

THE HUMAN PERSON IN YORUBA CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The question: who is a human person? has remained a perennial question in the study of philosophy and religion. In spite of the fact of the establishment of the fact that the human person is an individual substance of a rational nature, different cultures continue to reflect on the question of the human person from the particularity and peculiarity of their cultural category. Thus, this paper investigates the concept of the human person from the perspective of the Yoruba people. The Yoruba believe that a human person consist of a body, which is physical, and a soul which is spiritual. At creation, Yoruba mythology of creation has it that Olodumare worked in collaboration with some gods to bring the human person into existence. These gods are Orisanla (God of creation) who was responsible for molding the body, Ogun (God of iron) was the beautifier; who for example cut the hands into fingers and Olodumare gave the soul. This paper is aimed at giving an explanation to what makes

a human person among the Yoruba. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological method of inquiry would be employed.

Key words: Human Person, Yoruba Culture, Body, Soul, *Olodumare*, *Orisanla*, gods.

Introduction

The purpose of this work is to discuss human person in Yoruba culture. A human person is a living being that contains a real and existing power to direct its own development toward fulfillment through perfect, unconditional, and infinite Truth, Love, Goodness, Beauty, and Unity, and will do so if all the proper conditions are met. A human being is referred to as “eniyan” in Yoruba context, which connotes a good or responsible person hence the saying “kii se eniyan” that is person is not responsible or reliable. This by implication means that a human person must be dependable with total sense of readiness to be there for others. If a human person is not making any contributions to the community in which he or she is part, then to Yoruba people, he is not a human person per se. Although he has the features but not the competence. This idea has earlier been presented by Gbadegesin (1983) that “the normative concept of a person evolves from the way in which man is understood in a given community in terms of his relations to other living beings and his role among other men.” Therefore human person in Yoruba context mean somebody that is part of the community in all ramifications. This is in line with the understanding of *Akan* people about human person. “In fact, a person of high moral standards or conduct would be described approvingly as *oye onipa paa*—literally; she is a real (human) person. In contrast, an individual who fails in his striving in the *Akan* community may be judged as *onipa hun*, which literally means “useless person,” an opprobrious expression. (Wingo 2006)

In the lesson note of Open University on person and persons, there is an agreement that “someone who has suffered some catastrophe that has put them in a permanent coma, a ‘persistent vegetative state’. Their biological classification has not altered; they are still a human being. They have lost something, however. In a sense, they have ceased to exist.... A being in a persistent vegetative state is a case of something human that might not be a person.” Therefore a human person must be alive, active and productive.

Who Are the Yoruba?

Yoruba people according to Atanda (1989) constitute one of the major ethnic groups in modern igeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Lagos State and a substantial part of Kwara State.

A considerable number of Yoruba people also inhabit the South- Eastern part of Republic of Benin (formal Dahomey). In agreement, Omojola (2015) states that, the Yoruba live in the South-western part of the present day Nigeria and they occupy the states of Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Lagos and Ekiti. They are also found in some parts of Kogi, Kwara and Edo States and beyond the lower Niger northwards into Nupe land. They could also be found beyond the boundaries of the present day Nigeria in Dahomey (Republic of Benin) and Togoland. Since the result of the last census in Nigeria is controversial, it is difficult to give the accurate total population of the Yoruba people. All that is known about them is that they are regarded as one of the most advanced communities in West African in; religion, agriculture, commerce, education, art, intelligence, government and warfare.

This group of people has as part of their values collective community development, cultural observes reflecting in their interaction with others- mode of dressing and diets. They also value honesty, humility and diligence. And more importantly, they value communal life. All these are taught in their informal training beginning from home. According to Kanu and Omojola (2018), Yoruba values are inherent in their formation as they assert that “at rising, children are taught to greet elders, sweep the surroundings, they are also taught from time to time to respect elders, to have value of honesty, charity, industriousness, cleanness, humility, support- members helping themselves in developing someone’s project, as a group or people of the same trade helping themselves. Formation of children was even taught to be done collectively. Most Africans gain this knowledge ever before they grow up to form associations according to age groups and they begin to compete and use themselves as yardstick for success, development and progress. All these are taught through proverbs, songs, art, communal life, and folk tales/ lore during moonlight play.

The Human Person in Yoruba Culture and Philosophy

The understanding of human person in Yoruba culture therefore is seen beyond ordinary because it has to do with physical and spiritual. Akíntúndé and Fálọlá (2016) put it this way “Yoruba religious thought makes a distinction between the physical body (ara) and the spiritual elements that inhabit it and give it life and individuality. Still, there is the conception that the two are inseparable entities that make up human personality. The spiritual elements consist of both the head (orí, the inner head) and breath (èémí), which are the vital components without which the body dies. Orí, which is more than a physical head that carries human brain, controls one’s destiny and direction through the use of one’s ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ (legs). Eṣe (legs) is regarded by the Yorubas as a vital part of the

human personality make-up, both in a physical and spiritual sense. This is the symbol of power and activity. It is therefore an element which enables a man to struggle and function adequately in life so that he may bring to realization whatever has been marked out for him by the choice of ori. Makinde (1983).

Orí also guides one's deeds and actions; a bad and good choice depends on one's choice of orí. In essence, orí is the element that predetermines a person's success or failure in the world." Therefore, human person consists of physical in body (Ara) and spiritual body in head and breathe (Orí and èémí). Abimbola (2006), added that One's ori-inu (spiritual consciousness in the physical realm) must grow in order to consummate union with one's "Iponri" (Ori Orun, spiritual self).

Makinde (1983) alludes to this by saying that "apart from the body and soul which, in Yoruba thought, are the two main elements (the physical and the spiritual) of a person, there is a third element, also spiritual, of a person, known as ori (inner head) whose function it is to determine human destiny." Makinde went further to say that the Yoruba concept of the choice of destiny through ori also emphasizes the need for hard work to bring to fruition the potentiality for success represented by the choice of a good ori. This leads us to believe in ese (leg) as an important ingredient of human personality. This means to a very large extent, success determines a human person. This success in human person is what Yoruba people refer to as "Eniyan" not just the person with features of a human being.

Reflecting on what make a human being (Eniyan) and how they come about, Gbadegesin (1983) is of the opinion that "eniyan" is the combined effort of "Olodumare", the supreme deity, and some subordinates. Yoruba conception of a human person refers to all the tangible elements that make a person both externally and internally such as brain, intestine, liver, and so on. Emi (Soul) is believed to be the immaterial element that provides the energy without which a person is said to be living or being conscious. Akíntúndé and Fálólá (2016) in their attempt to draw the relationship between body, soul and head referred to Ifá verse that the body (ara) was molded by Òrìṣà-Nlá, the orí (head) is provided by Àjàlá and the èmí is provided by Ọlórún (Olódùmarè), God in Yoruba believe. This relationship has been grouped into physical-material and mental-spiritual by Gbadegesin (2003) as follows: "Ara" – body belongs to the first, èmí –soul, to the second, and "orí"- head and "okàn"-heart has physical and mental aspects.

In another version, Makinde (1983) asserts that the Yoruba people believe that the human personality has two main elements: the physical and the spiritual body and mind (soul). And that the creation of the physical elements of a person by Orisanla does not include hands and

legs. It was the duty of Ogun (the god of iron) to cut the hands into fingers and also cut the legs out of the shapeless trunk. The researcher finds this Ogun assignment as beautifier very interesting. Being the god of iron according to Yoruba people, he would have enough instruments like cutlass and others apparatuses to do the separations.

The physical head which is said to be the first to be molded is regarded as the beginning of all things from which the body was made and Gbadegesin (2003) explained the importance of this (Ori) as follows “The idea of *orí* as a spiritual component, chosen by the individual and having the power of a guardian and protector over him/her, seems too deep-rooted in the Yoruba world-view to be given up. It is therefore the “*ori*” so chosen, with the destiny wound up in it that determines the personality of the individual. And though the *orí* is symbolized by the physical head, it is not identical with it. For the *orí* is construed as the inner—or spiritual—head (*orí-inú*).” From these two versions of the creation of human persons, it can be deduced that Olodumare (God) worked in collaboration with some gods to bring forth man. They were Orisanla and Ajala according to Akíntúndé and Fálólá. Makinde says Orisanla and Ogun.

As an extension to the above concept of human person in Yoruba culture, Abimbola (2006), opines that Yoruba belief holds that all human beings possess what is known as “Ayanmo” (destiny, fate) and are expected to eventually become one in spirit with Olodumare. Also, the thoughts and actions of each person in *Ayé* (the physical realm) interact with all other living things, including the Earth itself. Each person attempts to achieve perfection and find their destiny in *Orun-Rere* (the spiritual realm of those who do good and beneficial things).

Impact of the Community on Human Person

Taking lead from the fact that a human person must be responsible and reliable, indigenous Yoruba community comes together to raise a child for his good and good of the community. At pregnancy, ‘Ifa’ priest is consulted to know the type of child that should be expected. Even at times, a prediction of a particular type of child may come to a family and how to prepare and care for such a child will be discussed along with the announcement before pregnancy. A woman who is carrying a future king will know before birth for example. At arrival, naming ceremony will be done to welcome the child to the community and everyone in the community has it as a responsibility to care for him through proper formation or informal education. Hence the saying in Yoruba that “*Eniyan kan lo n bimo, igba owo lo n to*” literally means that it is only one person that gives birth to a child and two hundred hands bring him up.

In the typical Yoruba culture, a diviner must be consulted before any serious decision is taking because as Idowu (1966) opines ...the full responsibility of all the affairs belongs to the Deity...through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles; it is the Deity who is in control". Sacrifices are used regularly to appease the gods because it is equally believed that evil world can change destinies. Therefore regular prayers in form of sacrifices are important to one Ori as will be needed in the mind of Abimbola (2006). "Iwapeḽe (or well-balanced) meditative recitation and sincere veneration is sufficient to strengthen the "ori-inu" of most people. Well-balanced people, it is believed, are able to make positive use of the simplest form of connection between their Oris and the omnipotent Olu-Orun: an adura (petition or prayer) for divine support". What happens in this type of prayer is this: "Eshu Elegbara" (a god) initiates contact with spiritual realm on behalf of the petitioner, and transmits the prayer to Ayé; the deliverer of ase or the spark of life. He transmits this prayer without distorting it in any way. Thereafter, the petitioner may be satisfied with a personal answer. In the event that he or she is not, the Ifá oracle of the Orisha Orunmila may also be consulted. All communication with *Orun*, whether simplistic in the form of a personal prayer or complicated in the form of that done by an initiated Babalawo (priest of divination), however, is energized by invoking ase. (So shall it be) Abimbola (2006)

The community guides individual to a matured age and at times initiate them especially male children to a cult for support and protection. Human person are guided through choosing a trade that is suitable as dictated by the diviners. Even in marriage, the community still pays attention to the choice of partner. In times of trouble, they still run back to their family and community for solutions. In case there is any failure after all these efforts have been put in place, they resign to "Ayanmo" (Destiny or Fate) hence, the saying that "Ayanmo ko gbo Oogun". (Destiny has no remedy). This is as well related to the choice of Ori (head), hence those with difficult cases without remedy are termed to be "Oloriburuku" that is, having a bad head. This however will lead us to whether Yoruba believe that human person lives after here, that is, the physical realm (heaven) that Abimbola (2006) is pointed at earlier.

Human Person and After Life

Primarily, Africans believe in life after here or live beyond here or Ancestral World. In the explanation of Abanuka (1994), that "Ancestors are an aspect of the African experience of the universe... the dead are not considered as very far removed from the living, and those who are still living are conscious of their journey to join those who have gone before them to the land of the dead". In the mind of Mbiti (1969) however, "A

person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living- dead, and no other term can describe him better than that". To the family members, the diseased continues to live as and remembered as if he travels. Keeping the dead in the temporal sight by his loved ones is what Mbiti describes as the cult of the living –dead in all African societies. Ige (2006) added that they even move round and "It is only those who possess special power or medicine that can notice their presence."

Being particular about Yoruba people, Mbiti insists that "they are uncertain about the final lot of the departed: some are put in a good place, others in a bad place; the first group meets relatives and lives more or less as the people did in this life, but the second group is thought to suffer without end." This is the story of the ancestral world that the researcher heard in the oral tradition of Yoruba people. The second group may not be able to survive and they disappear without attention hence, they emphasize good relationship here on earth so that they can reunite with the ancestors and continue to live here after. Also, Yoruba believe that after a while, the diseased will leave the ancestral world and return to their families to live again or to fulfil some uncompleted assignments hence they have names like- "Yetunde", "Yejide", "Yewande" or "Iyabo" – mother has returned, and "Babatunde" "Babajide" or "Babade" – father has returned. In the mind of Idowu (1966), ancestral world exist and there is an annual festival in their honour especially for those that have been deified. Remembrance of the Ancestors is not only particular to the deified members because that is what is being celebrated annually in "Egungun" festival as opposed the idea of Idowu (1966). Ige (2006) attests to this that "communal ceremonies are done in honour of the ancestor and to remind the people of the great deeds of their ancestors. Some of these festivals include 'Oro' and 'Egungun'". Apart from this, Ige continues "The ancestors have shrines where sacrifices and prayers are offered to them. Among the Yoruba it is called *Igbo Igbale*'. There are priests and priestesses attached to the shrines. The priests and priestesses are usually the most elderly men and women in the family. It is however not a woman married into the family. The above consequently establish the fact that human person continues to live here after. It implies that life is not end by death as Mbiti (1969) affirms "Death stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible."

Conclusion

An attempt had been made in this paper to discuss the understanding of human person in Yoruba culture and Philosophy. The physical element of a person is collectively known as *ara* (body), a creation of Orisanla (the Yoruba God of creation) who is charged by Olodumare (God of Heaven) with the responsibility of molding human beings out of clay, with *Ogun*

(god of iron) to beautify the body while Olodumare gives the breath “Eemi”. In the analysis, “ara”, (body) “Ori” (head), “Emi” (Spirit), and “Eemi” (Breath) form a human person. Prayer to one's *Ori- Orun* is important regularly as it produces an immediate sensation of joy. This must work directly with “ese” legs to bring to fulfillment all that one has been destined to achieve. It was equally established that the community in which one is part must have influence on human person from the beginning to the age of maturity for his good and the good of the community at large. However, even after death, a human person lives on in Yoruba land especially those who have lived well and they are regularly celebrated as ancestors. Finally, in the Yoruba belief system, Olodumare has *ase* (Final say) over everything hence, it is considered supreme.

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