

*Review*

# A comparative analysis of causality in Buddhism and African philosophy

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The principle that everything has a cause is very fundamental in all aspects of life to every culture. Both the Buddhist and the traditional African believe that nothing happens by chance. The Buddhist conception of causality, hinged on the theory of "dependent origination", appears to be concerned with the human (physical) world with suffering as its prime focus while the traditional African thought does not limit causation to the empirical world but freely blends and relates empirical causation with supernatural causation. This paper in its critical comparison posits that both positions are fraught with some logical and metaphysical difficulties which in turn seem to blur and retard the people's knowledge of the external world, thus acting as an albatross to scientific development and progress.

**Keywords:** Causality, Buddhism, African Philosophy.

## INTRODUCTION

"Causality" (what is ordinarily referred to as cause and effect) is one fundamental natural principle that is inevitable in our day to day interpretation, explanation and prediction of phenomena, whether in religion, science, politics, social interaction, philosophy and so many other fields of human endeavour.

From earliest times, down to our own generation, man has learnt to come to terms with the idea that one thing could produce or bring about something else; hence the idea that every event has a cause seems to be as old as man. The idea of causality thus appears to be transhistorical, transcultural and transdisciplinary. It is simply a universal concept. This does not mean that every culture or forms of knowledge or systems of thought or disciplines have the same conception or understanding of causality. The onus of this paper is therefore, to attempt a comparative analysis of the Buddhist and the African ideas of causality.

Buddhism is both a religion and philosophy founded by an Indian prince called Siddhartha Gautama, who was originally a Hindu (Offiong, 2002: 99). Gautama later called the Buddha after his enlightenment aimed at reforming Hinduism. Thus he set about reconstructing some doctrines and beliefs of Hinduism, one of which was the notion of causality- though also retaining some Hindu doctrines and beliefs. His idea of causality was basically scientific and he relied upon experience (sense) and emphasized critical examination and verification (Pande, 1997: 370).

In contrast to this, the African culture holds a different view of causality. The African culture we are referring to here is the Traditional African culture. By Traditional African we mean the African who has not been 'adulterated' by Western epistemological paradigm. Causality for this African is more or less a phenomenon that is transcendental and mythical. This does not mean that this African does not also believe in empirical causation. He however goes beyond this, especially when the event is intriguing and of significance to him, to ascribe what Gyekeye calls "agentive causation" (28) to phenomena. In this type of causal explanation, the African raises the "who caused it" and "why it was caused" questions more than the scientific "what" and "how" questions.

The notion of causality, whether in Western philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, African philosophy or wherever, is quite a complex one. In this work, we shall dance more within the bounds of the original Buddhist thought on causality as presented by Gautama himself. This does not mean that we shall not make allusions where necessary, to other Buddhist schools' conception of causality. Our exposition on African notion of causality shall be limited to the Traditional African as earlier stated. In this wise, our usage of "African philosophy" shall be limited to such thoughts that can be classified under the trend called "ethno philosophy". The reason is that this is where we can get the original idea of what causality is to the Traditional African. We shall, in our discussion, have

at the back of our mind that though this African thought on causality could be said to be communitarian as against the Buddhist thought which has the mark of a historical individual, it may have been probably invented by some distinct individuals. Such ideas, according to Asouzu, could not have fallen from the blues. They originated from people, hence Asouzu employs the term “anonymous traditional African philosophers and thinkers” in presenting their ideas (Asouzu, 2004b).

Here we shall simply refer to them as traditional African philosophers or thinkers, since we believe that the ideas of these “anonymous traditional African philosophers” who actually originated these ideas, offered firm basis to their contemporaries to organize themselves and understand phenomena and has since then served as a tradition in which many educated and non-educated Africans of our generation still understand and use in interpreting natural phenomena.

To give this work a sound philosophical flavour, we shall present a critical comparison of the Buddhist conception of causality and the African conception of causality after which conclusion will be drawn on the work.

### **The Notion of Causality**

Much of what we have come to know in academic circle about causality is the Western conception of the term. The Western conception is more or less scientific and philosophical. But ordinarily, causality according to the *OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S* Dictionary refers to the relationship between something that happens and the reason for it happening. In simple terms, it is the principle that nothing can happen without a cause. It involves the relationship between, at least, two things, where one causes the other to happen. In Mackie's understanding, causality is associated with the idea of something producing or bringing about something else, (126). The word “cause” thus refers to an event prior to an effect. Take for example where severe draught (A) could be said to be the cause of famine (B) or where petrol (A) stored near a burning candle could be said to be the cause of fire out-break (B). In each of these cases, A is said to be the cause of B. It is generally believed that nothing happens without a cause hence such assumptions like “whatever goes up must come down”, “there is no smoke without fire”, etc. Central to the concept of causality are such features as “necessary connection”, “uniformity”, “universality”, etc. It was generally believed that there is always a necessary connection between an event “A” as the cause and another event “B” as the effect. It was also believed that since there is uniformity in nature, then like causes would always produce like effects.

This idea of causality was taken for granted until David Hume's sledge hammer fell on it. Hume

had argued that there is no necessary connection between event “A” and “B” such that we could easily conclude that “A” necessarily causes “B”. He claimed that it is rather our experience and habit of associating things that usually go together in sequence that make us believe that A causes B where B is always seen following A. The idea of necessary connection arises because we have, for example, repeatedly observed that thunder follows lightening, we always come to the conclusion that lightening causes thunder-where actually there is no such necessary connection. The fact that there are moments where lightening occurs and thunder fails to follow is a falsifying instance of the idea of necessary connection. Hume's criticism may have raised serious questions on the notion of causality and therefore on the foundation of human knowledge for it could truly be difficult for anyone to offer any logical justification that there is a necessary connection between a cause and the assumed effect, yet he did not totally deny (neither can we) that there is a causal principle operating in the universe. He however, substituted the idea of constant conjunction for necessary connection. We need not go deep into this Humean problem. Our concern is on Buddhist and African idea of causality which does not seem to enjoy much recognition as the Western conception.

Nevertheless, both the Buddhist life and the African life is permeated by the understanding that nothing happens without a cause. In these two thought systems, there is no question of an event happening by chance. The African (just like the Buddhist) may not bother about the analytic rigours which characterize the Humean arguments of priority in time, constant conjunction, contiguity in time and space, and necessary connection (Ozumba, 2004: 29). But they have their own conception of causality which we now turn to analyze.

### **An Exposition on the Notion of Causality in Buddhist Thought**

The Buddhist idea of causality is basically a theory concerned with the human world. It avoided the pre-Buddhist speculations of the Vedic seers which had conceived of the first cause as the spirit and its will. Buddha was quite cautious not to assume the reality of any spiritual substance, whether soul or God. In Mesembe's word, “Buddha maintained about reality, a noble silence” (76). For Buddha, “causation was primarily impersonal and a dynamic, coexistence with empirical phenomena, physical and mental” (Pande, 1997). What this means is that the Buddhist thought on causality was not dependent on what religious authorities of the Vedic sect put down as tradition. The Buddha rather relied upon experience in nature and reason to propound his idea of causality. It should however be noted that in Buddhism,

experience include introspection, rational intuition or mystical intuition.

The Buddha, according to Pande, is “the first thinker to formulate the abstract and universal law of causality and to apply it to human psychic events and experiences” (371). The human experience in the world, for Buddhism, is that of suffering. That is why it is held that the prime focus of the Buddhist causal theory was the explanation of human suffering, not principally as a social fact but as an existential feature of human life (374). It is on this account that David Dilworth makes the point that the method of Buddhism was basically agonistic (146). This however does not take away the fact that the Buddha in particular, was objective and critical in his method of analyzing the cause of suffering and any other phenomena whatsoever. The Buddha deviated from the theological, magical and animistic ways of understanding the world peddled by the Vedic seers of Hinduism and employed scientific understanding in terms of definite causal laws which could be discovered through human reason and put to practical use.

Fundamentally, the Buddha’s theory of causality is known as the “Theory of Dependent Origination” (Pande, 1997: 371). The fulcrum of the theory is the assertion that “any object of experience depends for its existence or occurrence on the necessary and sufficient presence of its cause”. The assertion here has a network of interesting and significant implications, which according to Pande, include:

- (1) That all phenomena, have an origin
- (2) That their existence depends on causes
- (3) That causes do not operate singly but in networks
- (4) That causality stands for a necessary and sufficient relationship between cause and effect
- (5) That causes operate inevitably, uniformly, and spontaneously by their own nature (371).

In its original formulation, the Buddhist causal principle goes thus: “When this is present (given) that comes to be; from the rising (birth) of this, that rises (is born); when this is absent (not given) that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases (Omogrebe, 1996: 280; Pande, 1997: 371 – 2).

What the above indicates is that the Buddha’s idea of causality contains all the intricacies that characterize even the Western conception of the term. We can see in it the idea of necessary and sufficient relation between cause and effect, the idea of uniformity, the idea of network of causes that may lead to a single event and the idea of spontaneous effect resulting from cause.

We can also see from this idea of causality that the Buddha did not believe in chance neither did he believe in supernatural causes. Everything or object has an origin and is caused. This was in direct opposition to many of his contemporary philosophers who either favoured the eternalist idea of absolute beingness or the accidentalist, or annihilationist views of absolute non-

beingness. The Buddha simply denied the idea of accidental occurrence as much as he denied the idea of externalism. Thus, his idea of causation was described as a Middle way, the way between absolute being and absolute non-being. What this means is that objects in the world, especially human beings which is the central problem of Buddhism, are not to be regarded as external spirits, nor as mere transient material states. Human reality is characterized by its psychic or experiential process which, according to the Buddhist thought, is constituted by a ceaseless succession of impermanent states originating from causal conditions and passing away. Physical objects, according to this idea, are to be understood as impermanent functions which depend on causes but which, of course, are not substantial and at a point would certainly cease to be by nature (372).

The principle of dependent origination is only one part of the truth (Dharma) which Buddha is said to have discovered intuitively during his supreme experience of enlightenment. The other aspect of the truth is what is called Quiescence (Nibbana). While Dependent Origination elucidates the nature of reality and the fundamental relatedness of things, Quiescence deals with “the absence of empirical reality, the realization of which leads to cessation of the stream of consciousness” (372). At this point it becomes very imperative to point out that the doctrines of “impermanence” (Anicca) “no self” (Anatta), and human suffering are the central themes of Buddhism. The doctrine involved here is that, everything in life is in perpetual flux and subject to the changes which occur through the cycle of birth, growth, decay and death. To crave or desire life is to go through the process which is suffering. Nothing is eternal. Even the human soul, which in many other religions and cultures is taken to be the only immortal part of man is

conceived as mortal in Buddhism. Man is a conglomerate of certain characteristics, namely, perceptions, feelings, consciousness, disposition – pleasant or unpleasant. These characteristics constitute what is known as the “individual”. Each component however, is in a state of perpetual change, the entire component disappearing at death only to pass on to a new existence. The bottom line of this doctrine is that there is no permanent reality inside or outside man, except the reality of change (Mesembe 70 – 72). Pande captures the above explication this way: “Thus all things are only processes, not entities. Identities are nothing but analyzable sequences and independence, an illusion”

(373). The implication here is that our thinking that things have individual and sovereign right of existence is simply as a result of our lack of understanding of the nature of reality. The belief in an identical self or existent is an illusory projection. Things derive their existence, though as a brief tenure, from their dependence on others. Since they are parts of ordered world of relations, they possess only a conditioned reality (373).

The Buddhist principle of causality is quite fundamental to Buddhist philosophy. The theory, as Omeregbe notes could be used to explain everything in the universe – including the evolution and dissolution of the world process, natural phenomena like drought and earthquake. It could be applied to psychic processes, moral, social and spiritual behaviour (281). But perhaps, of particular importance to us is the idea that the original and prime focus of this causal theory was the explanation of human personality which is fraught with suffering. Suffering in Buddhist thought is therefore an existential feature of human life.

Omeregbe vividly captures the application of the Buddhist principle of causality to the human personality in the twelve-fold formula thus; when this is present, that comes to be; on the rising of this that arises. When this is absent, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases. That is to say, on ignorance depends dispositions; on disposition depends consciousness, on consciousness depends the psycho-physical personality; on the psycho-physical personality depends the six 'gateways', (or sense perception). On sense perception, the six 'gateways' depends contact; On contact depends feeling; on feeling depends craving; on craving depends grasping; on grasping depends ageing and death, lamentation, suffering, dejection and vexation. In this manner there arises this mass of suffering (281).

We can see from the above that, according to the Buddha, the origin of suffering can be attributed to various causal factors, called a causal chain with twelve links. This chain in Pande's view constitutes the most popular form of Dependent origination (375). But it is glaring that ignorance occupies a prominent place in this chain and it is regarded as the leading factor that causes desire and craving to live permanently in a world that is impermanent. It is ignorance that determines one's dispositions and this leads to clinging to the world which again leads to rebirth. Rebirth is suffering. To put paid to this cycle of rebirth one must eliminate ignorance through right understanding and this would lead one to enlightenment which is perfect happiness (Nirvana).

The human condition, for the Buddha, is one of illness and he sought to deal with it on the analogy of medical investigation of causes which include four stages, namely, the symptomatic stage, diagnostic stage, therapeutic stage and the curative stage. In the medical circle, the basis of investigation is the observation of present data, inferential hypothesis drawn from generalization on past observation, testing, formulation of therapeutic processes and the definition of health on the basis of primary assumptions about the natural constitution and functioning of the human organism (374). In the Buddha's view, observation, include not only the systematic sense – perception of external data, but also the introspection of mental states, and the rational intuition of universal and essential principles, which

though unobservable, function to enable us understand the essential and underlying nature of man.

Following the above, one would say that observation revealed to the Buddha that the human existential situation is a diseased situation where one is born into the world, grows, craves for the things of this world, becomes sick, old and eventually dies only to be reborn into this cycle of suffering. Buddha has diagnosed the cause of human suffering to be desire and ignorance. The curative process is to understand the eight-fold noble path which is anchored on self restrain and renunciation, hence elimination of ignorance. This will then lead to good health; that is, liberation from the cycle of birth after which one attains perfect happiness (Nirvana) means attaining perfect health.

The interpretation of the theory of Dependent origination by several Buddhist schools of thought brought about certain variations in the concept of causality. For example, Theravada Buddhism understood and interpreted the causal theory from a purely metaphysical standpoint of Dharma (truth). From this standpoint, there is ceaseless transformation of elementary complexes in which the substratum elements are regrouped, although they are separate particulars and never repeated (376). It appears that Theravada Buddhism falls under the category which Omeregbe calls the Substantialist School (279). This school holds that causation is due to the activity of the self, the inner core or the soul of all beings. In this case, the soul is responsible for the activities in the world. But in contrast to this, the Buddha did not believe in the reality or independent existence of the soul, neither did he buy the idea of transformationism where causation was taken as the continuation of being with transformation. Buddha's theory was also in contrast to the dialecticians' who denied the reality of causation. Thus the Buddha is quoted to have said that "He who perceives causation perceived dharma" (Qtd. in Omeregbe, 1996: 281).

Our concern, we should remember, was not to look at the variations in the notion of causality. Our major concern was to look at the original formulation of the causal principle by the Buddha himself with a view to comparing with the traditional African idea of causality. To the exposition of the African idea of causality we can now turn.

### **Causality in Traditional African Thought**

The traditional African concept of causality to a large extent could be understood from the perspective of the traditional African view of the world. The world is viewed as a unitary sphere though composed of multifarious individual beings. It is a world where everything interpenetrates, where the physical and spiritual

coalesce. It is simply a world of amazing unity and interaction among all things. J. I. Unah in view of this holds that the African world is one of extra-ordinary harmony, one of synthetic unity and compatibility among all things (107).

In this type of world, events are determined by the will of spiritual beings, the operation of automatic forces, and the self-willed actions of men and other animals, which follow in orderly and comprehensible sequence. The traditional African is usually influenced by this conception of the world in his explanation or prediction of events. He may refer to the Supreme Being, the spirits, deities, ancestors or evil forces as the cause of certain events. He may also point to the individual as the cause of his own problem. In other words, the traditional African believes in both the empirical (natural) idea of causation and the idea of supernatural causation. In Sogolo's view, the traditional Africans understand two levels of causation, namely, primary and secondary levels. The primary level of causation refers to those predisposing factors that are not directly explicable in physical terms. Some of these factors are attributed to supernatural entities such as deities, spirits, witches, etc. He notes that apart from these supernatural factors, others still within the primary level of causality "arise from stresses, due either to the victim's contravention of communal morality or his strained relationship with other persons within the community" (111). What this means is that some misfortunes or sickness that happen to somebody may be as a result of the person's violation of some communal rules or bond of relationship. The secondary causes on the other hand involve direct causal connection similar to the cause - effect relation where, for example, a man after eating sour beans suffers from acute diarrhea or stomach ache. In this case, it could be explained that the sour beans is the cause of the stomach ache or acute diarrhea.

It should be noted that the traditional African does not ordinarily raise much problem on issues bordering on secondary causes as when someone, for example, out of his drunken state falls into a pit or carelessly steps on a snake which retaliates by biting him. In each of these cases the victim involved is blamed for his own woes. However, it is not uncommon to see that secondary causes are sometimes related to primary causes especially when the events or phenomena are considered intriguing, grievous and malignant.

Halaine Minkus, writing on the Akan causal theory gives us an interesting clue here. He illustrates:

If one person steps on a snake and is bitten, the occurrence may be ascribed to his carelessness and perhaps dismissed as happening without ulterior reason (eye Okwa). But if he dies from the snake bite it is more than likely that either his own destiny or else witchcraft, sorcery or some other cause will be proposed to explain why such a thing should have happened (141).

What this implies is that the traditional African does not seem to limit himself to empirical causation. Because of his intense religiosity and the culture's profound obsession with supernaturalistic or mystical causal explanation, the African goes beyond the empirical when the issues are knotty to ascribe "agentive causation." Thus in explaining the cause of an event, a sickness or death, for instance, the African will tend to raise the "who caused it" and "why it was caused" questions above the more scientific "what caused it" and "how was it caused" questions. Thus in explaining the cause of the phenomenon of death arising from snake bites as we illustrated above, the African would raise such questions as why the person stepped on the snake or why it was Mr. X and not Mr. Y. He could propose that Mr. X was caused to step on the snake by a witch and for that reason the witch is the cause of the death of Mr. X.

The traditional Africans generally believe that the supreme being, the Creator made the world good and introduced order into it. Thus when any element of evil disrupts the smooth running of life, it is often believed that it is caused by an agent other than the Creator. In such cases, witchcraft is brought in to account for such misfortunes (Uduigwomen, 2002: 37). Witchcraft and other such phenomena are believed to be supernatural phenomena. Almost all mishaps – accident, miscarriage, impotence, bareness, academic failure, poverty, suffering, death, chronic sickness, etc. are believed to be caused, most times by witches and other devilish practices, especially when such problems defy all attempted solutions. In traditional Africa, explanation of causes for one event or the other preclude the concept of chance. Extraordinary occurrences which may be inexplicable because of man's limited knowledge are immediately attributed to supernatural powers. They are not considered as "chance – occurrence." This appears to be a sharp contrast to the Western explanatory scheme where events considered as supernatural are attributed to chance or perhaps just taken as one of those things that cannot be explained. Again, the Westerner, as correctly noted by Sogolo may not attribute supernatural events to supernatural forces, but "may stubbornly hold on to his scientific model, but admitting, because of the extraordinary nature of the event, that the principles involved are yet to be discovered by scientists" (91). This is not the case with the traditional African whose "life is permeated by the understanding that nothing happens without a cause...this means that the concept of chance does not have a place ... What we call chance is our ignorance of the series of actions and reactions that have given rise to a given event" (Ozumba, 2004: 28).

The traditional African view of the world does not seem to draw a sharp distinction between the supernatural world and the physical world as if there is no link at all while the Western culture deeply bifurcates between the

natural and the supernatural worlds. Hence for the Africans, causes of illness can be seen as a blend of supernatural forces and natural forces and for the traditional doctor to solve such a problem he has to look for the causes beyond the physical. The traditional healer will look for the causes in the psychological and spiritual realm of the victim in a bid to know whether he has a strained relationship either with his spiritual agent or with other persons within his community, or whether he has wronged the gods, etc. It is only when the traditional healer has ascertained the causes of the problem at the supernatural level and has taken care of such, that he can apply physical medication on the victim with the conviction that once the spiritual has been taken care of, then the physical problem could be completely solved. We should note that this idea of causation where there is inter-relatedness of causes between the supernatural world and the natural world is borne out of the African belief that the world is a unitary whole where the spiritual coalesce with the physical.

### **A Critical Comparison of Causality between Buddhism and African Philosophy**

Having attempted an expository analysis of the notion of causality in Buddhism and traditional African philosophy, this section is given to a comparison between the two thought systems on causality. We shall here attempt to draw out points of convergence and points of divergence respectively given our expository analysis above. Our comparison shall be laced with critical comments if we have to present a consummate philosophical piece.

The Buddhist thought and the African thought do not believe in chance occurrence. They believe strongly that every event has a cause. The Buddha's theory of Dependent Origination attests that there is no room for chance occurrence. There is no event without a cause. It is believed that what we see as chance occurrence is as a result of man's limitation and ignorance, thus the Buddha holds that whoever perceives causation believed Dharma, that is, knows the truth (Omogbe, 1996: 281).

This is in sharp contrast to the Western culture where some occurrences are attributed to chance. Quantum physicists, for example, believe that the decay of a radioactive atom is a totally random affair and is not known to be caused. Though this thinking may be questioned, as John Bell has done in arguing that the decay reaction of atomic particles cannot be a matter of chance, for, "like everything else, it is dependent upon something which is happening elsewhere" (Qtd. in Zukav 316), the Western scientist is given to stubbornly holding on to his scientific model in matters that the traditional African can easily attribute to supernatural causation. Phenomena that are inexplicable to the traditional Africans are seen as caused by supernatural powers. The Buddhist from what we have

gathered in our study does not pander to the belief in the reality of supernatural causation. He would rather maintain a 'noble silence' in matters pertaining to supernatural reality, but does not however, attribute events to chance occurrences.

The Buddhist idea on causality, especially as represented in the principle of Dependent Origination accepts the idea of the inter-relatedness of things in the world. Nothing has a sovereign independent existence. That things appear to exist individually is an illusion (maya). At the most fundamental level, everything is related to each other. The Africans also have a similar idea. The world is a world of mutual inter-relatedness amongst all things. As such there is always a causal link or chain when an event occurs. However, while the Buddhist causal chain is limited to the psycho-physical level, the African causal chain moves beyond the psycho-physical to the supernatural realm. While for example, the Buddhist would trace the cause of suffering to related psycho-physical factors like ignorance which influences dispositions and which leads to consciousness, from which feelings, cravings, desires would lead one to pursue things of this world as if they are permanent, thus leading to decay, suffering, death, and rebirth, the African would think less of the human person as the cause of his suffering. The cause of human suffering and misfortune is more often attributed to both natural and supernatural forces at once, especially when the issues are knotty and intriguing. B. E. Nwigwe, in reference to the Igbo conception of interrelatedness between things made the point that their (African) conception of reality is ambivalent in the sense that everything co-exists with its opposite such that "body and spirit are co-extensive with each other – so do suffering – joy, pain – pleasure, life – death, good – evil, etc. They all constitute part of the existential issues that belong to life itself" (15). What is meant here is that, for the African, reality is complex and cannot be comprehended by watching it from one side alone. To understand reality in its totality, the traditional African therefore seems to favour complementary understanding rather than exclusivist understanding of the opposites or diverse components of reality.

Meanwhile, we should note that the idea of inter-relatedness amongst things in the world is not peculiar to Buddhism or traditional African thought. Recent development in modern physics seems to support this metaphysical determinism which bottom-line is that "there is an implicate order in the universe, a cosmic web of relations at a non-manifest level that demonstrate an unbroken wholeness" (Morgan 290). Nonetheless, that the traditional Africans and the Buddhists had the idea of interrelatedness among all things in the world even before modern science confirmed it is not in doubt. But the question is, why has Buddhism and African traditional thought not moved beyond the level of merely 'knowing'

that there is such interconnectedness to the level of harnessing this cosmic phenomenon as quantum mechanics has done in a bid to improve human life positively. One fundamental problem may be that of explanation and this appears to be more or less a linguistic problem. Thus one may be forced to ask: Could it be that quantum physicists' concepts like atom, leptons, quarks, gluons, etc, are the equivalents of the traditional African deities, divinities, gods, etc? If this is the case, then the traditional African has a big task of devising means to show how these concepts and ideas work in terms of which they could be verified.

The Buddhist idea of causality, we are told, is based on empirical causation. The Buddha shifted attention from and avoided the metaphysical assumption of the Vedic seers of Hinduism whose understanding of the world was more or less animistic, magical and theological. The pre-Buddhist notion of causality thus appeared to be similar to our traditional African concept of causality where deities, spirits are assumed as causes for certain events. But the question one could raise here is, if the Buddha as early as the sixth century BC could see the need of attributing causes to nature rather than to supernatural beings, why do some Africans even in our contemporary world still ascribe causes to supernatural beings even when such causes are explicable in natural terms? Why is it that some African scientists and scholars in spite of their high level of education still ascribe certain events to supernatural forces? Agbakoba would answer that, a culture's ideology, in our case "African traditional Religion and thought" (as a particularistic ideology) could be so influential and compelling such that the traditional African would have a low level of understanding of nature objectively (230 – 233). In such situations the African would tend to "see" the gods and deities or 'hear' them when there are no such entities there and then.

Buddha's notion of causality is based on sense experience. But the Buddhist idea of experience goes beyond the commonsensical to include introspection and mystical intuition. The remarkable point to note is that even at the point of mystical intuition; the Buddhist thought does not buy the idea that man on achieving Nirvana (state of perfect happiness) is merged with a supreme being like Hinduism would hold. To show that the Buddha was a true empiricist, he refused to talk about life after death, claiming that it was something beyond human experience. For him, immortality simply means cessation of rebirth and this is Nirvana. A person who attains this, though he still lives in the world is free from craving and desires, and so the vicissitude of life does not cause him any suffering, "neither day nor night, neither birth nor decay and death, neither coming nor going affects him any more" (Omeregbe, 1996: 288). For traditional Africans on the other hand, causality is based not only on sense experience. Causality is based on

extra-sensory experience. But the problem here is that only a few privileged ones like native doctors, rainmakers, diviners and priests or seers, witches and wizards are believed to possess such forms of knowledge and are therefore privy to the explanation of supernatural causes. However, the knowledge claims, predictions and explanations of these so called privileged people, since they are not open for inter-subjective verification, would always remain mysterious and esoteric. Such position could only make them quasi omniscient.

The tendency towards supernaturalism in African causality has been severely criticized by many scholars. Kwame Gyekye commenting on why science in Africa has not developed well makes the point that though the traditional African culture appreciates the notion of causality very well, the Africans tend to, more or less, understand causality in terms of spirit and mystical forces. Such tendencies, he argues, has failed to promote a purely scientific or empirical causal explanation (28). The consequence is that we have failed to attain knowledge of the external world which would have helped in our scientific development.

In the same vein, professor Asouzu argues that African traditional philosophy (thought) does not consciously separate religion and myth from scientific research. Therefore, the mythological - metaphysical approach could be a serious hindrance to scientific progress. He further notes that ultimate causality framed within the religio-mythical context and attributed to "personified natural forces erects an artificial barrier, abinitio, between what is empirically demonstrable and what is considered humanely impenetrable areas" (Science, 3).

The onus is now on the contemporary African philosophers and scientists to take decisive steps away from the mythical and magical ways of attributing events to supernatural powers even when the events could be explained by reference to other natural causes.

The Buddhist sees the human existential situation as that of sickness caused by desire and ignorance. It does appear that the Buddhist have a pessimistic notion of life, hence he strives to get disentangled from the desires and attachment to this life in a bid to achieve perfect happiness. The African on the other hand sees life as precious. He wishes that he can enhance his life by getting the good things of life. He wishes to live long, hence he attempts to be at peace with natural forces as well as super-natural forces. This is borne out of the belief that the supernatural forces can cause him either to die or to live long. It is therefore not uncommon to see the traditional African attempt to pacify and venerate his ancestors, deities and other spirits as if these could add to his own life-span. The point is that these lesser spirits, in my opinion, hardly could cause one to live longer than God has approved for each man.

One striking difference between Buddhism and traditional African thought related to the notion of causality is the notion of the soul, Supreme Being and immortality. The traditional Africans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, which they call by so many names. The Supreme Being is seen as the first cause. He is the cause of the universe. The Africans believe in the soul and the immortality of the soul which at death can enter another body thus coming back to life via reincarnation. On the contrary the Buddhist doctrine seems to keep us in the dark whether there is a Supreme Being or not, who caused the universe. The Buddhist philosophy from the outset is said to have refrained from any metaphysical thinking concerning the existence or not of a Supreme Being, or whether the world is eternal or not, or whether the soul and body are the same or different, or whether there is life after death.

Unlike Brahmanism (Hinduism) which believes in the reality of Supreme Being (Brahman) and the reality and immortality of the human soul (atman), Buddhism denies the reality of any spiritual being: it denies the existence of the soul. But one thing is that Buddhism at the same time believes in reincarnation (rebirth). The problem here is, if there is no soul, how is it possible to speak of one's next life? If reincarnation or transmigration, which for the Buddhist have ethical significance in the sense that the law of cause and effect demands that one's good and evil actions inevitably would have their effects in time and determine the nature of one's next life, entails one thing passing to another, the question would be "who or what passes from one embodiment to another"? (Copleston, 1980: 65) if there is no soul. How do we explain the 'Karmic connection' of one's suffering in the present life because of his past life if there is no soul to connect the past life to the present life? These are some of the difficulties involved in the idea of no-self in Buddhism as it relates to cause and effect which the Buddha incidentally upheld.

The traditional African's conception of reincarnation, though fraught with metaphysical and logical problems is not as problematic because there is always a soul to do the 'journey' from one body to another as the occasion demands. But this does not make the African conception of reincarnation and transmigration free from questions. The concept of reincarnation has a general problem of how a soul could travel from a dead body into a yet to be born foetus, which when eventually given birth to is said to be the person who had died before.

## CONCLUSION

This work has been an attempt to give a comparative analysis on the concept of causality in Buddhist philosophy and African philosophy. The Buddhist concept of causality is based on the Buddha's theory of

Dependent Origination, which is one of the truths (Dharma) revealed to him during his enlightenment. This theory of causality is a complex one, embodying the idea that, there is no event without a cause; causes do not operate singly but in networks; there is a necessary and sufficient relationship between cause and effect, etc. The Buddhist concept of causality is somewhat empirical and scientific but directed primarily to the explanation of human existential situations which is suffering.

On the other hand, the traditional African conception of causality though not as systematic as the Buddhist's has revealed to us that there is no room for chance occurrence in the African thought. Based on the excessive religiosity and the obsessive supernaturalistic tendencies, the African freely relates empirical causation with supernatural causation. The African hardly explains a natural phenomenon without giving a little thought, at least, to possible supernatural influences.

Given our study of both conceptions of causality we wish to point out that both are fraught with some difficulties. The Buddhist thought, though many would claim is empirical and scientific, does not seem to escape entirely from the problem found in the traditional African concept. The ideas of no-self, impermanence, etc, are quite problematic and make the philosophy quite mystical and mysterious. On the African side, it is still surprising that the tradition of supernatural causation is still given prominence even in our contemporary world. The influence of science and technology should by now have compelled the African to be satisfied with empirical and scientific causation.

Moreover, if we have to look at the Humean critique on causality, we can say that neither the Buddhist nor the African conception of causality can be free from some logical questions.

Both cultures, it appears, strongly believe that there is always a necessary connection between what is regarded as cause and its effect. The fact remains that we cannot say categorically that there is such a necessary connection between desire, cravings, etc, for example, as presented by the Buddha, and human suffering; nor can we say that there is a necessary connection between supernatural forces and the events usually ascribed to them. To say that there is a necessary connection between a cause and its effect is to say that when event "A" happens, "B" must necessarily follow. But experiences have shown otherwise.

We are quite aware of the fact that there were some sicknesses, which were believed to be caused by supernatural forces in the past but whose causes have now been explained in natural terms by science. This shows that there could hardly be a necessary connection between an assumed cause and its effect. The event may be due to something else other than the one ascribed as its cause.



Nevertheless, we must dare to point out that there are some events whose causes cannot be easily related to natural forces. For example, how do we explain the mysterious phenomenon where a woman suffering from some kind of pains in the head, according to medical report, was discovered to be harbouring a key right there in her head. Diagnosis by the surgeon, Professor G. T. A. Ijadioha, who carried out the surgery, indicated that the woman was not actually born with the key in her head. The mystery key was believed to have been planted there by a witch. But the question is, how was it planted? How did the key get into her head without any physical contact or sign? Such strange phenomenon would certainly defy natural causal explanation.

Though the scientific report regarding this phenomenon enthused that “advance scientific techniques in medicine and surgery may have started bridging the age-long chasm between mystery, witchcraft and objective existence”. (Ezea, 1993: 3), the surgeon’s remark that such a phenomenon and evidence “reinforces the belief that the world of the unknown is real and must not be wished away as mere super-natural”, (3) is a pointer to the reality of super-natural causation.

The fact is that the Buddhist and the traditional African should not merely ‘keep a noble silence’ nor jump to ascribing supernatural causation to events respectively without seeking for adequate knowledge. The best thing, it seems, is continuous scientific investigation, which could one day unravel the mystery behind the so called supernatural causation.

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