Evil, Death, and Some African Conceptions of God

Hasskei M. MAJEED
Department of Philosophy and Classics
University of Ghana, Accra
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1409-1295
Email: mmajeed@ug.edu.gh

Abstract

The age-old philosophical problem of evil, especially prominent in Western philosophy, as resulting from the intellectual irreconcilability of some appellations of God with the presence of evil – indeed, of myriads of evil – in the world, has been debated upon by many African religious scholars; particularly, philosophers. These include John Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, E. B. Idowu and E.O. Oduwole. While the debate has often been about the existence or not of the problem of evil in African theology, not much philosophical discussion has taken place regarding death and its implications for African conception(s) of God. This paper attempts to contribute to the discussion of those implications. It explores the evilness of death, as exemplified in the African notion of "evil death," and argues that the phenomenon of death presents itself in complex but interesting ways that do not philosophically ground its characterization as evil. Therefore, the problem of evil would not arise in African thought on account of the phenomenon of death.
Keywords: The Problem of evil, death, God, evil death, Akan theology, African theodicies

Introduction

Death is a phenomenon that is as factual as the capacity for organic growth of the human being. So, a balanced study of human life would not be achieved without a serious attempt to bring the issue of death to the same prominence as, say, life. It is therefore pertinent for, perhaps incumbent on, African philosophers to devote thought to it. In doing so, some related concepts or questions which do receive attention in the African philosophical literature will even be tinged more with lucidity and receive a more comprehensive exploration. Such concepts include personhood, vitality, and the afterlife.

The physical and emotional impact of death has the tendency to influence people's perception about its value – often negatively – but the philosophical interest in the subject of death extends beyond this impact. Philosophical questions raised in this direction have as their object a broader goal of understanding its origin, nature, and place in the cosmological thoughts of human cultures. This implies that it is not enough to identify the impact of death, but it is philosophically more rewarding to understand it and examine the strengths of arguments that are advanced in connection with it. According to Ademola Fayemi (2012, 6) death is evil; and, in cultures such as the Yoruba where it is held that God is partly evil, the existence of death would not be inconsistent with the

character of God.[1] However, in African philosophies where God is believed to be good (MBITI 1969, 29) and is conceived to be the source of death, logical problems begin to emerge. Other appellations of God that will be discussed in the next section, combine with His alleged goodness to create further logical problems. God is therefore conceived differently in African thought. In this paper, I examine the implications of these different conceptions of God, and argue that death, especially death which in Akan thought is perceived as "evil death," cannot be regarded as an evil creation of God.

In section one, I discuss the philosophical problem of evil from an African perspective. This is followed by an analysis, in section two, of the argument that the problem is resolved in African philosophy. Section three explains the concept of death, while section four presents the concept of "evil death" from an Akan perspective. The implications of death, evil death and some African conceptions of God are handled in section five.

The Problem of Evil in African Philosophy
There is an ongoing debate about whether the problem of evil exists in African theology and, subsequently, about the potential for African thought to provide a solution to the problem. The problem whose essence is captured by Richard Swinburne as being about how consistent the presence of evil is with the existence of God (1987, 174), ultimately questions other attributes of God such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-benevolence. For some unexplained reasons, however, Kwame Gyekye excludes omniscience from his statement of the problem. He claims (1995, 123) the problem is about the following propositions:

> *God is omnipotent.*
> *God is wholly good.*
> *Evil exists.*

The above constatives considered as a unit of thought provide some insight into the problem, but it is not enough. For if God is deemed to be wholly good and omnipotent, it is possible to argue that he should not be willing or feel compelled to stop evils that he did not anticipate will accompany things that he brought into being. And it may be asked why God should not be sympathized with but rather blamed for effects that he had no idea about or intend. It may then be argued that God created the earth, for example, but not earthquakes and should be responsible for what he knowingly did, just as we in normal life would not blame a person for his or her unintended actions. But Gyekye might be forgiven if he is understood to be interested in directly capturing the import of moral evil – that is, whether God can or should prevent moral evil. Even so, the inclusion of omniscience is, in my view, still important. Otherwise, one may not be able to challenge the possible troubling theodicy that God created humans (as moral agents) without knowing all that they were going to do with their free will.

---

[1] This is one of the reasons why some Yoruba philosophers prefer "high deity" to God in their description of *Olodumare.*

The problem of evil has been extensively discussed in Western theology where theodicies proposed have often been found to be unsatisfactory. Largely, they have been about a range of exculpating claims; for instance, that evil results from wrong choices of action freely made by humans (something close to misuse of human freedom),[2] that evil is an illusion (BALOGUN 2009, 12), and that evil is not a substance but a privation of being (according to Plotinus and Augustine, as cited by FAYEMI 2012, 4). This paper does not aim to give a historical account of the problem of evil, except to add that the above theodicies have aptly been criticized by philosophers such as Epicurus (HICK 1966, 5), Hume (1973, 186), Russell (1957, 32) and Schopenhauer (BALOGUN, 2009 13). Since the theodicies have arguably achieved little success, if any at all, in resolving the problem of evil, religionists continue to search for new ways of appreciating and presenting the nature of God, while their critics are inspired to hold firmer their arguments against the existence of God.

In the attempt to understand the nature of evil and its relation to the Supreme Being, a key question that has guided researchers is whether God created evil or not. I acknowledge that sometimes it is asked whether God permitted evil – but invariably the two perspectives (that is, the creation and permission of evil) are thought to have the same effect on life, the natural world, and the character of God. In this regard, an affirmative answer, for instance, to the question about God's creation of evil would be presumed sufficient for God's responsibility for evil, and vice versa. However, the question "Did God create evil?", in the current context, requires prior attention to be paid to some other questions. For, the question presumes for instance that God is personal and creator (at least, of evil). However, the issue of creation is never at all settled in contemporary African philosophy. It is, for instance, a matter of contention between two of the most influential African philosophers, Kwasi Wiredu and Gyekye. While Wiredu would prefer to describe the Akan Supreme Being as a "cosmic architect", Gyekye endorses the attribute of creator (WIREDU 1998; GYEKYE 1995). By this, Gyekye implies that the Supreme Being is the creator of all things and accepts the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* – contrary to Wiredu who argues that He fashioned the world from some pre-existing material.

The second question that requires our prior attention, and is quite related to the above, is that of identifying what sort of things the Supreme Being could possibly create. Knowing this is crucial if we are to tell whether evil falls within the class of entities brought into being by the Supreme Being. This question of the scope of His creation, if He did at all, has in most cases been discussed in some context of theodicy. In Yoruba thought, while some philosophers such as Sophie Oluwole (1995, 20 cited by O. BALOGUN 2009, 6 and B. BALOGUN 2014, 65) deny the presence of the problem of evil, by holding, among other reasons, that *Olodumare* (the High Deity) was not the creator of the world, others such as Ademola Fayemi (2012, 7) explicitly makes *Olodumare* a joint creator of the world with other primordial deities. In a recent publication of Thaddeus Metz and Motsamai Molefe titled "Traditional African Religion as a Neglected Form of

---

[2] For more on this, see Oladele Balogun (2009, 12).

Monotheism" they advance the former position about the Supreme Being in African philosophy: that "God's creativity, and hence omnipotence, does not extend to originating the physical universe" (2021, 397). There are implications for these views though. Unlike the belief that *Olodumare* did not create the world, the joint creator characterization of Him does not absolve Him of responsibility for the existence of evil. There could also be a further issue with the idea of a joint creator if Wiredu's caution is to be heeded (WIREDU 1998, 29-30); which is that "creation" is a term that historically invokes the notion of prior nothingness from which the Supreme Being brought all existents into being. But, for Wiredu, this is misleading because the African conception of Supreme Being, at least the Akan *Onyame*, is a cosmic architect who moulded things from pre-existing material(s). Nevertheless, typical in African philosophical literature of questions that are very debatable, one can always expect further divergences as Gyekye (1995) would add to the debate by criticizing the rejection of an *ex nihilo* creator-God and, by extension, the joint creator characterization of God. He interprets Akan language, beliefs, and practices to project a sole, *ex nihilo* creator.

The final and most critical question, which is whether God created evil, can be answered satisfactorily only if the reality of evil is affirmed. However, the reality of evil has been denied by some philosophers as if to suggest that that translates to a potent theodicy. This denial comes in varying degrees, nonetheless. In African philosophy, we see examples of such denials in the works of Babalola Balogun (2014, 60) where evil is said to be relativistic, such that what one may want to call evil would not be seen by another as such, thereby denying the objective reality of evil. Perhaps, a more direct denial which is about the substance of evil can be found in Augustine (also an African) and those who Oladele Balogun (2009, 12) identifies as contemporary Christian scientists. John Hick (1993, 42) rejected this view outright and in recent times, Fayemi (2012, 4) has also disagreed with Augustine and Plotinus (who held a similar view) while affirming the reality of evil from a Yoruba perspective. Evil, then, may be considered real.

Very often, we read in the literature, as explained above, that the Supreme Being is in African philosophical perspectives personal and can "create". Yet, the reality of evil may not lead an African thinker to the position that the Supreme Being created evil. Two reasons account for this position. First, I see in Akan philosophy how Kofi Busia (1963, 148) shifts responsibility for evil from the Supreme Being (*Onyame*) to the deities and humans, how in Yoruba thought Dasaolu and Oyelakun (2015, 26, 29-31) attribute moral evil to humans and evil in the cosmos to what they call "personal gods", mischievous spirits, and to punishment for actions taken by humans in their previous lives. Secondly, according to Oladele Balogun (2009, 7), "Ajala, the maker of destiny in Yoruba myth of creation can be taken as the agent indirectly responsible for evil, that is, human suffering and not God." Unless there is a typographical error in the sentence, which I suspect is the case, I wonder the purpose it will serve for Balogun to say an agent is there whose function is to act indirectly. Would the

quotation, then, not suggest that *Olodumare* rather acts directly? If so, how does Ajala's "indirect" responsibility absolves *Olodumare* of any blame as the authors are trying to establish? Perhaps, the authors intended writing "directly" if my thinking is right. And this, accordingly, confirms the authors' shifting of blame.

It is important to note that while Busia's position is motivated by the desire to eliminate the problem of evil from Akan theology, Gyekye (1995, 125-128) rather affirms the existence of the problem while, at the same time, appealing to human free will to also shift responsibility for evil to humans. For resorting to the free will argument, Wiredu criticizes Gyekye both rightly and wrongly. Wiredu (1998, 40) is right about the fact that the free will defence "does not provide satisfactory answer to the question why God does not intervene" when humans plan to do evil? However, his charge that the free will defence "does not begin to deal with physical evil" does not seem justified to me. As a result of Gyekye's explicit indication that he is discussing moral evil, it is not clear why his solution ought to deal with physical evil. It simply need not begin to deal with such evil, even though it is possible for moral (or human) evil to cause some natural evil (Hick, 1993, 45). But I do not deny that it would have been interesting if Gyekye had explained how he understood Akan thinkers to treat natural and other evils, and their implications for the goodness of God.

The second reason why evil may not be traced to God can be inferred from an earlier observation about Yoruba theology where the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*) is only responsible for some evils (Oluwole, Balogun) – viz. evils emanating from that which he brought into being. This only makes Him partially responsible for evil. A similar situation is what the joint creator argument brings about. Furthermore, assuming that *Olodumare's* portion of creation did not take place at the same time or is continuous, it should be possible for the other divinities to create or to have created some 'entities', which *Olodumare* required or will require, so to speak, to create his portion of existents. In this case, it would not necessarily be wrong to attribute the evil found in those entities "created" by *Olodumare* to defects originally left in the materials obtained from the other divinities who are deemed to be creators (i.e., Obatala, Esu and Ifa [B. BALOGUN 2014, 7]). Such evils may possibly be passed on to those deities.

It may be objected that *Olodumare* is supposed to know about the presence of evil or defect in the raw materials and rectify it if He is indeed omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent. But, as noted above, *Olodumare* has none of these qualities.

On the Alleged Solution to the Problem of Evil in African Philosophy

The logical incongruities in the affirmation of evil in this world and such appellations of God as omnipotence, omniscient, and omnibenevolence give rise to the problem of evil. Some African perspectives on the problem have already been discussed. What requires attention here is the supposition by some philosophers that African philosophy resolves the problem of evil because God is not conceived in it (African philosophy) in absolute terms. The idea, for instance, is that if God is not infinitely good, then, it should be consistent with His nature to expect evil in Him or His creation.

In some African philosophies, this perspective is held. Dasaolu and Oyelakun write: "… in both Yoruba and Igbo philosophy, as well as in the Akan philosophical context, it is a given that the problem of evil is a substantive philosophical problem only within the Western conception of evil and that such a problem does not hold much weight when situated within the African notion of evil" (2015, 23). This view is incorrect because some philosophers, including Gyekye, would deny this. Gyekye (1995) argues for the existence of the problem in Akan philosophy. For this reason, Babalola Balogun is quite cautious with his remark that the problem of evil is foreign to Yoruba thought (2014, 61).

Balogun (2014), however, interprets the Yoruba concept of evil in a manner that (in his thinking) makes it inconsistent with the Western view. From a Yoruba perspective, he maintains:

> Evil is an indispensable part of each person's life. A life entirely spent in good, with no possibility of evil, is impossible within the Yoruba existentialism. The good-evil dichotomy popular in Western scholarship is therefore incompatible with the Yoruba conceptions of these notions. Rather than being viewed as incompatible, good and evil are seen as necessary complements for a meaningful life: an appropriate measure of good and evil makes a fulfilled life. (2014, 62)

The above quotation reveals a two-fold approach to understanding practical life that is often not obvious. The first approach concerns the best ways of living in *this* ethically polar world, while the second is about the best ways of interpreting *this* world (with all its alleged shortcomings) as one proceeding from an *absolutely* good source. While the first option is a life management issue, the second is logical. B. Balogun's remark that "Evil is an indispensable part of each person's life. A life entirely spent in good, with no possibility of evil, is impossible within the Yoruba existentialism" appears to be a view of anyone, not just the Yoruba, who cares to look at the predicament of the human being on earth.[3] Human living is certainly about the alternation of experiences of good and evil. I do not think that in Western philosophy, it is argued that humans are, on this earth, able to continually experience evil and the absence of good, or experience good all the time without the possibility of evil. So, if human life in the Yoruba culture is taken to entail good and evil, so is it taken in the West.

It is difficult to understand the assertion that "The good-evil dichotomy popular in Western scholarship is therefore incompatible with the Yoruba conceptions of these notions" when B. Balogun is not expected to admit that evil is the same as good and good is the same as evil. In other words, so long as he would not deny that the category of good is different from the category of evil (and, thus,

---

[3] This is particularly so, given his endorsement of Oladele Balogun's definition of evil, that it "denotes something that is not good, that is, absence of good or the corruption of goodness" (2014, 61; O. Balogun 2009, 1). In this sense, B. Balogun notes, the Yoruba conception of *ibi* (evil) is not significantly different from the Western view.

oppose each other by definition), he cannot deny the presence of a dichotomy in Yoruba thought. For that would only suggest, for instance, that the Yoruba idea of goodness is when there is a combined presence of good and bad. Or that goodness is the entailment of good and bad. But even in this, there is a logical separation of good from bad, meaning that some dichotomy exists. There is some inconsistency in such interpretation unless it is argued that what one person judges to be good in the Yoruba culture might be adjudged bad by another. Indeed, this relativistic interpretation is affirmed by B. Balogun (2014, 60). In this case, it would be assumed that no person sees an action, event, or experience to be both good and bad, thereby eliminating the possibility of inconsistency at the level of the human individual. But in a more general cosmological sense, he perceives the Yoruba world to entail both good and bad which is not different from what any critical observer anywhere in the world would admit. There is, therefore, incompatibility in the Yoruba perspective. And, it is the same way that evil and good would relate to each other in the West. Accordingly, B. Balogun's reference to the Yoruba saying that "the universe was created as a mixture of evil and good" and therefore evil is "inextricably woven into each individual's life" (2014, 61) is an interesting observation, but it is not unique to Yoruba, nor does it change good to evil (and evil to good) in human life or in the universe. Another way of explaining the view that evil is "inextricably woven into each individual's life" is to assert that in Yoruba thought, nothing is wholly good or bad – as done by Babalola Balogun (2014, 64). But that makes the concepts of evil and good nebulous, such that there can no longer be the good or bad in Yoruba thought. Neither concept can, then, stand alone and be an object of enquiry. Yet, there are some good things in life – such as peace of mind and honesty – and bad ones as well.

What B. Balogun might be right about is in the context of life management, where the expression "good life" is meant to be a comprehensive evaluation of human circumstances. For, a life described as such may take evil into account. In this sense, the term "good" will not entail evil per se, but will be descriptive of how well a person has managed his or her good and evil experiences in practical life. And, given that humans are, and will be, unavoidably confronted with evil and good, coming to terms with this reality and making the most out of it are deemed to be virtuous. Consequently, to have a fulfilled life, and thus a good life, both evil and good would be deemed to have enabled one's attainment of such a life in practical life. In this vein, it might be right to view evil and good as "necessary complements" to manage which "an appropriate measure" of each is required. Even so, it does not seem to me that this view is uniquely African.

With regard to the second approach – as in the best ways of interpreting *this* world (with all its alleged shortcomings) as one proceeding from an *absolutely* good source – the problems raised in Western philosophy (as earlier discussed) have been about the logical propriety of conceiving a Supreme Being who is infinitely good, powerful, and omniscient, and yet is alleged to have created the sort of world we live in. The partly evil character of this world necessitates the concerns that were attributed to different philosophers in the first section of this paper that focused on the existence of God. The questions roughly constitute the problem of evil, and the preoccupation with such questions cannot be equated or

mistaken for questions about how best to manage an inescapable reality of evil in the world.

For this reason, any attempt to solve the problem of evil in African philosophy should aim at examining African conceptions of God and the African world to find out whether they generate logical difficulties. In this respect, Oladele Balogun advances that in Yoruba thought *Olodumare*, the high deity, is not perceived to "possess the absolute attributes of all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-merciful that led to the philosophical problem of evil."[4] This perception, according to him, "can be used as an African solution to the philosophical problem of evil which is one of the oldest metaphysical problems in Western philosophy that has defied solutions" (BALOGUN 2009, 15, 14).

However, the problem with this thinking is logical. Given the idea that *Olodumare* is not omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient, it is apt to assert that the problem of evil is nonexistent in Yoruba philosophy. But that does not constitute a solution *per se* to the problem of evil; for, it is an aberration, a logical misfit, to have a solution when there is no problem. The problem of evil does not just arise in Yoruba thought; and, in other philosophies where it does, adopting the Yoruba perspective on God and evil will compound, rather than solve, the logical problem of evil.

Death

I am restricting my discussion of death to biological death; in which case it would refer to the absence of life in the body. The phenomenon of death is sometimes understood differently including the view held by an Akan Chief, Nana Kwasi Opong Otaferegya I of Begoro, that an Akan may regard as dead-alive (*tease awuo*) an individual who is very bad morally, such as perverse criminals. As far as I know, the term also refers to someone who appears to have a short life ahead of him or her. But the two interpretations are not quite apart, since people who are perverse are more likely to perform actions that may shorten their lives. Nana's view is worthy of consideration because it brings out an interesting relationship between morality and death. In a related fashion, J.A. Thompson suggests that biological death, and for that matter life, may be understood in relational terms. In this sense, there is death if a person is unable to act upon or react to his or her environment (2003). Since Thompson intends, by the foregoing, a scientific explanation, it may not be wrong to understand 'environment' in terms of natural and, perhaps, social environment. A living person, then, should be able to act upon and react to the natural and social environment. These ideas about relationality bring to mind the African perspective of personhood that prizes communal relationality. Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984), Wiredu (1992) and Gyekye (1997) did not use relationality to distinguish dead from living persons, but to determine moral

---

[4] These attributes of *Olodumare* are confirmed by Godwin Sogolo (1993, 41) and Sophie Oluwole (1995, 20), but Balogun J. Babalola (2014, 64) maintains that *Olodumare* is omniscient.

personhood. Yet it cannot be denied that an individual who is described by them as not being a person would by virtue of the same criterion of morality/relationality be dead-alive. Thus, there is a good connection between moral death and personhood.[5]

The biological occurrence of death is, from the Akan philosophical perspective, sometimes explicable with a metaphysic of a person, where death overcomes a person only partially. In this sense, death is believed (and observed) to happen to the body but not to some other metaphysical entities postulated in Akan thought. This is made possible by the belief that a person is composed of a body (*nipadua*), soul (*okra*) and spirit (*sunsum*). The *okra* and *sunsum* are believed to survive death and constitute the grounds for belief in life after death. The exact relationship between them is well articulated by Gyekye (1995) and further strengthened by Hasskei Majeed (2017), but the characterization of the two entities as spiritual has been criticized by Kwasi Wiredu (1983).[6] This sort of controversy might exist in some African philosophies as well. This notwithstanding, there is an unmistakable expectation of the body to die at some point. Death prevents the continuation of life, but is this good or evil? I will return to this question after I have made a few observations about the notion of "evil death" in the next section.

The Concept of Evil Death

In Akan culture, there is the idea that some deaths are evil. This idea has philosophical relevance as I indicate in the sections below. For now, I intend to show how it is conceived. Death as already explained in this paper is seen by some African philosophers, such as Ademola Fayemi (2012, 6), as evil. As a result, the concept or expression "evil death" appears to be a tautology. However, the idea of redundancy in the expression "evil death" is taken care of by the following interpretation.

Even though the idea of evil death is held in Akan culture, it is difficult to make an exhaustive list of deaths that are called evil. Generally, the idea is captured by deaths that are often described as *atofowuo*. These are deaths that are conceived as unnatural or strange. They involve all sorts of premature deaths, like deaths by fire, lightning, drowning, being killed by a falling tree, by murder and mutilation, as well as losing one's life through strange diseases. I do not suggest by the foregoing that the classification of these deaths as evil is fair, for I anticipate someone asking, "what is wrong with dying through any of these means if one has achieved all one wants"? These deaths are regarded as evil because they are perceived to be a possible punishment from the deities or the living-dead

---

[5] The concept of personhood is central to African ethics. It does not only guide individual behaviour and action, but it also undergirds the socio-political set-up of the African community. It has prospects for contributing immensely to resolving ethical problems in modern life as exemplified by Motsamai Molefe with his *African Personhood and Applied Ethics* (MAJEED 2021). See also Majeed (2018).

[6] According to Wiredu, the *okra* and *sunsum* are quasi-physical and therefore fail to meet the criterion of spirituality as understood in English or Western philosophy. See Majeed (2013) for a critique of Wiredu's concept of quasi-physicalism.

(GYEKYE 1995, 78-80) or are caused by a curse invoked by an aggrieved person. Because of the perceived evil associated with such deaths, funeral rites cannot be properly performed, thereby barring the dead from moving on to the "land" of the living-dead (*asamando*). Apart from these supernatural reasons, evil deaths are such that they invoke horror, at the sight of the bodies thought to have undergone so much pain or suffering. In short, evil death refers to what the Akan would consider a horrible death. All this suggests that conscious effort is made in Akan thought to distinguish these deaths from others, such as natural deaths, thereby eliminating the apparent tautology in the expression, "evil death".

Death, Evil Death and the Goodness of God
Given the supposition that death is a natural phenomenon, it may be expected that those, at least some, who see death to be evil would also classify death as natural evil. And if God is believed to be the creator of nature (or for some thinkers, the creator of everything), then death would be seen as a creation of God. The thinking that death is God's creation is found in Akan thought. For, it is often said "Onyamenku wo a, odasani ye kwa" (lit. If God has not killed you, all efforts made by a human being to kill you will be in vain). Yet, Wiredu disputes the attribution of a creative function to *Onyame,* suggesting that any direct reference to His involution in bringing things about could only be expressed with the term *bo.* Wiredu's reason is that the term *bo* means "to fashion" or "make" with materials, but not to create (1998, 30). It is on this basis that the Akan reference to *Onyame* (God) as *O-bo-adee* is translated by him to mean a cosmic architect who made things from some pre-existing material. But he inadvertently approves J.B. Danquah's translation of a drum text in which *Onyame* is described as the creator of death. It reads "He [God] created death" (1998, 31; my square brackets) which will be stated in Akan as "Onyamena o-boowuo". But one may ask how meaningful it would be to assert in Akan that "Onyamena o-boowuo" if *bo* must involve some material? It would not mean much at all, for death and life are not conceived to have material origins. To make sense of the word *bo*, therefore, the context of its usage ought to be re-examined. Here, I agree with Wiredu that "the abolition of context effectively abolishes intelligibility" (1998, 29). With the relevance of context in mind, Wiredu explains that,

> In the most usual sense creation presupposes raw materials. A carpenter creates a chair out of wood and a novelist creates fiction out of words and ideas … Moreover, *Oboade*, the Akan word that I provisionally translated as "creator", means the maker of things. *Bo* means to make and *ade* means thing, but in Akan to *boade* is unambiguously instrumental; you only make something with something. (WIREDU 1998, 30)

First, to *boade* is not unambiguously instrumental as Wiredu understands, given the belief about the origin death mentioned in the preceding paragraph. What is right to advance is that to *boade* may or may not be instrumental. The belief also means that creation need not presuppose raw materials.

In the Akan language, when *bo* is used in the context of God's activities, it simply refers to His origination of things (as *oboade*). It is also not the exclusive Akan translation for "make" (especially, to make with raw materials). Otherwise, it should be possible for humans, particularly carpenters, masons, cloth weavers and other craftsmen to describe their activities in terms of *bo* or say of the things they create that they have been *bo* (made). However, that is not done.[7] It is interesting to note that whenever *bo* is used even at the human level, they do not always mean make.[8] This means, *bo* does not necessarily refer to the making of things from other things. I concede that Wiredu's translation of *oboade* as "the maker of things" (1998, 30) is intelligible, for Akan thinkers do suggest with another attribute *borebore* that *Onyame* can make things. But it is not suggested, as we saw above with the questions of death (and thus, life) that all things were made from a pre-existing material. With reference to the appellation *borebore*, Akan philosophers who believe in *Onyame*'s creation of things *ex nihilo,* such as Gyekye, would object that *Onyame* might have made (some) things out of what He had earlier originated, and argue that Wiredu's idea of pre-existing material or "indeterminate raw material" does not refer to anything that preceded God's creation. But I agree with Wiredu that the idea of nothingness, creating out of nothing, requires proper formulation in Akan philosophy.

Gyekye, like Danquah and Wiredu, recognizes the divine creation of death. But the fact that death is created by *Onyame* does not necessarily make it good. Therefore, it is worth asking why a Supreme Being believed to be omnibenevolent will originate death. Is death, philosophically speaking a creation? How correct, in other words, will it be to argue that it is an ancillary condition that arises from a created reality – life? From Gyekye's acknowledgement of evil death and postulation in Akan thought of an absolutely good and potent God, a third question may be asked, assuming his position was correct: how appropriate would it be for one to claim that the problem of evil exists in African theology, on account of the phenomenon of death, especially evil death? To answer the last question, recent discussions in the literature on the problem of evil suggest its non-existence in at least, one African culture: the Yoruba (where God is neither omnipotent nor omnibenevolent). This position comes as a reaction to earlier Yoruba scholars who argued otherwise (such as IDOWU 1962, ODUWOLE 2007). By the recent interpretation, we are assured of the absence of the problem of evil in Yoruba thought but not a justification for the evilness of death. Also, I am not quite sure if the concept of evil death is in Yoruba thought, but of

---

[7] The right word to use in the carpenter's case is *ye,* the weaver's is *nwene,* and the mason's is *si.*

[8] For the benefit of those who do not speak any Akan language, the following usage of *bo* would be helpful. Note that in most cases, the term *bo* is not about making or designing things: *bodwa* (to call a public gathering), *botofa* (to summarize); *bodua* (to invoke vengeful powers of the deities); *boetire* (to braid), *bobosea* (to take a loan), *bodam* (to become crazy), *boapata* (to construct a hut), *bomusuo* (to say or do something abominable), *bokwan* (to make a path), *bobede* (to weave a carrier with palm branches), *boewa* (to cough), *bowhii* (to go swiftly). Perhaps, the usages that come closest to the making or fashioning of things are *boapata* (to construct a hut) and *bobede* (to weave a carrier with palm branches).

death I cannot doubt – even though a thorough and sustained philosophical discussion of death in contemporary Yoruba thought will be ideal. The situation is not quite different from what one observes about works on death on the African continent in general. Yet, death and evil, and related concepts have the potential to enrich philosophical debates on, and increase our understanding of, humanity, God, and life. I take up the question of the evilness of death later in this paper.

The phenomenon of death is complex and at times difficult to characterize. It is often dreaded, for instance, yet it influences how many people live. One may even be advised to safeguard one's family interest (especially, that of the immediate family) in readiness for death. Secondly, and in relation to the second question raised above about whether evil was a "thing" but not an ancillary condition that arises from a created reality, there is hint of the conceptual problem that, as noted above, Augustine had to grapple with in connection with evil. The question is, thus, an attempt to see if Augustine's position extends to the phenomenon of death. Given this background, one may ask: Is death an actual, positive creation of God? This question is particularly relevant given that in many African conceptions, God is identified with life, life force or vitality (BEWAJI 1998, 8; METZ and MOLEFE, 2021). Death may therefore seem the opposite of life, of reality, of an existent. Since Augustine's conclusion was that evil was not created by God, but was just a privation of good, it may be argued that death was also not created. The thinking here would be that God created life, but not death; and that death is nothing but a human description for absence of a created reality – life. Death would then be classified as lacking concrete existence and not created by God. However, this position is difficult to sustain because even if God is believed to have created life and is a permanent presence of life (in the context where God is conceived as incapable of dying), his creation or origination of terminal life – that is all life apart from God's – logically assigns Him the quality of creator of death. For, he chose to end life, creating in its wake a situation that enabled the existence of mortal beings. God is therefore the originator of death. Further, even if it is granted that death was not positively created, the fact that mortal beings received from God life into which death was built makes it reasonable to hold that God was, at least, aware that he was going to allow death to occur. In both cases, death becomes a necessary companion to life and part of the project of causing life.

Given the above, there is need to revisit some appellations of God by asking, for example, how God's causation of death affects his goodness.[9] If God created the world, then, from the thinking that the phenomenon of death is evil (as held by Fayemi [2012, 6]), and from the notion of "evil death", it should not be difficult to claim that death is an evil creation of God. So, if one were to believe that the problem of evil existed in African thought, evil death or death could be

---

[9]The thinking that God is good in African thought (MBITI 1969, 29) would imply that God does not only desire, but acts good (MAJEED 2014, 134). See Ada Agada (2017) for some discussion of evil between Gyekye and Wiredu.

cited as a reason for the existence of the problem. In that case, God would at least, no longer be seen as omnibenevolent. Indeed, a conception of a partially good God would still not prevent some thinkers from attributing some evils such as death to God.

However, I see the above characterization of death and evil death as inaccurate, and maintain that death is not evil and need not be cited as opposed to the alleged good nature of God. I do not mean here that nothing else can be inconsistent with the nature of God. I will explain my point by first considering three ideas which, together, constitute a possible objection to my assertion that death is not evil: that:

(i)   Death brings pain to friends and family of the deceased,
(ii) Dying persons sometimes go through the pain of ill-health, have anxiety about death and are troubled by the sheer pain of knowing that they are dying,
(iii) Evil Death – the pain or perhaps the "indignity" in dying through such horrible means as drowning, burning, and all manners of gory accidents.

The above reasons are essentially about pain and indignity, which although understandable, do not count much toward understanding the nature of death itself. Besides, I do not think death is one of the things that are wrong or bad in themselves. No wonder the alleged evilness of death is claimed based on its effects on other humans, especially family and friends. Consequently, on hedonistic grounds, especially on qualitatively utilitarian grounds, death might be seen by some as an evil act of God. But there are two things to note: (i) that it is possible to separate the phenomenon of death from its effects on people, and (ii) that death does not always have negative effects on people. This suggests that evil (and pain) is not a necessary quality of death.

Death is just the event of ending some earthly life. This, in my view, is value neutral. This view is not affected by the common observation that thoughts about the evilness of death have been about events leading to death, events surrounding death or the conditions under which a person was in at the time of death – but not about death itself. For instance, depending on the biological shortcoming(s) that a dying person may have, he or she could be said to have a painful and/or a bad death. Furthermore, in the very notion of evil death presented above, we find a number of factors preceding or surrounding death which are deemed bad or horrible, as a result of which those who suffer them are said to have had evil deaths. But all these preceding factors or conditions do not constitute death. Hence, the concept of evil death entails a misrepresentation, just as the characterization of the phenomenon of death as evil is.

The implications of the foregoing on the argument for the existence of the problem of evil in African thought is that it (the argument) cannot be supported if death is cited as an evil phenomenon whose creation by God is inconsistent with His absolute benevolence. And if, on the other hand, God is deemed to be a joint creator, and the problem of evil is not postulated in African thought, then the phenomenon of death cannot still be tagged as evil, because it is value-neutral.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the concepts of death and evil death and discussed their implications for the existence and goodness of God. I have argued that the problem of evil in Western thought, which results from the logical inconsistencies that arise when we posit God's omnipotence, omnibenevolence and omniscience and admit His creation of death, does not arise in African thought. This is in spite of the fact that the Akan philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, allows the problem in Akan thought (on the grounds of moral evil in this world), even as many Yoruba philosophers deny its presence in their cultural philosophy. They argue that *Olodumare*, the high deity, did not create the world alone and is neither omnibenevolent nor omniscient. This, according to the Yoruba philosophers, makes for the accommodation of *Olodumare* and evil (including death) without any inconsistencies. I have argued that death is value neutral, and its creation does not add to the tally of evils on earth. Thus, in a culture like the Akan where the existence of the problem of evil is affirmed, the fact of death does not affect the status of God negatively.

Relevant Literature

1. AGADA, A. "The Apparent Conflict of Transcendentalism and Immanentism in Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu's Interpretation of the Akan Concept of God," [Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions], pp23-38, 2017. Vol. 6. No 1. Web.

2. BALOGUN, O. A. "The Nature of Evil and Human Wickedness in Traditional African Thought: Further Reflections on the Philosophical Problem of Evil," [Lumina], pp1-21, 2009. Vol 20. No 2. Web.

3. BALOGUN, B. J. "*Ibi*: An Examination of the Yoruba Traditional-Existentialist Conception of Evil," [Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya], New Series, pp55-73, 2014. Vol 6. No 2. Web.

4. BEWAJIJ. A. I. "Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil," [African Studies Quarterly], pp1-17, 1998. Vol 2. Issue 1. Web.

5. DASAOLU, B. and OYELAKUN, D. "The Concept of Evil in Yoruba and Igbo Thoughts: Some Comparisons," [Philosophy], pp22-33, 2015. Vol 10. Web.

6. FAYEMI, A. K. "The Philosophical Problem of Evil: A Response to E. O. Oduwole," [Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy], pp1-15, 2012. Vol 41. No 1. Web.

7. GYEKYE, K. [An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme, rev. ed.], 1995. Temple University Press: Philadelphia. Paperback.

8. HICK, J. [Evil and the God of Love], 1966. Fontana Library: London. Paperback.

9. HICK, J. [Philosophy of Religion], 1993. Prentice-Hall of India: New Delhi. Paperback.

10. HUME, D. "God and the Problem of Evil," [Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings], 1973. Harcourt Brace Jovanovic: New York. Paperback.

11. IDOWU, E. B. [Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief], 1962. Longman: London. Paperback.

12. MAJEED, H. M. "Motsamai Molefe: African Personhood and Applied Ethics," [African Studies Review], pp26-28, 2021.Vol 64. No 4. Web.

13. MAJEED, H. M. "A Page in African Ethics: A Review of Bernard Matolino's Personhood in African Philosophy," [Legon Journal of the Humanities], pp338-343, 2018. Vol 29. No 2. Web.

14. MAJEED, H. M. [Reincarnation: A Question in the African Philosophy of Mind], 2017. UNISA Press: Pretoria. Paperback.

15. MAJEED, H. M. "On the Rationality of Traditional African Religion: Analyzing the Concept of God," [Legon Journal of the Humanities] pp127-141, 2014. Vol 25. Web.

16. MAJEED, H. M. "A Critique of the Concept of Quasi-physicalism in Akan Philosophy," [African Studies Quarterly], pp338-343, 2013. Vol 14. Issues 1 & 2. Web.

17. MBITI, J. S. [African Religions and Philosophy], 1969. Heinemann: Oxford. Paperback.

18. MENKITI, I. A. "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," [African Philosophy: An Introduction, 3rd ed., R.A. WRIGHT Ed.], pp171-181, 1984. University Press of Americas: Lanham, MD. Paperback.

19. METZ, T., & MOLEFE, M. "Traditional African Religion as a Neglected Form of Monotheism," [The Monist], 2021. pp393-409. Vol 104. Web.

20. MOLEFE, Motsamai. [African Personhood and Applied Ethics], 2020. NISC (Pty): Makhanda. Paperback.

21. ODUWOLE, E. O. "The Dialectics of Ire (Goodness) and Ibi (Evilness): An African Understanding of the Philosophical Problem of Evil," [Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy], pp1-13, 2007. Vol 36. No 1. Web.

22. OLUWOLE, S. "Madonna and The Whore in African Traditional Thought," [Journal of Philosophy and Development], N.P. 1995. Vol 1 & 2. No 1. Paperback.

23. RUSSELL, B. [Why I am Not a Christian], 1957. George and Allen Unwin: London. Paperback.

24. SOGOLO, G. [Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought], 1993. Ibadan University Press: Ibadan. Paperback.

25. SWINBURNE, R. "The Problem of Evil," [Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology, Louis POJMAN Ed.], pp174-184, 1987. Wadsworth Publishing Company: Belmont, CA. Paperback.

26. THOMPSON, J. A. "Life and Death: Biological," [Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, J. HASTINGS Ed.], pp1-9, 2003. Vol 8. T & T Clark: London. Paperback.

27. WIREDU, K. "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion," [African Studies Quarterly], 1998. pp17-46. Vol 1. Issue 4. Web.

28. WIREDU, K., & GYEKYE, K. Eds. [Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I], 1992. Council for Research in Values and Philosophy: Washington, DC. Paperback.

29. WIREDU, K. "The Akan Concept of Mind," [Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies], pp113-134, 1983. Vol 3. Paperback.