

Questionable but Unquestioned Beliefs: A Call for a Critical Examination of Yoruba Culture

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Abstract

The fundamental belief in destiny in Yoruba culture is explained within the tradition that for every individual person who comes to *aye* (earth), there is a package of destiny containing the totality of all that such person will be. However, the content of this destiny is not known to any person except Orunmila, one of the deities. Therefore, it is believed that a person dies if and when he/she has exhausted the content of his/her *ori* (package of destiny). Included also in the Yoruba belief system is that a youthful death is a sorrowful death. This is predicated on the premise that a young man could not have completed the content of his earthly mission. His death is therefore sorrowful, and he could therefore not be admitted into *Orun* (“heaven”) to join the league of the ancestors. This is the explanation for the belief in reincarnation, and, more specifically, the belief in *akudaaya* or *abaramoji* (reincarnated persons).

This paper argues for two main points. *First*, in spite of the Yoruba belief that no human being is privy to the content of destiny, the Yoruba belief in sorrowful or sudden death (*iku-oyo* or *iku-ojiji*) presupposes some knowledge of the content of each person’s destiny. *Second*, the beliefs in destiny on one hand, and in sudden or sorrowful death on the other, are mutually exclusive. This means that if one is true the other will be false and vice-versa, so that holding the two together would be contradictory. Because such contradictions are common in the entire gamut of Yoruba belief, there is need for a critical examination of the Yoruba belief system in the quest for a modern culture.

Key words

Sorrowful death, sudden death, mournful death, non-mournful death, human destiny

Glossary of Yoruba Words and Phrases

Abaramoji: one who shares two natures - natural and supernatural. It is another name for a reincarnated person.

Afuwape: The third hypothetical person in the myth on destiny and *ori* recorded by Abimbola (1952).

Agba/Agbalagba: An elderly person - between 55 and 75 years old.

Ajala: the individual who, in Yoruba mythology, was assigned the responsibility of molding the *ori*; but for his careless attitude he was never identified as an *orisa* (deity).

Akudaaya: a reincarnated person.

Akunlegba: Literally translated as “Kneeling – down – receiving”. This is one of the trimorphous ways of receiving destiny according to the account by Idowu (1962).

Akunleyan: Literally translated as “Kneeling – down – choosing”. This is one of the trimorphous ways of receiving destiny according to the account by Idowu (1962).

Ara: The Physical body. It was created by Orisa-Nla.

Ara-Aye: The Earthly dwellers.

Ara-Orun: The heavenly dwellers, including Olodumare (head of the supernatural hierarchy), the *Orisas*(deities), and the league of ancestors.

Arugbo: Very old people - 75 years old and above.

Ayanmo: Literally translated as “That which is affixed to one”. This is one of the trimorphous ways of receiving destiny according to the account by Idowu (1962).

Aye: Literally “Earth”; but the Yoruba have a mythological account of how it was created different from the biblical or scientific accounts.

Babalawo: literally “the father who owns the secret”. This is a worshipper of Orunmila. He is consulted by people on any matter. He then divines to consult Orunmila, and conveys Orunmila’s message to people. The instrument he uses to divine is known as *Ifa*.

Emi: Life, Soul, or Spirit. It was breathed into the lifeless body (*ara*) only by Olodumare (head of the supernatural hierarchy).

Ifa: the instrument used by Babalawo to divine when he consults Orunmila on any matter.

Iku-oyo: Mournful death.

Iku-ojiji: Sudden death.

Iku-oro: Sorrowful death.

Ila: Translates “Okra” in English.

Obatala: another name for *Orisa-nla*.

Odo: Youth or young people.

Oku-Orun: the league of ancestors - the elderly people who have died but are still believed to be in *orun* where they continue to live. Any elderly person who dies is believed to have joined the ancestors in *orun*. In the hierarchical order, the ancestors are next to the *orisas*(deities).

Olodumare: He is the head of the supernatural hierarchy. In the hierarchy are some subordinate deities (*orisas*). According to some notable scholars such as Bolaji Idowu (1962), he is also the equivalent of God.

Omo-araye: another name for the Earthly dwellers.

Omode: Could refer to a child or a youth, depending on the circumstances of use. It could also be seen as a polar concept to *agba or Agbalagba*.

Ori: the bearer of the destiny of a person. This is also believed to be a personal god, a protector or a metaphysical counterpart. It is used here to refer to the bearer of destiny.

Orilemere: The second hypothetical person in the myth on destiny and *ori* recorded by Abimbola (1952).

Orisa: the collective name for all subordinate deities under *Olodumare*. Examples are *Orisa-nla, Esu, and Orunmila*.

Orisa-Nla: a deity reputed as the deputy of Olodumare, and responsible for moulding the physical parts of the human being. The name may also refer to a deity who owns *ila*.

Orisa-Ninla: *Orisa* is a deity. *Ninla* means “big” or “great”. So this is a big or great deity.

Oriseeku: The first hypothetical person in the myth on destiny and *ori* recorded by Abimbola (1952).

Orun: Literally “Heaven”, but it is different from the biblical one because of some peculiar events that happen in it.

Orunmila: the name of a deity (orisa) associated with wisdom. This deity possesses wisdom on any matter concerning human beings and *aye*.

Yoruba: the name of the ethnic group that occupies the South –Western part of Nigeria. It is also the name of the language spoken by the group. Hence the Yoruba language is spoken by the Yoruba people.

Introduction

This paper Interrogates the following two principal beliefs in the Yoruba culture:

(1) Each person has a pre-ordained programme of events to fulfil in *aye* (“earth”). This is referred to as destiny.

(2) There exists sudden death (*iku- ojiji*), or mournful or sorrowful death (*iku- ofo*).

The paper observes that according to Yoruba belief, no one knows the content of his/her destiny (*ori*) or that of other people’s except the deity Orunmila.¹ For the Yoruba, since destiny contains the totality of the life-course of an individual, it is improbable that a person will die without having fulfilled his/her destiny. In other words, the time a person dies is the end of his/her destiny, and this may be any age. It follows that no one dies suddenly, and thus no death is sorrowful.

However, belief in destiny, which presupposes that no death is sudden or sorrowful, conflicts with the practice in Yoruba society, where some deaths are held to be sudden and sorrowful, while others are not. Thus the death of a young person is attended with mourning, while that of an old person is celebrated. Obviously, this practice presupposes the knowledge of the content of the destiny of people, young and old alike: there is the supposed knowledge that the old person dies having fulfilled his/her destiny, and so his/her death is worth celebrating. There is also the supposed knowledge that a young person who dies has not fulfilled his/her destiny, and so his/her death is sudden and calls for mourning.

¹*Orunmila* is a deity associated with wisdom. It is believed that he was the only witness of the process of the issuing of *ori* (content of destiny) in *orun* (“heaven”), so that no one else has the knowledge of *ori*.

The paper argues that the two sets of beliefs outlined above are mutually exclusive - they cannot both be true at the same time and in the same respects. Consequently, if a culture holds the two to be true simultaneously, there is need for its re-evaluation.

The rest of this paper is divided into four main sections. The first presents a background to the Yoruba traditional myth which supports the belief in how *ori*(the bearer of human destiny) is obtained. It also identifies two schools of thought on the question of *ori*. The second section critically examines the belief in sorrowful death and non-sorrowful death among the Yoruba. It also highlights the need to address the harm that unnecessary expenses during burial ceremonies bring on Yoruba society. The third section seeks to illustrate that the beliefs in destiny and sudden or sorrowful death are mutually exclusive: for Yoruba culture to be more consistent, it must not jointly hold the two to be true. The fourth section is a call for an assessment of Yoruba culture. This is because running through the whole gamut of the culture are some inconsistent sets of beliefs.

Background to Yoruba Traditional Beliefs in the Human Person and Destiny

The substance of Yoruba culture is situated in the metaphysical belief in supernatural beings such as *Olodumare*², the *Orisas*³, and *Oku orun*⁴. This establishes Mbiti's point that "for Africans, the whole existence is a religious phenomenon; man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe" (Mbiti 1969, 15). Besides, for Bewaji, the existence of *Olodumare* is not a matter for argument or debate; instead, it is held to be foundational to all other ontologies:

The existence of *Olodumare* is not geotactic, nor is it dependent upon any human whim. This, perhaps, explains why no elaborate arguments of proofs are thought necessary for the existence of God in Yoruba religion. The starting point of wisdom among the Yoruba is the acceptance of the *de facto* existence of Deity (Bewaji 2007, 369).

Belief in the existence of *Olodumare* accentuates the Yoruba belief in two planes of existence, namely, *orun* ("heaven") and *aye* ("earth"). *Aye* is believed to have been created by *Olodumare* with the assistance of the *Orisas* (subordinate deities) who reside with him in *Orun*.⁵ This belief also establishes the idea of a continuum between *aye* and *orun* (Abimbola 2006, 88; Onwuanibe 1984, 191; Mbiti 1969, 97). By *continuum*, I mean the connection between *orun* and *aye* such that the two "dovetail and intermingle into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, to draw the distinction or separate them" (Mbiti 1969, 97). This idea informs the Yoruba traditional belief that people in *aye* (*Ara-aye*) communicate and/or interact directly with the beings (*Orisas* and ancestors) in *orun* (*ara-orun*). This may be through sacrifice, pouring of libations, and invocation. This also informs the Yoruba belief that the souls of the dead go to *Orun* from where they came and where they now continue to live. However, the requirement is that these souls fulfilled their mission in *aye* ("earth") for them to be admitted to *Orun* ("heaven") to continue to live as ancestors. The souls of those

²*Olodumare* in Yoruba belief is the head of the hierarchy of supernatural beings. According to some notable scholars, he is the equivalent of God (see for example Idowu 1962).

³*Orisas* are the subordinate deities under *Olodumare*. Examples of these are *Orisa-nla*, *Esu* and *Orunmila*.

⁴This is the league of ancestors who are next to the *orisas* (deities) in the supernatural hierarchy of beings.

⁵*Orun* literally translates as "heaven"; but there are some events that happen in *orun* that are accounted for differently in Judeo-Christian doctrine. For instance, In Judeo-Christianity, God is believed to be the Creator of everything, but in *orun*, *Orisa-nla* is the one assigned to create the physical parts of the human being, while *Olodumare* puts *emi* (the soul) into the body.

who did not complete their mission before they died are believed to put on other bodies and to continue to live in *aye* (“earth”) until they fulfill their destiny which is their earthly mission.

There is also the tripartite conception of a human being in Yoruba belief. A person is constituted of the *ara* (body), *emi* (soul) and *ori* (Inner head, the bearer of destiny) (Abimbola 1971; Makinde 1984; Idowu 1962; Kaphagawani 2004; Hallen and Sodipo 1986, 105; Gbadegesin 1998 and 2004; Abimbola 2006). *Ara*, which is the physical part of the human being, is believed to be created by Orisa-nla, a deity (*orisa*) who is the deputy of Olodumare (Abimbola 1971, 41). This *ara* (lifeless body) then proceeds to Olodumare to receive *emi* (soul/spirit).

Nevertheless, traditions are divided on the personality of Orisa-nla, who is also referred to as *Obatala* (Babatunde 1989, 283). Abimbola (1971) presents Orisa-nla as the deputy of Olodumare, who moulded the physical parts of a person in *orun*. However, Adeoye (1971) identified Orisa-nla as one of the chiefs in Ile-Ife. This deity used to plant Okra which is *Ila* in the Yoruba language. *Nla* in Yoruba also may mean “strong” or “great”. So, it might also have been that the person was powerful or great when he was alive. Hence we have the Yoruba name *Orisa-ninla* (great deity); then, from that, we have *Orisa-nla*. Besides, it may perhaps either be that he utilized *Ila* (okra) in some certain unique way for an achievement, or that he excelled so much in okra farming, or that he held the monopoly of okra farming, which made him to be deified at death and for his identity and remembrance to be tied to okra (*ila*). However, Adeoye’s account is silent on those assumptions. It may be that it is from those assumptions that he became the deity that owns Okra (*Orisa ti o ni ila*, or *Orisa oni'la*); hence, from the contraction of these, the name *Orisa-nla* was formed. Nevertheless, *Orisa-nla* is used in this paper as the deputy deity to Olodumare who he (Olodumare) assigned the task of creating the physical parts of a person. *Emi* (soul/spirit) is identified as the invisible but vital property which gives life to the lifeless body, and this is within the repositories of Olodumare who puts it into each created *ara* as he so wishes (Abimbola 1971, 44).

The third part of a person is *ori*, which is the bearer of destiny. It is believed that *ori* contains all that a person will become in *aye* (Gbadegesin 1998, 144; Abimbola 1971, 7; Idowu 1962,

170). Abimbola (1976, 132) supported by Balogun (2007, 119), in another construal of *ori*, identified it as a personal god to its bearer. *Ori* is here depicted as responsible for the security or defence of its bearer. The bearer is believed to be safe if his/her *ori* is behind him/her: it guides and guards him/her against external attack and promotes his/her interests. Traditional Yoruba belief identifies Ajala as a personality whom Olodumare put in charge of moulding *ori*, which is to be the bearer of each person's destiny. The traditional belief holds that each person moves to Ajala's house from Olodumare to choose their *ori* (package of destiny). Each person chooses his/her own *ori* which contains all that he/she will be in *aye*.

A departure from the account involving Ajala is identified in the view of Idowu (1962) shared by Gbadegesin (1998) and Awolalu and Dopamu (1991, 161). For them, *ori* is a human personality who knelt down before Olodumare to receive his destiny; and depending on how this is received, we have the trimorphous conception of destiny *viz.* a *kunleyan* ("kneeling down, choosing"), *akunlegba* ("kneelingdown- receiving"), and *ayanmo* ("that which is affixed to one"). However, it could be seen, according to this view, that no entity called *Ori* is chosen or picked from Ajala by any individual in *orun*. Instead, the "incomplete individual", *ara plus emi* (Abimbola 1971, 44) kneels down before Olodumare to either choose by verbal declaration, or to passively receive what he/she would simply be in *aye*. For this group of scholars of Yoruba thought, destiny, as that which determines the essence of every individual person, is received directly from Olodumare. This destiny could be seen as a "pre-ordained portion of life wound and sealed up in *ori*. Human beings have an allotment of this destiny which determines ... the general course of life"(Gbadegesin 1998, 144).

Thus we have identified two schools of thought on the traditional Yoruba beliefs on the way a person receives his/her destiny. According to one school, the incomplete person goes to Ajala's house to choose his/her *ori* (the bearer of his/her destiny). The other school identifies *ori* as a personality who kneels down before Olodumare to choose or receive his destiny in one of the trimorphous ways. Whichever way *ori* is received, what is relevant to the present paper is that it is believed that each person comes to *aye* with an *Ori*, the bearer of destiny, that which determines the life-steps, achievements, essence, and all else that a person will be or do in *aye*. That is the reason Abimbola states that "Once the choice of *ori* has been made, the individual (now a complete human being) is free to travel from *orun* to *aye*. His success

or failure in life depends, to a large extent, on the type of *ori* he has picked up in Ajala's store-house of heads" (Abimbola 1971, 6).

Each person who comes to *aye* is believed to have come with a destiny which states his/her earthly mission. Consistently following from this, it is also believed that a person returns to *orun* after having fulfilled his/her earthly mission, to become an ancestor and live with the other league of ancestors. This destiny, in relation to human life, then looks like a person's life activity stored or recorded in a disc. The person simply comes to *aye* to live out whatever is packaged or recorded in the disc. One simply lives according to whatever the disc plays, something akin to or reminiscent of Robotic life. But does Yoruba culture really construe human beings as robots? Does it not appear that this is worth questioning? It is safe to avoid this digression.

One more point to make: it is also believed that no one knows the content of each *ori*, except Orunmila (the deity identified with wisdom), who witnessed the choice of *ori* at Ajala's house (Abimbola 1952, 115). However, Orunmila was not permitted to reveal the content of any *ori* to anyone at Ajala's house. This was done so as to make him (Orunmila) a consultant on matters of *ori* for *omo-araye* (the inhabitants of "earth"), and perhaps thereby to give him a fortune in *aye* ("earth"). According to the myth about *Oriseeku*, *Orileemere* and *Afuwape* on the issue of destiny (Abimbola 1952), in the case of the hypothetical Afuwape, Orunmila did not reveal the content of Afuwape's *ori* to him; he only did a good in return by guiding Afuwape to pick a good *ori* after Afuwape had met Orunmila's urgent needs. Afuwape met Orunmila's needs in obedience to his *Babalawo*'s instructions. A *babalawo* is a professional diviner in matters of wisdom. He worships and consults Orunmila on any matter. He divines to receive and convey the message of Orunmila to people using an instrument called *Ifa*. According to the account of Idowu (1962) supported by Balogun (2007), Orunmila witnessed the process through which *ori*, in this case as a personality, receives its destiny directly before Olodumare in one of the trimorphous ways -*Akunlegba*, *Akunleyan* or *Ayanmo*. It must be clearly stated that *Ori* in Idowu's account is not the same as *Ori* in Abimbola's account. In Idowu's account, *Ori* is a personality who goes directly to Olodumare to receive destiny in one of the aforementioned trimorphous ways. However, for Abimbola, it is the bearer of destiny which is chosen at Ajala's store-house of heads. In both accounts, a person embarked on the journey to *aye* ("earth") after the process of receiving destiny.

Makinde (1985) and Balogun (2007) argue that the analysis of Yoruba belief in destiny/*ori* favours soft determinism (SD) as opposed to hard determinism (HD) favoured by scholars such as Idowu (1962). However, Oduwole (1996) has answered some pertinent questions raised by Balogun. It is also important to note here that the *freedom* identified by Balogun (2007), which implies moral responsibility and the possibility of altering one's destiny through hard work and/or sacrifice, are all found to be, upon deeper reflection, reinforcements of the argument in favour of hard determinism (HD). For instance, if Balogun (2007) is correct, the Yoruba primordial maxim *ori eni lababo t'aba f'orisa sile, nitori ko s'orisa tii daniigbe leyin ori eni* (literally "One should rather make sacrifice to or worship one's *sori* and leave *orisa* alone, because no *orisa* helps or assists one outside the content of one's *ori*") would be meaningless. Gbadegesin (1984, 185) also lends credence to the significance of one's *Ori*, as he sees it as "the limit of the individual possibilities", where "individual" here refers to the individual person.

Hallen and Sodipo (1986, 105) conceptualized *ori* as an exceedingly complicated package. Now, the freedom spoken of by Balogun (2007) is consistently explainable within the exceedingly complicated package of *ori*. The possibility, therefore, of altering one's *ori* (wherever applicable), for instance, is not incongruent with the issue. It is simply a possibility within the complicated package which is *ori*. The hard deterministic nature of destiny, as believed by the Yoruba, should now be fully appreciated when *ori* is seen as an exceedingly complicated package. The point of note is that Balogun and other proponents of soft determinism (SD) only need to pay closer attention to some details. They must be articulate and then "stand outside of exigencies of the present and its multifarious pressures to dispassionately consider and discuss issues" (Bewaji 2008, 192). None of the Yoruba scholars on this issue is oblivious to the societal practices. Intelligent minds are only trying to consistently follow the body of traditional belief about *ori* to its logical conclusion from its fundamental points. This will enable us to identify the problems with the belief in *ori* and see the need for assessment and/or review, not for the issue of *ori* alone, but for the entire system of Yoruba beliefs.

Balogun's soft determinism (SD) thesis is captured in this excerpt: "Soft determinism here refers to a situation where a person is held responsible for *actions* deliberately performed by him while attributing to his *ori* those *actions* whose 'cause' transcends him" (Balogun 2007, 126-127; emphasis mine). Even from this thesis alone, Balogun highlighted two types of "actions": there are those actions that an individual is directly responsible for and those

whose cause transcends the individual. Obviously, Balogun's refusal to distinguish these sets of actions by examples into their respective cadres is indeed suspect. I suspect that distinguishing these actions would raise some further questions about the adequacy of his soft determinism thesis. For instance, his position will not be far away from raising the question whether or not there are free or deliberate actions at all.

Tracing the question of freedom of choice a bit further, what freedom of choice did I have in my ability to reason? In other words, strictly speaking, is the cognitive faculty (the hub of all deliberate actions) a matter of choice? Either one has cognitive capacity or does not have it; but whether or not one is rational is not within one's control. It is *Ori* that determines this (Abimbola 1976, 114). One is even worried about the conclusion of Balogun (2007) given his analysis. I presume he knows that Yoruba culture is not a corpus of beliefs which treats destiny in a fragmentary manner, where actions are sifted like grains. Instead, according to this culture, destiny (*ori*) is a complex package which determines the course of a person's life. Situating the corpus of Yoruba belief in *ori* and/or destiny within the purview of soft determinism (SD) therefore literally amounts to a deliberate but an untidy attempt towards theoretical blindfolding and the persistent endeavor to label an omnibus system of contradictory and anachronistic beliefs as belonging to Yoruba culture. I will not pursue this point further, for the objective of the present paper is not to argue for hard determinism (HD).

Sorrowful and Non-Sorrowful Deaths

In the Yoruba society, as in all other societies, people die of any cause. However, Yoruba people classify death just as they classify persons. For instance, some persons are classified as *omode* (young person) or *odo* (youth), while others are *agba* or *agbalagba* or *arugbo* (elderly person or very old person) (Ayoade 1984, 98). Corresponding to this classification, death is classified: some deaths are considered as sorrowful, while others are regarded as non-sorrowful. If an elderly person of fifty-five to seventy-five years old (*agbalagba*) or very old person (*Arugbo*) of seventy-five years old and above dies, the Yoruba regard that to be a non-sorrowful death, whatever the cause: it is generally believed that the deceased is going home to be with the ancestors. Igbo culture shares this belief with Yoruba (Onwuanibe 1984, 188). Such a death is usually followed by a burial ceremony. The nature of the ceremony, however, depends, to a large extent, on the socio-economic status of

the departed on the one hand, and the bereaved on the other. This traditional aspect of the culture is still being upheld.

As a matter of socio-economic consideration, is it not time something was done about the ceremony attached to Yoruba burial rites? I observe that it has already injected a wasteful and anti-development attitude among the people. If an elderly member of the family dies, this calls for the hosting of a lavish feast after the burial rites. In the past, it was considered a taboo not to conduct a burial ceremony for one's parents when they died at an old age. It was believed that without the burial ceremony the dead would not sleep well, and that this might cause the dead to trouble the children later. Furthermore, it was believed that the dead would meet other ancestors and report everything that happened in *aye* ("earth") to them. Anybody who was cast negatively by the dead to the other ancestors would be punished by the ancestors. That was why when somebody's parent died, people went there to greet the children thus: "*E ku aseyinde baba o. Eyin won yio dara fun yin o*" ("The aftermath of your parent's death will be good for you"). Thus the family of the deceased had to conduct a burial ceremony. Some elderly people, while alive, might even specify the nature of the ceremony to be observed after their death.

Nowadays, among the Yoruba, people see a burial ceremony as a sort of psychological competition through the display of status or wealth. Some wealthy persons prefer spending untold amounts of money on burial ceremonies to helping the financially disadvantaged. This partly explains the upsurge of poverty in spite of a substantial number of wealthy people in the society. People who can scarcely feed their families will also run to throw a lavish ceremony for a dead parent. Sometimes they do this so as not to be looked down upon by friends and neighbours. Most people happily do it to the discomfiture of their family or personal economic sustenance. As a result, many children are withdrawn from school because of parents' inability to pay school fees after scarce finances have been wasted on burial ceremonies. Failure to act prodigiously results in name calling, back biting, and side talks. Some will even bury the dead and then fix a future date for such a wasteful ceremony. This is how Bewaji (2008) captures this point:

Now, this (idea that the soul/*emi* cannot survive bodily demise) will ... challenge a lot of the ideas which support beliefs and practices such as ancestor veneration, respect, consultation and the need for extended funerary rites (which latter funerary rites and extended ceremonies have become a veritable source of waste and indebtedness in Yoruba society)(Bewaji 2008, 201).

However, Bewaji disengaged from the issue for fear of what he called “selective interrogation of cultural beliefs”. Why should we not interrogate a cultural belief that encourages wastage, folly and underdevelopment? I strongly think that it is high time we disengaged from a belief that supports wasteful spending in the name of burial ceremonies to the detriment of our well-being! Resources that could have been used for developmental purposes are sunk into unproductive burial ceremonies. This is a clear pointer to the need for cultural reformation. On this issue of burial ceremonies, there must be a disconnect from the past for the culture to maintain its relevance. So much for the burial ceremonies, now let us return to our main issue.

Mutual Exclusivity of Yoruba Belief in Destiny, and *Iku-Ojiji*(Sudden Death) or *Iku-Ofo*(Sorrowful Death)

As earlier indicated, according to Yoruba belief, anyone who does not die at an old age dies a sudden or sorrowful death (*iku-ojiji* or *iku-ofo*). Notwithstanding the cause of the death, the Yoruba regard the death of a thirty year old man as *iku-ofo*(sorrowful death). Sadly, things are rapidly changing now. The death of a thirty year old person may also be attended with some level of ceremony depending on his/her achievements. Traditionally however, if an *agbalagba* of eighty years old dies in an accident, his burial will involve a ceremony, because that is not considered as sorrowful death. However, if a twenty-five year old man dies of a sudden illness, everybody will mourn - it is a sudden death (*iku-ojiji*), and therefore a sorrowful death (*iku-ofo*) (Onwuanibe 1984, 188). Ceremonies are not observed in such a bereaved home. In fact, expressions of grief such as weeping and sobbing are manifest following such a death. Noise is reduced in that environment to show the gravity of the sorrow that attends such a death. This practice is still widespread in Yorubaland.

If one considers the implications of the Yoruba beliefs in *Ori* (“Inner head” and “bearer of destiny”), *Akunlegba* (“kneeling- down-receiving”), *Akunleyan* (“kneeling –down-choosing), and *Ayanmo* (“that which is affixed to one”)⁶ on the one hand, and the attendant Yoruba beliefs about deaths, either sorrowful or non-sorrowful on the other, one is struck by the relationship between the traditional belief in destiny and the attitude towards death in the same culture. According to the Yoruba, each person comes to *aye* (“earth”) specifically

⁶ Translations of these Yoruba words are provided in the glossary at the beginning of the paper.

because he/she has a destiny to play-out. In other words, no one embarks on the journey to *aye* if there is no destiny to fulfill.

It is further believed that one's destiny contains the completeness of one's earthly mission or one's life course. Since no human being knows the content of each person's destiny, no one knows the time that each person will complete his/her destiny. The time that a person dies marks the end of the play of the content of his/her destiny in *aye*. This is because destiny, as indicated above, includes all that must *necessarily* happen to a person in *aye*. A person's death marks the end of his/her earthly mission. There is no substantial evidence to suggest that the Yoruba believe that a person gets to *orun* ("heaven") to continue the outworking of his/her destiny. However, whether or not there is a separate corpus of destiny fulfilled in *orun* is a different issue entirely, and one that is beyond the scope of this study.

The implication of the point in the last paragraph is clear - that nobody could die suddenly or unexpectedly: each person dies of any cause, when he/she has completely exhausted the content of his/her destiny. This is because the nature of each person's death, including its cause, is also part of his/her destiny. It follows that there cannot be a sudden or sorrowful death (*Iku-ojiji* or *Iku-oyo*). It also follows that the time or age at which anybody dies is the time or age when he/she has completed his/her destiny: this may be at ten years or one hundred years as the case may be. This shows that nobody should be mourned after death because he/she dies when he/she has completed his/her earthly mission. This is reminiscent of the fact that whenever a CD or DVD exhausts whatever was recorded on it, it stops playing. However, it may be argued that being alive and having a destiny to fulfill are two different things. Yet the possibility of being alive without a destiny is unthinkable in the Yoruba belief system. It is believed that a child begins to fulfill his/her destiny from the time he/she is born.

Would it not appear rather bold to assert that some aspects of Yoruba practice imply that people know at least part of the content of each person's destiny? For instance, it is believed that if an elderly person dies, his/her soul goes directly to *Orun* ("heaven") to join the ancestors. This is because it is believed that he/she has completed his/her earthly mission; but if a youth of twenty years dies, it is believed that his/her soul would not be allowed to join the ancestors, but will reincarnate (Onwuanibe 1984, 197, Endnote 16) and continue to live in *aye* ("earth") because he/she could not have completed his/her earthly mission (Abimbola 1971). This is a common belief in the Yoruba society. A young man who dies in Osogbo (the capital of Osun State in Nigeria) may be reportedly seen again at Lagos (the commercial

capital of Nigeria) after his/her death. Let us ignore the philosophical problems that reincarnation raises to avoid digression. These reincarnated souls are called *Akudaaya* or *Abaramoji* in Yoruba language (Makinde 1983, 31-59). An example of such cases was recently reported in a newspaper called *Alaroye*. The newspaper is written in the Yoruba language. This is the translation of the headline of the said article: “After Lasisi had died, he got married, gave birth, and then sent the wife and children to his parents at Tonkere near Ile-Ife”⁷ (*Alaroye Newspaper* 2013, 12).

The belief that the deaths of young and old people are sorrowful and not sorrowful respectively implies the knowledge, even if partial, of the content of the mission of individual persons that come to *aye* (“earth”). It presupposes the knowledge that part of the content of an individual’s destiny is to live to old age before he/she can be said to have completed his/her earthly mission. However, clearly this may not follow: one dies at any age at which one completes one’s destiny. In other words, whatever age at which one dies may be termed as one’s old age. This may be true since human beings are ignorant of the content of the mission of each individual person who comes to *aye* (“earth”). Again, nobody goes to *orun* (“heaven”) to continue to play-out his/her destiny. Therefore, the time anybody dies is his/her own old age, that is, when he/she completes his/her earthly mission. However, this conflicts with the Yoruba belief in sudden or sorrowful death (*iku-ojiji* or *iku-oyo*).

What we have arrived at is the conclusion that the Yoruba position is a contradictory one. *First*, belief in sorrowful death (*Iku-oyo*) presupposes the knowledge, at least partial, of the content of individual destiny - knowledge that it is part of the destiny of a person that he/she lives to old age before he/she could be said to have completed the content of his/her destiny. Therefore, whoever dies young does not fulfill his/her destiny, that is, he does not become old. Such a death is sorrowful and calls for mourning. *Second*, the belief that no one knows the content of the destiny of any individual (except the deity Orunmila) presupposes that anybody dies when he/she has exhausted the content of his/her destiny. This is because death is the end of all destinies in *aye* (“earth”). No one carries destiny back to *orun* (“heaven”). To argue that this is not so is to presume the knowledge of the person’s destiny, which, allegedly, no human being knows. It would follow that such a death is not sudden or sorrowful, and therefore does not call for mourning. There is contradiction when one affirms what one has denied. Belief in sudden or sorrowful death affirms the knowledge of at least

⁷Lasisi is the name of the person who allegedly died, was reincarnated, got married and got children. Tonkere is the name of the village where Lasisi was born. Ile-Ife is the name of a town close to Tonkere.

part of the content of a person's destiny, while the belief that no human being knows the content of the destiny of any human being denies this knowledge: this is an apparent case of contradictory beliefs.

From the foregoing analysis, we can infer that it is logically impossible to simultaneously hold on to the two beliefs: either the Yoruba hold on to the strong belief in destiny with all its implications and give up the belief in sudden or sorrowful death, or hold on to the belief in sudden or sorrowful death and give up the belief in destiny. The contradiction exposed above weakens the relevance of this set of cultural beliefs.

A Call for a Critical Examination of Yoruba Cultural Beliefs

The truth must be told about the traditional Yoruba belief system: whether it is more in line with soft determinism or hard determinism, it is contradictory, inconsistent and even incoherent. This may be due to the complexity of the entire belief system, or because of its presupposed uncritical nature. Yet even if uncritical scholars can afford to be literal in their analysis with a view to preserving the traditional Yoruba belief system, philosophers cannot afford such luxury (Bewaji 2008, 192). Why then do we still hold on to such questionable elements of traditional beliefs as *ori* (destiny), the Yoruba creation myth revolving around Olodumare, Orisa-nla, Oduduwa, Ajala, the Yoruba concept of human personality, belief in the efficacy of burial ceremonies, among others as they were passed on to us, yet we know that they yield clouds of questionable and/or contradictory positions?

Some aspects of the traditional Yoruba belief system are no longer plausible in the modern society, that is, they are anachronistic (see Wiredu 1980, 2). Our society is getting more and more enlightened by the day, and is now characterized by a generation of people who are ready to question whatever ideas confront them. For how long are we then going to preserve an internally inconsistent system of beliefs and wait to be presented with the entangling questions from this enlightened generation? This is a clear indicator of the urgent need to assess these traditional beliefs. Yoruba intellectuals must not be passive about this revolutionary assessment of the cultural beliefs. If they do not stand for something *strong*, they may fall for *anything*. They must therefore contribute to the development of a modern Yoruba culture if they are to effectively counteract the superimposition of western culture which is eroding, and ready to obliterate, the Yoruba culture in its entirety.

In my view, one way to approach the suggested cultural assessment is to apply Quine's specification of his linguistic theory, namely, holism (Quine 1961). For Quine, the linguistic theory is surrounded by experience. Anytime the theory conflicts with experience, it is the theory which is reevaluated. The reevaluation runs through the whole system, and may lead to the rejection of some part of the theory. The same may be applied to the Yoruba beliefs that conflict with societal practices. It is a fact that Yoruba society observes practices that express the belief in sorrowful or sudden death (*iku-ofo* or *iku-ojiji*), including weeping and sobbing. Yet there is the mythological body of theoretical belief in destiny which contradicts the societal fact. If we are then applying the Quinean method, we may have to reevaluate our adherence to the belief in the necessity of destiny and its attendant implications.

Alternatively, instead of evaluating and reforming the traditional beliefs, we may abandon them altogether, and systematically begin to develop a new and modern set of beliefs which may withstand rational scrutiny, and which may therefore be proudly bequeathed to posterity.

The two suggested alternatives above are simply possible approaches to the problem of anachronistic Yoruba beliefs: there may be other means of achieving the desired result. What is important is the need for a revolutionary assessment: it is a task we must perform to defend our rationality and to avoid being convicted by posterity.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined traditional Yoruba beliefs in destiny and sudden or sorrowful death, and raised two main issues. *First*, it has argued that an adequate understanding of the Yoruba belief in destiny leads to the conclusion that the belief in the distinction between *iku-ofo* (sorrowful death) or *iku-ojiji* (sudden death) on the one hand, and non-sorrowful death on the other, presupposes knowledge of the content of the destiny of the individual. Yet this contradicts the belief that no human being knows the content of the destiny of any individual. *Second*, the paper has sought to show that the belief that each person comes to *aye* ("earth") with his/her destiny which contains the totality of what he/she will be in *aye* on the one hand, and the belief in sudden or sorrowful death on the other, are mutually exclusive. This is due to the fact that no death can be sudden if it is believed that each person dies when he/she has fulfilled his/her earthly mission. Consequently, we should hold to one position and give up the other, as simultaneously holding both is contradictory. In

sum, the internal inconsistency of a key feature of the Yoruba belief system revealed in this paper indicates that a thorough re-evaluation of the entire Yoruba belief system is essential for the development of a modern Yoruba culture.

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