

# ISRG JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES (ISRGJHCS)



**ISRG PUBLISHERS**

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Humanit Cult Stud

**ISSN: 3048-5436 (Online)**

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/gjhcs/>

Volume – II Issue- II (March – April) 2025

Frequency: Bimonthly



## The Reflection of African Ontology in the Nyankyusa Community in Tanzania

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| **Received:** 15.03.2025 | **Accepted:** 17.03.2025 | **Published:** 10.04.2025

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### Abstract

*This article has examined the role of African ontology with reference to the Wanyankyusa community in Tanzania. The primary data used in this article were obtained from the Mbeya region, Rungwe district in the Busokelo council. The target wards are Isange, Kandete and Luteba. Interview and discussion methods were used to obtain primary data from the target population. The proportion of the target population was based on gender and age criteria. A review of the documents used to verify the primary data was obtained through electronic and library methods. The results of this article show the role of African ontology in building and developing strong ethical, philosophical and cultural foundations to face their lives and environments. It is also viewed as a specific library for the reference of indigenous and cultural issues that serve as a strong indigenous link that builds a system for educating, strengthening and keeping the community together on strong living and environmental foundations. This article concludes that African philosophy is based on the ontological issues of each society by examining the nature, principles of reality, origin, principles and destiny of the existence of people, things or nature.*

**Keywords:** African philosophy, African ontology, African philosophical theory, reflection and the Nyankyusa community.

### Introduction

For a long time, there have been conflicting ideas about the existence or non-existence of African philosophy. Western scholars maintain that Africans do not have their own philosophy because they did not have writing (Bodunrin, 1981). The basis of this argument is tied to the claim that Africans are incapable of thinking due to the existence of traditions that do not take into account rational reflections. They also see what is called

philosophy as rituals, magic, rituals, beliefs, taboos, ideologies and narratives and not rational reflections that can be called philosophy (Hontondji, 1983). This view was established by the colonialists to justify their efforts to dominate Africa in all aspects without looking at the developmental stages it had reached before the arrival of the foreigners.

They also claim that African philosophy is based on the traditions of Western people. This view was opposed by Oje-Ade (2004), who explains that African philosophy is that which concerns African intentions and methods that distinguish it from other nations. African societies, like other societies around the world, have their own philosophy formed by eschatological, epistemological and ontological elements that are evident in the fields of literature. It also combines elements of idealism and materialism and has various currents (Faustine, 2017). African philosophy began to change after the arrival of foreigners to the African continent. Their arrival caused Africans to have negative attitudes towards their languages, names, colours, foods, cultures and traditions. Western philosophy captured the feelings of deviance in discourse, culture, education, religion and lifestyles (Masolo, 1994). This interaction affected the identity of the African who fell into a web of confusion.

African philosophy deals with various issues concerning humans, their existence and the destiny of their lives (Mages, 1997). It can also be classified into several streams (Mulokozi, 2017). First, literary philosophy which is carried in the poetry and fields of oral and written literature. Second, traditional philosophy deals with traditional thoughts, especially life, the world and its existence. It also appears in traditions, myths and narratives. Third, academic philosophy, which is derived from the thoughts of philosophical scholars. Fourth, wisdom philosophy which is derived from the thoughts of wise and wise elders. Fifth, Diaspora philosophy, which is derived from the thoughts of Africans abroad. Sixth, political philosophy, which concerns the thoughts of leadership and governance carried out by some people, including activists and politicians. Finally, hermeneutic philosophy, which concerns the study of language structures and styles in order to find philosophy.

Ontology is a philosophical discipline that deals with the nature of existence or the existence of visible and invisible beings as well as the nature of the universe (Mbiti, 1969). Africans are at the heart of African ontology. Ontology refers to the existence of a perspective and belief about society and the environment around it. Africans have their own ontology rooted in their religion and culture (Kaponda, 2018). Religion has analysed issues that answer ontological questions. Some of them concern the role of God, spirits, ghosts, humans, animals and things. Ontologically, Africans cannot live without religion because humans are identified in society by participating in beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and rituals. Religion is a system of beliefs, participation and actions.

Western societies used African ontology to view the African as half-human. This issue was caused by the lack of relevant information about the ontology of the African (Sengo, 1995). Every society has an ontology, whether written or unwritten. There is no need to view African philosophy in writing alone. This is due to the fact that among the characteristics of African ontology are the concept of the extended family, the appreciation of fertility, and the belief in God and spirits, which is accompanied by belief in magic, witchcraft and medicine. Also, there is the concept of time and circular socialisation. Through these characteristics, every African society can distinguish itself ontologically. This article has examined the reflection of African ontology with reference to the Wanyankyusa community in Tanzania.

## Research Methodology and Theory

This article has examined the aspect of African ontology with reference to the Wanyankyusa community in Tanzania. The

primary data used in this article were obtained from the Mbeya region, Rungwe district in the Busokelo council. The target villages and wards are Isange (Matamba), Kandete (Mwela) and Luteba (Ikubo). Interview and discussion methods were used to obtain primary data from the target population. The target population selection method was used to obtain 54 wards, villages and target populations. An average of 18 respondents were found in each selected village. The proportion of the target population was based on gender, age and geographical distance. The review of documents used to verify the primary data was obtained through electronic and library methods. The results of the study are presented using a descriptive method. African philosophical theory was used in the analysis and discussion presented. The founder of the theory is Placide Tempels in 1945 (Lyamuya, 2021).

The main basis of this theory is to examine how African philosophy is connected and well-defined in lifestyles, cultural foundations, modern and economic systems, beliefs and social perspectives on historical and geographical issues of the society in question. African philosophical theory is a discipline that deals with the nature of the existence or survival of visible and invisible beings, as well as the nature of the world. (Omoreghe, 1998). It also refers to the existence of a perspective and belief about society and the environment around it. The African is the core of African philosophy based on his religion. Religion has analysed the issues of existence that answer ontological questions. An African cannot live without religion because, for them, humans are recognised in society by fully participating in issues related to beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and rituals (Peterson, 1992). These issues also concern the existence of God, spirits, humans, animals, situations and various things in society.

African philosophy is mainly based on the ontology of the African. African ontology is based on the movements and experiences of the African since ancient times in the production of wealth, the distribution of resources and the construction of social and administrative systems to enable him to continue to exist and be. Therefore, ontology is the knowledge, perspective and belief of a society about life, the world and its existence (Beyaraza, 2004). Ontology attempts to answer various questions about the nature of man, God, the world, the purpose and destiny of life. Other questions concern whether there is an authority outside the world that governs the life and fate of man, the relationship of God towards man, the world and its contents. Naturally, there is no society that does not have its ontology regardless of whether it is written or not. The chosen theory has led the researcher to examine how African ontology is reflected in life, culture and the environment with reference to the Wanyankyusa community in Tanzania.

## Reflection of African Ontology in a Selected Community

This article has examined an aspect of African ontology with reference to the Nyakyusa community in Tanzania. This section has presented how African ontology is differentiated in a selected community. Some of it concerns the principles of reality regarding life, the environment, human nature and the existence of people, things or nature.

## Creation and the Secret Power

The Nyakyusa believe that there are secret powers within all creation. This is called secret because it is not understood by the

knowledge obtained through the doors of consciousness to receive knowledge and information (Oluwale, 1999). The power that permeates all creation is under the authority of God. Spirits and some people have been given the knowledge of how to draw upon this power so that they can use it. Usually, this power comes through objects, spirits or people with special powers, including preachers, traditional healers and witches. This issue touches on life after death because the spirits of the dead can do anything to the living. Spirits have the ability to touch the lives of the living because some people have gifts that enable them to use certain powers to change the lives of their fellow human beings.

Also, there are people who have the ability to know how to use secret power to accomplish what they want to happen. The actions they perform are those that are unusual, that are not understood by scientific knowledge nor governed by ordinary knowledge. People with such gifts use ritualistic methods to bring about this special power. These powers are not created by them but are released through work. Some people who are able to use secret power misuse it by causing events that bring misfortune, illness, death and strife (Mair, 1969). Often, society tries to warn them not to go too far in doing evil. Witchcraft that causes evil creates fear in society. Witch doctors have the ability to draw on secret powers to bring about good and control the damage that can be caused by witches.

## Origin of the First Mankind

There are two main theories about the origin of the first mankind (Meyer, 1993). The first theory claims that God created the entire universe. The first man came from the shores of Lake Nyasa. There, Lake Nyasa, was where the first people, Lyambilo and his wife Ngogotike, lived. These people lived peacefully with animals. Lions and other non-carnivorous animals ate only grass. God provided everything for humans. The place where they lived is called *mawe ya Mungu* ("God's Stones."). At first, the first people were immortal, but when they began to eat meat and hunt animals, the paradise state ended and enmity entered between humans and animals.

The second theory explains that when the world began to exist, God lived on Mount Rungwe. God was beating banana leaves with a stick while sitting on Mount Rungwe. While he was beating, two men suddenly appeared on the grass of the mountain. As the day progressed, God struck again, and a pregnant woman appeared who later gave birth to a baby girl. One of the two men married the woman, and the other married the woman's child when she grew up. They descended to Fiti near the small crater of Mount Rungwe. From there they descended again to Kabale, the source of the Suma River, where today is the village of Banyakajila or Banyokyolo. From there, they continued to breed more and more throughout present-day Unyakyusa.

The origin from Rungwe is also confirmed in other traditions. People say I am from Rungwe; I said I descended from Rungwe, or I said I was from Kabale. Furthermore, it is the custom of many Nyakyusa to dig a grave in such a way that the head of the deceased is directed towards Mount Rungwe. Even for the Nyakyusa of the lake (Kyela), Mount Rungwe has a special meaning for burial. They even lay the dead towards Mount Rungwe. When asked, they say that is where we came from.

## After Death: The Living

Just as humans live on earth, so do the dead in the underworld. Life in the underworld is similar to life on earth, except those spirits do

not have bodies. Life on earth ends with death. The state of life in the underworld depends greatly on the state of life on earth. If it was good on earth, it will also be good there. When death takes a person, that person becomes the living dead (Mbiti, 1970). The dead can communicate with the living in various ways. The living communicate with the dead through prayers and offerings. This is because he is a spirit because he is invisible, although he continues to have conditions that make him physically recognisable.

There is a great separation between the dead and the living. The deceased may appear to his or her family. The event is not a happy one for the living. The spirits of the dead are not greeted, nor do the living send their greetings to the spirits of the dead. There is a great connection between the dead and the living. The dead are the link between the living and God. The living show their solidarity with the dead through offerings, rituals and prayers. The state of being of the dead continues to exist among the living until the last person who remembered them dies (Bodunrin, 1981). After that, the dead begin to sink into the past because no one will remember them. At this point, he or she becomes a spirit in the complete spirit world. There is no higher level of being a spirit. The level before the spirit is God. In African thought there is no expectation or possibility of a man participating in the divinity of God. God is above all conditions of life.

When a child is born, he is welcomed into the family through various traditional rituals and signs. When he becomes an adult, he can marry to continue and increase the family. Marriage connects him with those who have died and those who will be born with him. The next thing to be expected is death. Death stands between the living and the spirits of the deceased. Death is a stage between physical life and the afterlife. When a person is about to die, his family sits by his bedside. They are there to examine the case of illness in order to take steps to prevent it, if it is due to witchcraft. The presence of his first child near him is a sign that if he dies, he will live on through his children.

According to African beliefs, the usual death is of old age. Other deaths are the result of witchcraft, spirits or any enemy. When a death occurs, a medicine man is invited to give his advice so that the cause of death is avoided (Mwangosi, 2019). When a death occurs, crying begins. The purposes of crying in many societies are many. First, it shows grief. Second, it shows that they are not involved in the causes of the death. Third, it is a way of welcoming people into a tragedy. Fourth, to comfort the deceased, mourners accompany their cries with special words about the deceased. Burial customs and traditions vary among African societies. Death does not bring the end of life but only a change of life. After continuing to live physically, death introduces a person to another state of life. There is a stage of living dead and then living spiritually.

Death is not a terrible thing for an African. Some Nyakyusa traditions say that both the wicked and the good have the opportunity to continue living as the dead and later as spirits. The difference is that the good live a life free from suffering. The wicked suffer even in that spiritual life. They also believe that the dead live closer to God than the living. This situation makes the living pray to communicate with God through the dead. The tradition of Christians of the Roman Church praying to God through saints is something that does not offend the beliefs of African communities.

## The Power of Prayer, Offerings and Rituals

Prayer and offerings are ways of communicating with God, spirits and demons (Mbiti, 1975). Prayers directed to God are not accompanied by offerings but to spirits. Prayer explains the reason and intention of the offering. Prayer and offerings to demons: their origins have continued to be forgotten because their procedures are not understood or have continued to fade now (Omoghe, 1998). The purpose of prayer and almsgiving is to deal with the disruption of normal life processes such as poor harvests, bringing hope for a good harvest, poor livestock, deaths, infertility and barrenness. It also addresses illnesses and childbirth problems or relatives worrying about a relative who is away on some errand. If a person follows the advice regarding prayer, almsgiving, rituals and medicine, he can see good results in due time.

In real sacrifices, animals are slaughtered on the spot, while in sham sacrifices, animals are consecrated. For the spirits, both sacrifices are the same because consecrated animals are treated differently from others. Consecrating an animal instead of slaughtering it is for the benefit of all. A person who does not slaughter a single consecrated animal such as a cow, goat or sheep can procreate. When there are many, they help to get many wives. Thus, there will be many children. The spirits will be sure that they will be cared for and respected for a long time by the present and future generations. A consecrated cow or animal cannot be sold or given a dowry. If it is slaughtered or sold for any reason, the spirits are notified, and a replacement is made known.

The ritual is associated with the death of the animal. The sacrifice involves food as well as other things that are offered that do not necessarily involve the sacrifice of life. The ritual depends on the seriousness of the event or the taboo that has been broken regarding the relationship between God, spirits and souls if it has been destroyed (Mwakanjuki, 2011). The Nyakyusa believe that no evil is left unpunished. It is well known that theft, witchcraft and disobedience to social taboos are offences to God and the spirits. Such evil must be removed by offering sacrifices to God or the spirits. Events such as prolonged drought and the presence of infectious diseases are known to be plagues from God. Rituals must be performed under the direction of God. The ritual is led by the chief after a meeting is held before sunrise. Such a meeting aims to determine the reasons for the occurrence of the situation or events that exist before performing the ritual.

Often, s/he cannot know what should be offered according to the mistake made. The scorers and the diviners are responsible for saying what to offer as a sacrifice or offering. The basis for making sacrifices for the Nyakyusa depends on several factors. First, it aims to bridge the gap between God and people and people and spirits that is caused by mistakes that have been made. These mistakes cause a breakdown in the relationship and cooperation between God, humans and spirits. Second, they sacrifice to seek cooperation between God and people or between people and spirits. Third, sacrificing is one way to thank God or spirits for some good that the sacrifice has seen done to him. Often offerings and rituals are offered to God for reconciliation, gratitude and cooperation with God. Offerings are considered a gift to God because everything and all successes come from him.

## Magic, Witchcraft and Medicine

The Nyakyusa are always more afraid of magic than they are of the actions of God and the interference of spirits. A person is at risk from birth to death from witchcraft. Due to witchcraft, there is no

safe place or safe job. Every part of life is at risk from witchcraft (Peterson, 1992). Everyone should protect themselves and protect themselves with medicine that can prevent witchcraft. Medicines to remove witchcraft are as numerous as there are medicines to cast spells. The first helpers of the common man are healers. Their job is to know the power of medicine, that is, the dragon within humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects. The job of healers is to understand these powers, free them, unite them and guide them so that they work. This skill makes the healer respected and feared.

Although witch doctors are accepted, there are those who practice their profession in secret, boasting and seeking to destroy. These are called sorcerers, and they are greatly feared because their actions are hidden and it is impossible to stop them. When a sorcerer is discovered and punished, people are very happy. Witchcraft is inherited, although some can learn for a fee. Witch doctors and sorcerers state that they receive this knowledge and skill from God (Oyekwe, 1975). Bad witch doctors can use strong medicines and have the ability to kill people, although some do not kill despite having the ability to do so. There are also animal creators, rainmakers and those who dissect corpses to determine the causes of illness and death. Their other duties include controlling crop and livestock thieves, resolving disputes, bringing back a runaway wife and sealing houses.

Witchcraft activities are closely linked to traditional rituals of worshipping the gods to the extent that they are an important part of them. There are six types of witch doctors, divided into two groups (Nkwera, 2002). The first group is the healers who cure diseases. They are herbalists, healers, doctors and nurses. Healers are people who have been granted the power by God to heal various diseases and infirmities through prayer, fasting and self-denial. Healers can be compared to prominent preachers in Christian churches. This group has no affiliation with praying to gods, spirits or demons. They do not glorify themselves or humiliate clients. They focus on the essence of medicine.

The second group is those who are very involved with spirits and ghosts. Unfortunately, spirits themselves are often the devil in disguise. They also call themselves by hiding their true nature through traditional healers, mediums or local experts. In this second group, there are also fortune tellers, sorcerers and witches. This group has a strong association with rituals of invoking gods and calling on elders. The god prayed to here is the genie, not Allah. The aim of their actions and practices is to glorify the genie above all, to win the hearts of their clients to obey them, to distort faith and to earn money and wealth. Deception and fraud play a large role in this group.

According to African beliefs, diseases have spiritual causes. Illness is due to the intention of a person or spirits to take revenge because of a bad relationship (Asante, 1993). The duty of the healer is to identify the nature of the disease and its causes. Also, to identify bad relationships in the patient's environment that are causing problems. Having identified the causes of the disease, he should use his expertise in healing and use his ability to manage the movement to protect people from witches and spirits who aim to interfere with a person and control him.

Witches are not considered healers. They are seen as destroyers because they boast about their actions that bring harm to society. Most of their work is done at night, although even during the day they can cause damage with the evil eye. The evil of the work of

witches is clearly visible in language. The most offensive statement to someone is to tell them that you are a witch. There are protective amulets that are worn around the neck or hung at home. An ordinary person can have a dream that makes him realise that someone is a witch.

## Hell and Spirits

The place of spirits is hell, the underworld. All people must enter there, although it is not desirable. It is also called the homeland because everyone will go there. It seems that God gave the spirits Hell as their place just as He gave the living the earth. Hell is not known, except that it is clearly understood that the way to get there goes down. Death sets the boundaries between the living and the dead. Death is a very serious separation, but only physical and spatial (Masolo, 1994). This view is based on the fact that the deceased continues to communicate with the living through dreams. The grave itself is only a temporary place for the soul of the deceased before it enters hell.

According to the burial customs of the Nyakyusa, the entrance to Hell is Mount Rungwe. The grave itself creates a special space where the head must be directed towards Mount Rungwe. In Hell, the spirit is received by its previous relatives. To be well received, the living pray in their mourning. There are even those who claim to have been to hell and back (Meyer, 1993). A woman died with her child from smallpox and explained that hell is not far; it is very close. I arrived there with my child at the village tree. Later, a group of children from the village came happily. When they saw my child, they took him and took him to the village happily. They came to me later (she named some of the people who had died before her) and asked me, What do you want here? Your husband should have arrived first. So, I had to return to Earth, and I woke up again. Already, the mourning for my child who had been taken by a group of his peers was going on.

There are also those who explain that when you reach hell, you meet strangers who ask you, where are your friends, so that they can welcome you? If your friends come and recognise you, call out joyfully! Then you will go with them to the village. If they do not welcome you and turn their backs on you, you should wake up again and continue the life of the living. The land of hell is similar to the land of the living. Normal conversations follow the same pattern as elsewhere on earth. One major difference is that all things, trees, houses, bananas, animals and humans are shadows. Hell lasts forever, except for its inhabitants. After a certain time, the spirits who have stayed for a long time change and become like insects.

The relationship between the living and the spirits is essentially a great harmony that exists in society that is not reduced by death (Mwambusye, 2006). Father, mother and children continue to be united even if others are on earth or in hell. Spirits are free to come to earth at night and engage in the benefit or harm of the living. Spirits can help in many ways. They can be hateful and cause a lot of damage if they are not appreciated. Negligence, crime and bad words against spirits and quarrels in the family are punished by spirits. They can also encourage, warn and hint at an event or thing in various ways. For example, a snake blocking the path is a sign of prohibition of something that should be done. Spirits can be seen in public.

For example, Isela wanted bananas from her friend Mapepo. She met him on the way. They greeted each other and discussed various issues. Then, Mapepo told her that she would get bananas from

him. They said goodbye to one another. Arriving at the village, there was a tragedy. She asked who had died. She was told that Mapepo had died. She was very shocked! She said, why did I meet him on the way? When she got home, she became very sick because instead of keeping quiet about the incident, she spoke. She should have kept quiet and not attended the tragedy. However, what are the special traditional medicines used to treat this problem? Otherwise, the person may leave (die) with the deceased who gave information to see him.

Spirits have a higher status than the living because their number is greater than the living on earth. Also, they have higher knowledge and wisdom because many generations contribute. Spirits have great freedom to move around because they are no longer bound to the body. This situation makes the living humble, consider their will and obey the spirits. Even at funerals, in addition to people expressing grief for their departed relative and fearing death, they also fear the deceased who has become a ghost. The leader of all rituals related to ghosts is usually a clan elder. He is informed of all problems so that he can take them before the spirits. A woman may invoke the spirits of her husband's clan. In doing this, they first say, "I have borrowed fire from you", meaning I am bringing trouble from your house.

## The Power of Life: Heart, Soul and Dreams

According to the beliefs of the Nyakyusa community, the heart represents the power of the spirit and is the origin of the actions of the body and all of the soul. The heart creates wisdom, prudence, desire, hatred, fear, evil and illusions (Mwambusye, 2013). The heart is the force that guides a person's thoughts and even his actions. Dreams and the power of life come from the heart. The heart creates the power of life. Serious spiritual things that occur can shake and even kill the heart. The soul is the power of the spirit that enables the body to live. The heart, soul and body are a living being. When a person is very sick, hope exists if the heart and soul are still there. When the state of the heart and soul begins to decline and disappear, the person dies.

The soul is a combination of the physical and spiritual, and it leaves the human body when it dies. When a person dies, it means that the soul has left. For two, three or four days, the soul wanders around the place where the disaster occurred in his or her home or in theirs until he or she is expelled by ritual to go to hell (Mwabukusi, 2014). If this ceremony is not performed, the soul will continue to roam and terrorise children and women until a reconciliation ceremony is held. On the other hand, at their own discretion, witches have the ability to separate their soul from their body. Thus, they may be sleeping at home while their soul visits others, doing whatever they want. Also, the souls of ordinary people can leave, especially if they dream and see strange things on their journeys.

There is a real life of a person when awake and when asleep. Dreams are not just thoughts but are the result of the life of the soul. Dreams can be caused by a person's thoughts when awake. For example, you can talk about a person, and at night he appears in a dream. Dead people who have problems with you can appear to you in a dream while you are sleeping. When a person is troubled by dreams, he goes to a fortune teller to understand the nature and intention of the dream. Dreams can guide you, inform you, hint you, warn you and forbid you from something (Abraham, 1994). There are a few people, including fortune tellers, healers

and those possessed by demons, who have dreams about future events.

## Conclusion

This article has examined African ontology in the Nyakyusa community. The things studied aim to build a chosen community on its indigenous foundations that are based on developing values, culture and the environment and reality in accordance with the traditions and customs of the relevant community. The research conducted shows that African ontology is given importance as a strong tool for the reflection of natural, environmental and cultural issues that serve as a natural link that builds a system for educating, strengthening and keeping the community together in terms of life and culture. Some of the issues investigated concern the existence of life after death, hell and spirits. Others concern the contribution of magic technology, medicine and healing, the power of prayer, sacrifice and ritual in sustaining life and preserving the environment. These issues are dealt with by considering the realities of daily life of the community.

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