

A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION OF THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF YORUBA BELIEFS REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GOD, HUMANITY AND THE COSMOS

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DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.25338.81600

Abstract

This study, "A Philosophical evaluation of the core Principles of Yoruba Beliefs regarding the relationships between God, humanity, and the Cosmos," examines the intricate connections among these fundamental elements from a traditional Yoruba perspective. Several fallacies about African philosophy, particularly the notion that Africans lack philosophical inclination, are attempted to be refuted by the critical exposition for the benefit of Western readers. An understanding of Yoruba culture is necessary before delving into the relationships between God, man, and the universe. The Yoruba people's philosophical position is understood in light of their geography, language, beliefs, and social structure. This study of African philosophy looks at elements, sources, techniques, and a problem. The study provides insights into Yoruba concept of God's existence, primacy, and eternity by delving deeply into the nature, attributes, omnipresence, omnipotence, transcendence, and moral aspects of God in Yoruba belief. The study also looks at how the Yoruba define man, highlighting their sociological and anthropological viewpoints that highlight the intricate relationship between man and nature, the notion of an eternal soul, the belief in reincarnation, and the characteristics that, in Yoruba philosophy, characterize human life. A careful analysis of God's relationship with man and the universe reveals the importance of the creator-creature relationship, God's omnipotence, and the cosmic order that was ordered by God. Examining the Yoruba people's beliefs—transcendence, reincarnation, and their seeming dependence on gods as intermediaries—the work emphasizes the community's brotherhood and solidarity while denouncing the theological foundations and purported dogmatism of their philosophical approach.

Keywords: Yoruba Belief, Divine Attributes, African Philosophy, Omniscience and Cosmos

Introduction

The Yoruba people of Nigeria are endowed with a complex cultural fabric that is based on a philosophy that deftly weaves together the concepts of God, Man, and the Cosmos. Their worldview and way of life are shaped by a complex network of connectivity that goes beyond simple spirituality and is deeply ingrained in their belief system.¹ Examining this paradigm is similar to embarking on a philosophical journey across a terrain where the holy, the cosmic, and the human converge to form a stunning whole. *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being, and humanity are believed to be connected by a pantheon of deities called *Orishas*,² which are the center of Yoruba belief. By emulating emotions, human traits, and natural components, these *Orishas* symbolize a variety of facets of life. They represent the diversity and depth of human experience, serving as both divine representations and guides in our world. Also, the Yoruba lay a great deal of stress on God, Man, and the Cosmos' interconnectedness and interdependence with one another in their conception of their interactions. As a microcosm of the cosmos, man is

¹Smith, Oluwakemi. "Ethnic Diversity and Conflict in Nigeria: A Comparative Study of the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo Ethnic Groups." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 48, no. 6, 2017, pp. 571–587.

²Idowu, E. Bolaji. *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman, 1962. P. 61

intimately connected to both the divine and cosmic forces. The foundation of ethical behavior and communal life is this connection, which promotes a sense of responsibility for both the environment and other people.³ Essential elements of the dynamic equilibrium that the Yoruba belief system embodies are harmony and balance. This harmony is reflected in the concept of Ori, which represents a person's inner consciousness and destiny.

Furthermore, the intricate cosmology of the Yoruba people consists of both visible and invisible levels in their universe. *Orun*, the spiritual realm, is home to heavenly creatures and ancestor spirits, whereas *Aye*, the visible realm, is the material world as perceived by the senses. The seamless connection between diverse worlds is the basis of Yoruba ceremonies, rites, and divination practices, which are meant to maintain equilibrium and seek guidance from supernatural entities. In addition, the Yoruba cosmogony tells the story of creation and the continual cycle of existence. Its discussion of legendary tales, divine interventions, and the never-ending dance between order and chaos mirrors the cyclical pattern of existence itself.

Yoruba philosophy is based on the communal fabric of society and emphasizes reciprocity, interconnectedness, and the maintenance of cosmic equilibrium. This relationship incorporates aspects of the natural world, animals, plants, and spirituality in addition to the human sphere, which promotes a holistic perspective on life. Through the relationships between God, Man, and the Cosmos, Yoruba theology displays a fundamental connectivity that transcends boundaries and embodies a holistic understanding of existence. A deep respect for the interconnection of all elements of creation is promoted by this philosophical worldview, which masterfully weaves together the sacred, the personal, and the cosmic.

The purpose of this paper is to critically explain African conceptions of God, man and cosmos with the aim of bringing out their relationships. The scope of the subject will need a critical, philosophical, and minimally biased/subjective approach to the task. Analysis of God, man and his characteristics as a rational animal shall follow. The list proceeds to explain the cosmos as an entity. A critical look at the connections among the previously listed would then be done and conclusion would be drawn.

A Discourse on African philosophy

Generally speaking, philosophy studies anything that comes under its umbrella. It harvests human conjecture while accepting critical explanation and reality-investigation. African philosophy, according to Pantaleon Iroegbu in his book "Enwisdomaton and Africa philosophy," is the thoughtful investigation into the issues and challenges that face people in the African continent with the goal of developing methodical justifications and enduring solutions.⁴ It's a multifaceted research that has philosophical and African components. African in that it provides answers to queries about God, spirits, the afterlife, humanity, neighbors, and other dimensions of existence and supernatural entities.

The debate on African philosophy is a complex one that has been ongoing for decades, with scholars, philosophers, and thinkers like Kwasi Wiredu, Ogunmodede and Oladipo engaging in discussions about the nature, scope, and validity of African philosophical thought. This debate centers on the question of definition of African Philosophy, some Philosophers argue that African philosophy should be understood in terms of its distinct cultural and historical contexts, while others advocate for a more universal definition that encompasses philosophical inquiry conducted by Africans or about Africa, regardless of the cultural background of the philosopher. There is also the problem of universalism and particularism, those who argue for the universality

³Falola, Toyin, and Matthew M. Heaton. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press, 2008. P.116

⁴Pantaleon Iroegbu. *Enwisdomization and African philosophy*. Owerri: Int. University Press, 1994. p. 132

of philosophical concepts and methods and those who emphasize the particularity of African philosophical traditions. The issue of relevance and application is another debate in African Philosophy. Advocates of African philosophy often highlight its relevance to contemporary issues facing African societies, such as development, governance, and identity politics. They argue that African philosophy can provide insights and solutions that are grounded in African cultural and social realities. However, critics sometimes question the practical utility of African philosophy outside of academic circles or its ability to address global philosophical concerns. Overall, the debate on African philosophy is ongoing, characterized by diverse perspectives and approaches. While there are disagreements about its definition, scope, and relevance, there is however a growing recognition of the richness and diversity of African philosophical thought and its potential contributions to global philosophical discourse.

The Yoruba race

The Yoruba people are not limited to Nigeria; they are also found in Dahomey, Senegal, Jamaica, Brazil, and several other countries of Africa. The old Benin kingdom's land fell under the fierce force of Britain in 1893. On the French frontier, it is located in the west, south of the Jebba and south of the Okpara River. They speak a language related to the Sudanic language family called Yoruba. They have great regard for marriage and the idea of celibacy is seldom discussed among them since polygamy is a well-established culture with many implications.⁵ Farming is their primary occupation and one method Yorubas show off their prosperity is by the collection of property, which includes spouses, land, animals, and other items.⁶ The chief magistrate, known as the "Baale," is the only alternative to the monarchical (king) style of administration that is now in place in Yoruba nation. Also, they hold that since God is too great for humans to approach directly, he must be approached through intermediaries, or divinities.

GOD

The African understanding of God is that He is inquisitive.⁷ And according to Africans and Yorubas in particular, these qualities—omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence—comprise His divine attributes.⁸ God is adored in all religions and cultures because he is the pinnacle of absolute divinity and is beyond human comprehension. God is frequently seen as the origin of creation, wisdom, and cosmic order. He is also thought to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Worldview depicts a variety of things, ranging from a single all-powerful being to gods with many facets.⁹ This divine presence gives rise to ideas of love, justice, mercy, and guidance that provide consolation, direction, and moral guidance. The image of God differs.

The concept Omniscience – All Knowing (*Ologbon/Oloyejulo*), means "Only God is wise - *Olorun nikan logbon*,"¹⁰ as Yoruba people say. Being a sage is the highest title that can be bestowed upon someone. Someone who is regarded as wise belongs to a unique class. It is said that God is the source of all wisdom, knowledge, and comprehension. Because man is finite, his intelligence is restricted. "What do you do in concealment that God's eyes do not reach?" Yoruba do ask. God is called "*Oba to ri bi toju o to, abe ti lu kara bi ajere*," meaning "He who sees both the inside and outside of man" (the discerner of hearts). Omnipresence '*Oba to wa nibi gbogbo*' is

⁵Smith, Oluwakemi. "Ethnic Diversity and Conflict in Nigeria: A Comparative Study of the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo Ethnic Groups." *Ibid.* pp. 571–587.

⁶*ibid*

⁷Ngozi, Adebayo. "Exploring African Spiritual Paradigms: Insights into the Divine Inquiry" in *Journal of African Philosophy*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2023. pp. 123-140

⁸Idowu, Bolaji. *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief*. *Ibid.* p. 38

⁹Mbiti, John S. *Concept of God in African*. London: S.P.C.K, 1970. p. 90

¹⁰Idowu, Bolaji, *Ibid.* p.41

the proof that God is "contemporary of everything." Supernaturally strong individuals do occupy two places. Since He created everything and by virtue of His supremacy, He is present everywhere and at all times, He does not require invitations or bilocation to be present. The aforementioned evidence demonstrates that the Yoruba call God "*Oba lailai*". Omnipotence – All Powerful, '*Alagbara nla/Algbara julo*' is the fact that Heaven and earth hold the greatest power for the Almighty God. For all intents and purposes, Olodumare's perpetual existence has been accepted as true without inquiry by the Yoruba. God chose the path for man when He created him. His earthly ministers are those divinities more powerful than man.¹¹ Africans generally perceive God's power in natural phenomena; for example, thunder is said to be the resounding voice of God.¹² People believe that it is "easy to do as that which God performs; difficult to do as that which God enables not" because things are achievable when they follow His orders.

God is equally praised by the Ngombe as "the all-power and first judge."¹³ Additionally, the most warlike Zulu nation in South-Africa, conceive of God as the 'Irresistible'. The Abaluyla look at the omnipotence of God in a different text, they believe that God has the power to alter the natural laws which He has established.¹⁴ They therefore pray Him to let natural phenomena continue normally – just in case He should change them. The Ashanti take God as 'the powerful and source of power'. In terms of time, the future was almost nonexistent in the African conception of time, which placed more emphasis on the past and present than on the future.¹⁵

There isn't a single tale for the future; all of our myths are for the past. Individuals believe that God exists somewhere beyond the past, thus their lives are rooted in it. Consequently, the Akans honor the One who never fades. The Yoruba, just as it appears in Judeo – Christian thought refer to him as "*Arugbo ojo*," meaning "ancient of days." God is shown in all of the above as transcendent, above temporal comparison, and is put as far as possible. In terms of space, distance and outreach, it is reasonably simple to establish parallels between space and other tangible comparisons. Africans express their understanding of God primarily through language. In fact, it appears as though the sky is calling men to look up at it, offering them an endless display of distance and space. The Gikyu are so convinced that the heavenly bodies and occurrences are God's manifestations that it is banned for anyone to look up at the sky during a thunderstorm, even though the Yoruba referred to Him as "Oba Airi—the invisible king." For some people, God's transcendence is synonymous with devotion and exaltation—He is deserving of honor. In terms of human explanation, it is infinite for some people, and infinite for others.

The External Attributes of God

The Yoruba say, "He is unmade; no one is made up of Him, and no one is beyond Him." There is nothing beyond Him because He is the embodiment of everything that existed in the Old Testament. To support this view, The Gikuyu hold the following beliefs: God is alone, He is neither a child nor an old man, and He will remain the same for all eternity. God has no father, mother, wife, or children.¹⁶

¹¹*Ibid*, p.44

¹²Fatima Nkrumah, "Divine Echoes: Exploring the Symbolism of Thunder in Religious Thought". 2022. Journal of Comparative Religion, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 213-230

¹³Kwame Osei, "Exploring the Divine Attributes: Reflections on the All-Powerful and First Judge". 2023. Theological Review, Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 45-62

¹⁴Nomusa Khumalo, "Exploring Cultural Perspectives on the Divine: Conceptions of God Among the Zulu Nation and the Abaluyla People". 2021, African Studies Journal, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 78-94

¹⁵Kwesi Amoah, "Exploring African Cosmologies: The Ashanti Concept of God and Temporal Perspectives". 2022. African Studies Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 112-129

¹⁶Wanjiku Njeri, "Exploring Gikuyu Cosmology: Beliefs and Conceptions of the Divine", 2023. African Cultural Studies Journal, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 45-62

God as the first and last cause is the notion that specifically portrays God as the first being, the source of all things, and the ultimate power and authority over all.¹⁷ For this reason, He is called by the Yoruba "*Ibere ati Opin, ohun gbogbo, Oba lana, Oba loni, Oba titi aye anipekun, Eleda, Oba to wa kaye to wa, ti o si tun wa nigba taye o ba si mo.*" God is already regarded as the initial cause in these descriptive names, even if He is not the reason. The spiritual attribute of God can be understood through this poem among the Yoruba.

Oni Olorun ni
Ola Olorun na ni
To lo le yaworan Olorun
Se boun lo ro ta n so jade lenu
Oba tin be ti o si tun ma be
Olorun to to fun-un¹⁸

Since God is spirit and invisible, He is represented by images like stone, water, iron etc. Ageless God without termination, He endures from everlasting to everlasting. The Yoruba also call Him the Mighty Immovable Rock that never dies. As in a popular song – they sing” One never hears of the death of God. The following are the moral attributes of God as seen and experienced by the Yoruba through history, piety, mercy, kindness, love, comfort, faithfulness, goodness, anger, will, justice, righteousness and holiness.

Man

According to myths, the original state of man was that of happiness, childlike ignorance, and immortality. It is nearly impossible to give a definition of man that will be satisfactory to all schools of thought in African philosophy.¹⁹ Man is a social being; among the Yoruba of Nigeria, a man cannot live independence of others "*Igi kan o le da gbo se*". This above in the communal living of man, it also prove that man is a socio-rational being. Man relate horizontally with man and vertically with God; the spirits, the departed ones and ancestors. Man realizes his destiny in the community.²⁰

The culture of the Yoruba is built on their ancestral father-Oduduwa, and it is impossible to build a culture without a base, and this base is the rationality of the Yoruba, which also embraces their logic. The Yoruba have a coined name for man, which is '*eniyan*' that is "*eni ti a yan*" 'One that is chosen'. The general African doctrine of man does not admit the dualism which is the characteristic of western – Greece Roman culture. Man is not split into two conflicting principles, the body and the soul. But African Anthropology conceives man as one unit.²¹ Some African anthropology including the Yoruba, identify four principles in each man; the soul, the destiny soul, the ancestral spirit, Human being- himself (*eniyan*) 'real person'.²² Soul, 'Emi' is conceived as a vivifying principle, a life force which links man is a serious relationship with the other life-forces in the universe. Destiny soul, '*ayanmo emi*' is believed that it incarnates man and links man with his family, clean and other human society. The Ancestral Sprit – '*emi awon baba nla*' is believed that it incarnates and links man with his family, clan and other human society. The Yoruba people also hold the belief that humans possess numerous souls, as listed by Emefie Metuh.²³ First, there is the breath-related "Emi." It is found in the man's vital force, or life

¹⁷*Ibid*

¹⁸*This is commonly said by the elders during the moon tale*

¹⁹Panteleon Iroegbu. *Enwisdomization and African philosophy*. *Ibid*

²⁰Emefie Ikenga Metuh. *God and Man in African Religion*. London: Geoffrey Chapman bk. Pub, 1981. p. 77

²¹Fadipe N. A. *Sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan: University Press, 1970. p. 102

²²*Ibid*

²³Emefie Ikenga Metuh. *God and Man in African Religion*. *Ibid*. p. 89

essence, as well as in the lungs and chest. When "Emi" exits the body, the man dies. Moreover, it might exit the body as you sleep and get caught or consumed by witches. Witches are able to assault people with their own "emi."

Then there is the 'Iponri' or personal destiny.²⁴ This is associated with the head-'ori', and conceived of as a spirit – double. One part is in heaven and acts as a guardian spirit, the other is a person's head and represents his destiny. The spirit guarding in heaven chooses a person's 'Ori' or destiny before he is born, kneeling before Olodumare the Creator who thereupon fixed it on the head. Thereafter the 'Iponri' in heaven helps a person to realize his destiny on earth. 'Iponri' also called the '*Eleda*', represents the partial rebirth or reincarnation of an ancestor, so it is sometimes called the person's guardian ancestor. Also, associated with the man is 'Ojiji'- shadow, which follows him about but has no function.

Man and nature are inseparable; in fact, they are closely linked. There is the existence-centered context of the cosmos. In nature, man fulfills his destiny (ayanmo), but with the previously mentioned supernatural extension. About Man and Immortality, the Yoruba people have the belief that human spirit is eternal. He'll make it through bodily death one way or another. He will nevertheless retain his identity as a person in it, partially as a disembodied spirit and fully as an incarnated person.

According to Oladipo in his paper, '*the Yoruba Conception of a Person*', emi of a person can be seen to be similar in certain respects to Okra of the Akans. They are both for instance regarded as the undying part of man which is given directly by the creator before man is born into the world. Also, emi of Yorubas like Okra of Akan he claimed can advise a person on what to do and what not to do.²⁵ However, they are not the same, for instance the Akan according to Gyekye regarded Okra as transmitter of the individual destiny. But the Yoruba see it in another way, Ori according to him is the embodiment of individual's destiny, the individuality element which is claimed to be responsible for a person's personality.²⁶ And in the words of Segun Gbadegesin, Ori called inner head is the bearer of a person's destiny as well as determinant of personality. This view of Gbadegesin is questionable as only Ori cannot be regarded as determinant of man's personality. Furthermore, Barry Hallen and Sodipo²⁷ opined that, a person in Yoruba Philosophy is composed of three essential components: the body (Ara); the life-giving element (Emi); and the spiritual head (Ori), which determines one's fate. The tripartite conception of a man is the term used to describe this viewpoint. The term "body," or ara, refers to all of the physical components, such as the brain, intestine, liver, and so forth, that together form an individual. According to popular belief, emi is the immaterial component that supplies the energy needed for a person to be considered conscious or alive.

Also, Bolaji Idowu concurs with this submission when he also opines that "Emi" is the life giving force of man. Its presence or absence he says in man makes the difference between life and death.²⁸ The Yoruba belief is that Emi lives on even after departing from the body and the original body that serves as house for the Emi that lives on can be seen in other places by people who don't know that, Emi has departed his or her original house.

²⁴Olufemi Adeoye, "Exploring Yoruba Concept of Destiny: The Notion of 'Iponri'" African Cultural Perspectives, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 78-92

²⁵Oladipo O. "The Yoruba Conception of a Person. An Analytico-Philosophical Study" in *International Studies in Philosophy*, (USA, Vol 24, 1992) p.19

²⁶Gbadegesin, S. "An outline of a Theory of Destiny", *Ibid*

²⁷Hallen, Barry, and Sodipo, J.O, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*, (Stanford. Stanford University Press, 1997) p.40

²⁸Bolaji Idowu, *God in Yoruba Belief*, (Longmans, 1962)

O tun fun la'ya
Lati ma bi si ati lati ma re si
O da aye ninu ominira Re
O si bunkum fun

In contrast, man believes that God is the source of his being and that God is in charge of him. People's names, such as "Olaolu" (God's wealth), "Oluwadamilola" (The Lord blesses me), and "Temitope" (My quantity of thankfulness), graphically illustrate this type of relationship. The concept of reincarnation and the immortality of the soul originated from the idea that man will return to God after death, either for reward or punishment.³³

Relations between God and Cosmos

The cosmos is viewed as having been created and arranged by God, and the other bodies in it are considered to be His ministry. When He commands, they comply. Nonetheless, different African societies have different ideas. For example, an earthquake is the rapid collapse or breaking of the epicenter; it does not happen in the Yoruba's sphere of influence, therefore they are largely unaffected by it. The Bambiti believe that God is out for a stroll. The importance that rain plays in African conceptions and lives is also readily apparent to all. A few examples of these people are the "olokun worshipers" and "yemoja worshipers." They believe that the provision of water in all its forms is a result of God's action, and they make numerous invocations, sacrifices, and offerings to ask for God's guidance during difficult times. A proverb also states that God has authority over water. "Oba Onibu Ore eni buburu ati rere tin rojo sori eni" Africans believe that the sun, moon, stars, and other manifestations of the universe serve as a bridge between them and God because they perceive God to be too majestic for humans to approach directly. In summary, God is the one who creates, corrects, and governs the universe.

Relations between God, Man and Cosmos

As observed previously, the initial type of connection among them is the creator-creature relationship. The universe and man were both created by God, it is widely acknowledged, and both species strive toward their creator in order to find happiness. A different sort holds that, among the Yoruba in particular, God's existence is essential while man's is contingent; in other words, all living things rely on God to survive and continue to exist. Subject relationships are another kind of relationship. People view God as their minister and the cosmos as their subject. It should be mentioned that, for example, the temperature has a direct bearing on man's life and provides him with a means of conceiving, loving, and worshiping God. Man uses his surroundings to fulfill the desires of His creator. It is imperative to understand that, aside from God, Africans often believe that others depend on one another.

Conclusion

This rigorous study has shown that Africans do, in fact, have a conception of God. They have an abstract idea of God, nevertheless, and Christian theology shows that God is more immanent than transcendent. "And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."³⁴ The Yoruba theory of the immortal soul of man, which emanates from God's breath, contradicts the transcendence of God, further undermining their claim that God is wholly transcendental. Because God is the source of man's soul, which is always with his soul, God is present in and with man. These individuals also hold reincarnation to be true. If this isn't the case, then why, instead of seeing their current life as a continuation of their previous lifetimes, do the so-called reborn people appear as infants and have to start their battle over? They have not been able to respond

³³Emefie Ikenga Metuh. *God and Man in African Religion*. *Ibid*, p. ⁹⁰

³⁴See the Holy book of the Christian, John chapter 1:14

appropriately, which suggests that the reincarnation notion is not well defined. This group of people has a commendable understanding of God, but based on the paper's content, it appears that they employed a dogmatic group of people who are still deeply committed to August Comte's logical positivist understanding of the theological stage of human society. Instead of employing science to provide an explanation for a confusing universe, they quickly bury the truth by creating gods and spirits. Even yet, I still realize that they have an awareness of the world around them, even though their methods and approaches seem archaic and nonscientific in the perspective of modern philosophy. Furthermore, the numerous theories and beliefs of this tribe reduced man to nothing more than a "robot" that is incapable of accomplishing anything on its own and is dependent on a rational creature—in this case, "God"—to survive. Speaking a language unique to the Sudan, this tribe becomes its handmaids since they are unable to comprehend the content of their surroundings and instead choose to exploit it. Additionally, they contend that even though God created humans, He can only be contacted by deities. Why, I wonder, does God alone have the right to talk with man directly? In contrast to the individualistic culture of the West, they continue to be a one nation that cherishes community over individuals and lives in brotherhood, in spite of all the criticism discussed above.

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