of the family or community. Every compound featured a specific sacrifice (*chu*) and a hallowed site of worship (*kire' ke nyuy*). The leader of the lineage had secular authority and, when necessary, took on the job of a priest. He

later served as a go-between for God and his lineage's members. When someone became gravely ill, when a child was born, when there was a protracted drought, and when crops were planted or harvested, he carried out sacrifices. Thanking God for his gifts and appeasing his wrath were the two purposes of sacrifice (Fonyuy, 2022, p.4).

The Role of Ancestral Spirits in Nso Cosmology and Spirituality

In Africa and Nso spirituality, ancestry is more than just those who have passed into eternity; it is the heavenly means by which life itself is passed down. In order to maintain continuity and ties between generations, physical and spiritual characteristics are transmitted through human ancestors. Humans incorporate divine qualities from the Creator, the ultimate ancestor of all spirits, just as they inherit bodily characteristics, abilities, skills and personality traits from their forebears.

In Nso cosmology, the function of the living is to commemorate and remember departed ancestors, who are seen to have a significant impact on their descendants' lives. The foundation of this practice is the belief that ancestors still remain alive and active in a spiritual form, affecting the living and providing blessings, protection, and guidance. According to Kashim Ibrahim Tala's theory in Orature, "incantations are formulas with a magical orientation." They are full of profoundly mythopoetic imagery and supernatural abilities. They are used to curse criminals, fend off evil, summon evil

onto adversaries, and flaunt one's individuality (Kashim, 1999, p.52).

Ancestors occupy a sacred zone between the divine and the living in Nso cosmology. As guardians and counselors to their offspring, they are seen as intermediaries with the power to affect the material world. Ties between the humans and their ancestors are preserved by cultivating a strong sense of connectedness to one's lineage across generations. The stronger the connection, the more effective or holier the ancestor is perceived to be. Ancestors are revered because of their biological and spiritual influence on the lives of the living. Therefore, paying respect by forebears is a recognition of the Creator's role in sustaining life and divinity via human ancestry

In Nso cosmology, the ancestral spirits act as a bridge between the divine and the living. They return to the society with wisdom after communicating human concerns to higher spiritual forces. The Nso people consider *Nyuy*, to be the ultimate God and the universe's creator; thus, *Nyuy* created the planet and the first humans, *Le'* and *Njing* (Nkwi, 1987). *Le'* and *Njing* are important characters in Nso mythology who are fundamental to the genesis narrative. According to Nso oral traditions, *Le' and Njing* are regarded as the first humans made by the supreme god *Nyuy*. *Njing*, whom *Nyuy* created to be the mother of humanity, is frequently portrayed as the first woman. She is connected to the soil, childbirth, and fertility. On the one hand, *Njing* was tasked with maintaining the fertility of

the soil and taking care of it. Conversely, *Le'* is frequently portrayed as *Nyuy's* creation of the first man and the father of humanity. He is known for his bravery, strength, and leadership. For Nkwi, *Le'* was tasked with defending and sustaining humanity (Nkwi, 1987).

Njing and *Le'* were formed by *Nyuy*, who put them in the world to take care of it and add people to it. The Nso people were finally formed by the growth and multiplication of *Njing* and *Le's* offspring. But in Nso mythology, *Le'* and *Njing* are important characters that symbolize the basis of human civilization. They represent the ideals and qualities that are significant to the Nso people, including duty, strength, and fertility. The Nso people are reminded of their ties to the natural environment and their ancestors through the roles of *Njing* and *Le'* (Kaberry, 1952). The Nso people's respect for *Njing* and *Le'* is shown in a number of cultural customs; for instance, women are obliged to perform rituals and make sacrifices to *Njing* in order to obtain her protection and blessings during delivery and childrearing. In the same vein, males may offer sacrifices and carry out rituals in order to seek *Le's* support and direction in their day-to-day activities. The earthly embodiment of *Nyuy* is thought to be the Fon (king) of Nso. He is essential to preserving harmony and balance in the cosmos (Diduk, 1992).

The Nso Palace is therefore a hallowed site of worship and a representation of the temporal and spiritual might of the *Fon* (king). The *Ngai* (meeting house of regulating organizations), the *vikiy Nto*

san (royal wives' apartments), and the *Shuufaay* (lineage halls) encircle the central courtyard, or *kibuh*. The Fon's role as axis mundi is made tangible by this centripetal arrangement. Commoners have access to outer precincts, whereas *ve wongi* (titled nobles) and *vibai* (regulatory societies) have access to interior chambers. The power hierarchy and ritual purity necessary to approach the Fon are carried out via the transition from profane to sacred place. The *kavah* (throne stool) carved as a double gong, signifies the Fon's dual role as judge and priest. The two chambers represent hearing both sides before judgment, while the gong form evokes the voice of ancestors. Only the Fon may sit on it, marking exclusive sovereignty. Leopard and Python, motifs found on royal staffs, stools, and door frames carry profound significance. The leopard denotes martial prowess and solitary authority; the python symbolizes wisdom, fertility, and the earth's regenerative power. Together they articulate balanced kingship: force tempered by prudence. The *Boom* (Royal Cap), a beaded conical cap with buffalo and spider motifs is another royal symbol. The buffalo indexes strength and sacrifice while the spider *ngam* indexes wisdom and the weaving of society. The Fon's legitimacy and metaphysical bond with *Nyuy* are publicly affirmed when they wear *Ndzev*. The Fon's appearance or demise was announced by the *ngem* (Palace Gong). It possesses a legal sound that calls the *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri* societies to council. The sound of the gong is viewed as the Fon's extension, a disintegrating individual who can be everywhere at

his territory. The fly whisks and beaded calabashes are also used to store palm wine for drinking, and beads are a symbol of grandeur. The ability of the Fon to "sweep away" chaos is symbolized by the fly whisk, *deng*. A *nchiylav* (attendant) carries both during public shows, representing hierarchy (God) and royalty (Mzeka, 1980).

The Nso Palace is a system of semiotic in which ceremonial artifacts, regalia, and space all work together to justify authority. Symbols function as condensed charters of political theology, inscribing principles of governing, mediating between the human and supernatural, and connecting the living Fon to a lineage of ancestors while *Kovvifem* acts as a mundi axis. His action is a mediator between *Nyuy* (Supreme Being), the *anyuy* (ancestral spirits), and the *wir Nso* (Nso people), the Fon gains authority through its elevation, which spatially enacts hierarchy. The Fon-elect must isolate himself on the mountain during major enthronement ceremonies, where he "eats" royal medicine and receives esoteric teaching from *Taawong* (priests) (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967). The prince changes from human to ritual office as he descends from the mountain and becomes the Fon. According to oral tradition, *Kovvifem* and the palace in *Kumbo* are connected by a leopard's trail. Thus, the leopard emblem on royal regalia alludes to the Fon's magical right of entry to the mountain as well as martial authority. It indicates that a lawful power moves between the sacred mountain and the palace. Sacred fires are set on the mountain during *kikum* rites. Rising smoke is interpreted as

communication with the ancestors and *Nyuy*. Additionally, fire distinguishes sacred from profane areas by marking the limits of consecrated space.

The Influence of Ancestral Spirits on Daily Life in Nso Culture

The ancestral spirits symbolize the connection between the divine and the human, and this understanding upholds the holiness of ancestry. Ancestors are revered because of their influence on the biological and spiritual development of the living. Therefore, paying respect to one's ancestors is recognition of the Creator's role in sustaining life and divinity through human ancestry. Nso cosmology is organized around three interrelated realms: *Nyuy* (God), *anyuy* (ancestral spirits), and *kitukensai* (the world of the living). Furthermore, *anyuy* are the most direct and proactive in day-to-day matters. The ancestors are the "living dead," or deceased elders who still have personality, memory, and moral authority (Jumbam, 2001). They are revered as senior members of the lineage whose approval is crucial for maintaining social and cosmic balance rather than being worshipped as gods. Significantly, ancestors shapes the daily life of Nso culture in three dimensions, namely, socio-political order, moral regulation and economic activity

First, the *Fon* (king) is at the top of the hierarchical Nso political system. The Fon's ceremonial ties to royal ancestors kept in the *Nto' Nso* (palace) shrine are the source of his legitimacy (Fanso, 1989). Ancestors must be consulted for important decisions like enthronement, war, and land distribution through

libation and divination by *Taawong* experts. Ancestral decrees are upheld by the *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri* regulatory bodies. Ancestral fury, which is thought to show itself as drought, plagues, or death, is invoked when a *ngwerong* decrees are broken. Thus, even in the history of Cameroon's contemporary province, ancestors serve as a transcendent judge, supporting the legitimacy of traditional institutions.

The Nso moral code is guarded by ancestors, and ancestral sanctions are meted to enforce taboos pertaining to areas such as incest, thievery, disrespect for elders, and land disputes (Jumbam, 2001). Seldom is misfortune seen as random; when a family has illness, crop failure, or infertility, they contact a diviner, or *ngam*, to find out which ancestor is wronged and what compensation is needed. Restitution frequently takes the shape of reconciliation, confession, or sacrifice. This system establishes a "moral economy" in which the desire for ancestral blessing and the dread of divine retribution preserve communal harmony. Proverbs, folktales, and involvement in sacrifices are used to instill reciprocity between the living and the dead in children at a young age (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982).

Ancestors are ceremoniously linked to the agricultural cycle. In order to request for soil fertility, lineage leaders pour a libation of palm wine on family graves prior to sowing (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967). Held following harvest, the *Mfu* festival is essentially an expression of gratitude to ancestors for

their protection. Ancestors can be both health-promoting and disease-causing. While displeased ancestors send *ngan*, a spiritual ailment, satisfied ancestors protect descendants. *Ngaa Shiv*, (traditional healers), assess ancestral curse and recommend the remedies, which could be *fufu*, *palm wine* or *kola nut* rites. Birth, marriage, and death are also ancestral matters: the goal of funeral ceremonies is to change the deceased into a kind of *anyuy* rather than a restless ghost. Infants are brought to lineage ancestors, and weddings need ancestral consent to guarantee fertility. Ancestors are active players in everyday life in Nso civilization rather than only incidental memories. They make laws, make decisions, provide care, and health. Both the living and the dead have a contractual and mutually reliant relationship. While their predecessors offer protection, fertility, and legitimacy, their descendants offer sacrifice, adoration and compliance.

Evaluation

This paper is a presentation of the role of ancestral spirits within a relational ontology in Nso cosmology. It illustrates that the Nso community believes ancestral spirits can engage with the living through various means, such as visions, dreams, and divination. This relationship allows the living to seek protection, knowledge, and guidance from their ancestors. In Nso tradition, ancestral spirits constitute the souls of deceased parents who continue to exist in the afterlife. They are thought to possess authority and spiritual powers that influence the lives of their descendants. Within Nso cosmology,

ancestral spirits serve as a link between the divine and the living; they are involved in the community, imparting wisdom after relaying human concerns to higher spiritual forces. An expression of this reverence is demonstrated during the *Mfu* festival, which is fundamentally a gesture of gratitude to ancestors for their protection. The Nso people regard *Nyuy* as the supreme deity and the creator of the universe. Consequently, showing reverence to *Nyuy* acknowledges the Creator's role in sustaining life and divine connection through human ancestry.

Conclusion

In Nso cosmology, veneration of ancestors is grounded in their enduring contributions to the lives of the living. Successive generations are understood to stand on the shoulders of their forebears, who are believed to have laid the moral, social, and spiritual foundations of the present through protection, wisdom, and guidance during their earthly lives. Honouring them thus functions as an expression of gratitude for their sacrifices and achievements. The Nso hold that upon death, the individual transitions (*kuvsin*) into the realm of ancestors, yet remains active in the affairs of the living. This continued presence constitutes a form of eternal existence. The soul, which originates from *Nyuy* (God), does not depart but becomes one of the “living dead” an active participant in familial and communal life. Ancestors are not deified; rather, they are revered as enlightened beings who have ascended to a higher plane of existence. This ontology affirms the continuity of life,

conceptualizing death not as termination but as a passage to another realm. The Nso reaffirm their participation in this eternal cycle and acknowledge the divine essence immanent in all beings.

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