

## EXISTENTIAL REVERSALS AND YORUBA PHILOSOPHY

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### INTRODUCTION

The essential themes of existentialism as a philosophy of declaration in human existence made famous and inherited from its classical heritage in the West are clear. The affirmation of the subjective or the individual as the starting point of any meaningful and useful philosophy; the rejection of outlandish speculative or transcendental metaphysics; the insistence that there are no *a priori* values for man to choose from and consequently that he must in freedom invent his own values, the affirmation that existence precedes essence, the nature and significance of choice, the pride of place given to revolt in the face of an absurd and meaningless life that leads particularly nowhere after an inevitable death and the celebration of suicide as the only serious problem in philosophy. These fundamental conclusions are robustly treated by both theistic and atheistic existentialist philosophers such that we can safely say that they represent the existential philosophical heritage from the West.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the fact that the corpus of existential thoughts and positions in Yoruba philosophy is essentially theistic, it also represents, particularly when viewed critically, a classical case of reversals of those same existential themes generally presented in Western Philosophy. This paper highlights and discusses these *reversals* as a concrete reflection of the Yoruba understanding of their own reality and their corresponding attitude to that reality regardless of certain seemingly epistemological flaws and its overdependence on speculative transcendental metaphysics. The paper discusses very briefly select themes in Existentialism as found in the Western philosophical tradition. These same themes are discussed as they manifest in Yoruba philosophy while carefully noting inherent flaws and inadequacy as an authentic, liberating philosophy of human existence, a scourge which existential philosophies of the West have considerably surmounted by remaining universal in their approach, concern and appeal.

### FUNDAMENTALS IN EXISTENTIALISM

Chroniclers of the evolution and development of history of Western philosophy generally refer to Søren Kierkegaard as the father of Existentialism and as such the first existential philosopher. He was the first to so explicitly make existential questions concerning issues of life and concrete living the primary focus of his philosophy. Be that as it may, and without a hint at understating the significance of this claim, Existentialism as a philosophy of human existence actually pre-dated Kierkegaard. As a manner of doing philosophy and a way of addressing issues that matter in people's lives, Existentialism is as old as philosophy itself. Socrates most certainly would qualify to be listed as a precursor of

existential philosophy and its emphasis. His avowed irritation, on the one hand, with abstract metaphysical ponderings rather than the practical questions of how man ought to live and what the good life for man might be, and his deliberate efforts on the other hand at clearing away all false preconceptions of outmoded morality in Greece represent distinct characteristic postures of later existential philosophers. More significantly too, the Socratic dictum, 'Know thyself' and the declaration that an 'unexamined life is not worth living' are nothing less than shouts of existential revolution projecting the vital emphasis on subjectivity and the structural significance of critical disposition to issues of ethics.

Indeed the entire philosophy of Socrates as mirrored by Plato adds up in its several themes to a treatise in existential philosophy. As Kierkegaard himself affirms of Socrates in his 1841 MA thesis, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*,

If irony is a qualification of subjectivity, it must exhibit itself the first time subjectivity makes its appearance in world history. Irony is, namely, the first and most abstract qualification of subjectivity. This points to the historical turning point where subjectivity made its appearance for the first time and with this we come to Socrates.<sup>2</sup>

Subjectivity is undoubtedly rootless unless it is buried deep in human or individual freedom. Socrates' morality most distinctively encompassed and emphasized both. Indeed, his contribution to the development of morality is consciously packaged to reject the authority of all previous moral norms, including the metaphysical, and challenges man to be aware of his fundamental freedom. The pretended objective authority of these norms is thus superseded by their subjective acceptance by the individual. Socrates points to the future when Jean-Paul Sartre later speaks of man's anguish as he confronts his freedom and the realization that he must choose his own values. Objectivity in the parlance of existentialist philosophers on the issue of morality certainly loses its foothold. And as Taylor explains, given this scenario,

the individual no longer takes morality seriously. He cannot take conventional morality seriously because he has exploded his claims to objectivity. But he cannot take his self-adopted morality seriously either because he looks on it as a task which he has arbitrarily set himself, something perhaps like a hobby which one has just chosen to take up.<sup>3</sup>

Philosophers after Socrates will ask the same moral questions wishing for man to know which direction to take and how he ought to live. The Stoics, Epicureans, and Cynics were all bothered about issues of human existence while distancing themselves from abstract metaphysics. Indeed, by the time we arrived at Kierkegaard, there existed a palpable discontent with traditional philosophy as it was practiced and paraded. A

revolution dragging in its wake robust iconoclastic tendencies which led to the rejection of several systems of ideas and philosophies as being essentially too antiseptic, academic and veritably remote from concrete human existence.

Existentialism as a philosophy likewise adopted the face of a revolution both in content, method and style: A protest philosophy and the most radical form of the courage to be as oneself. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, beyond pronouncing the death of God, had in fact in his description of European nihilism presented the picture of a world in which human existence has fallen into utter meaninglessness. With philosophers like Blaise Pascal, the insistence was also on how to decipher for man the way of dealing with the apparent meaninglessness of life which confronts him. The individual organic flesh and blood agent must evolve radically from a biological being and become an existential individual by accepting full responsibility for his actions. He must by an act of deliberate conscious choice reject the luxury and comfort of subsuming himself within the dictates of the faceless crowd or the herd, a preference which Jean Paul Sartre would later call bad faith typifying the inauthentic escapist existence of Kierkegaard.

And of course, the emphasis of Greek philosophy was not on any abstract set of theoretical metaphysical truths. On the contrary, early philosophers were concerned with the proper way to live one's life. Early Greek Philosophy was formative both in character and tone. As Thomas Flynn noted, 'The philosopher was a kind of doctor of the soul, prescribing the proper attitudes and practices to foster health and happiness.'<sup>4</sup> Socrates most appropriately lived the part just like the Stoics and died underscoring the predominant perception of philosophy as the care of self. More significantly, his death in fact became a vivid example of Kierkegaard's 'truth as subjectivity' since through it, Socrates moved beyond the limit of the rational in order to live his concrete life to the fullest and demonstrate his firm faith in immortality.

This point established, it will however not be until the first decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century following the end of Second World War that Existentialism as a philosophy of self care, outstanding courage and emancipation will receive world recognition as well as fame. This marks a clean departure as well as a resolute dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy which was until then abstract, remote and disinterestedly academic. As a philosophy with certain common interests, common ancestry and common presuppositions, I will in the next section highlight and briefly discuss in particular some of these common themes against which I shall examine similar existential submissions in Yoruba philosophy. I shall limit myself to human freedom, the submission that existence precedes essence, the nature of ethics and the contingency of human life. They will not be treated or listed as sub-themes but rather presented as a continuous stream of ideas since indeed they are all so connected to warrant being viewed as intricately seamless.

## **COMMON EXISTENTIAL THEMES FROM THE WEST**

One detail which unites all existentialist philosophers and one on which they all unflinchingly remained unbowed is their interest in human freedom. With the absence of determinism, or any set of *a priori* values to adopt and comply with

Man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith that he is without excuse... Neither behind (him) nor before (him) (is any) luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse.<sup>5</sup>

Man is free. He is freedom and he is condemned to be free. He must constantly invent himself by choosing for himself. And hence the commitment and passion of every existentialist philosopher to show people that they are free,

to open their eyes to something which has always been true, but which for one reason or another may not always have been recognized, namely that men are free to choose, not only what to do on a specific occasion but what to value and how to live. (Beyond the nature of freedom) we are being asked to experience freedom and to practice it.<sup>6</sup>

This radical challenge to live in the full awareness and acceptance of total freedom Mary Warnock identifies still as a common thread running through the fabric of existential philosophy. It is, according to her, the desire of existentialist philosophers to

convert their readers, to get them to accept that up to now they have been deluded, but can now see things in a new light. This is the missionary spirit of Existentialist which will appear in many guises, but whose tone is unmistakable.<sup>7</sup>

Ontologically, the curse of human freedom and by extension its burden are intricately tied to the idea of man as a castaway thrown into the world. Man exists first and encounters himself as an existent who must now define himself. He is nothing *ab initio* and he will be nothing until much later when he defines and chooses for himself what he wishes to be. As Sartre explains, man simply is. This is the root of existential subjectivity. Man is conceived as

a project which possesses a subjective life instead of being a kind of moss ... Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purports to be.<sup>8</sup>

It is this subjectivity which affirms all other subjectivities as concrete reality. For by affirming our existence as individuals we affirm also the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself most assertively in the Cartesian cogito. For according to Sartre still, our incontrovertible truth as human beings rests on our awareness and conscious ability to name ourselves as first existing. As he explains,

before there can be any truth *whatever*, when, there must be an absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond this, we equally affirm the existence of others. Our affirmation that we exist is one that receives its endorsement only through the affirmation and existence of the other. Thus in naming myself in the cogito, I discover all the others and discover them as also instantiated in the cogito. There is, suddenly a dull realization that I cannot be anything at all unless others recognize me as such. I cannot obtain any truth or obtain any authentication about myself except through the mediation of another. It follows that intersubjectivity is the essential character that defines human universe and by extension underscores its truth. The emphasis of the truth being proposed is that there is indeed no other universe except the human universe; the universe of human subjectivity.

Regarding existential ethics, it is this same truth of intersubjectivity which serves as its platform since in choosing for myself I also choose for all others. I chose for the world and mankind. Here too is the birthplace of anguish as man experiences a sense of complete inescapable and profound responsibility. To refuse to embrace this responsibility is to live inauthentically, deliberately shunning the prospect of choosing less as we choose for others we scandalize mankind. Whenever we choose not to choose, we are living a lie. The challenge of authentic existence or good faith as opposed to bad faith therefore is to continuously own up to our self-defining choices, to make them our own and consequently become authentic selves by truly acknowledging what we are and mirror consequently a universal ethical orientation.

Without any exception, existential philosophers acknowledge the brittleness as well as the contingency of human life. The entire fabric of existence itself and what we describe as human life is contingent. Everywhere individuals appear face to face with arbitrariness and the realization that any established connection between things may break down at any minute with utter indifference. Order thus becomes a deceptive mask that the universe, especially the social universe, wears. Man literally sags as his feet wobbles with the dull realization that he is powerless before an unyielding, opaque universe. He lacks the rational scheme by which he could master it and by some rude extension, his life is ultimately insignificant. If there is any hope at all, it is the rude awakening that there is in fact no hope.

Of all existentialist philosophers, it is Albert Camus that best drives the point home lucidly in his consideration of the theme of absurdity. He represents the classic definition of absurdity in its clearest, simplest terms. Absurdity, for Camus, is essentially the divorce of meaningful human thought from the here and now reality. The first awareness of absurdity is that which is also enunciated by Sartre and Nietzsche, namely, that whatever meaning our world may harbour is created by individuals either alone or in social relations. For Camus, this is anguish. Everything we had attributed to the world we now see as *de facto* springing from ourselves. The world of itself has no reason except that which we impose which in itself is limited, arbitrary and *a posteriori*. According to Gene Blocker,

human beings are purposeful creatures, doing one thing for the sake of another and hence acting always, or usually for a reason. So, we tend to transfer this way of thinking to the world itself, first interpreting objects in terms of their use to us and then, more generally in looking for reasonable patterns of behaviour on the part of the external world.<sup>10</sup>

We assume that the world cares and we long for meaning and purpose. What confronts us however is dead silence and an empty sky. We suddenly see the world as strange, alien, inhuman and insensitive. The world thus perceived lacks empathy. Stripped of its idealized garb, its dense materiality and finiteness, the heavy side of absurdity looms large.

We had thought naively that the world was familiar since our thinking and conceptual ascriptions confer such intimacy. We believe that we know the world and that knowing what exactly it is, we are secured in it and our satisfaction is thus guaranteed. As humans, this is what we need and what we normally get and it is exactly this which the experience of absurdity brutally terminates.

Certainly, our thought is divorced from reality. The problem always is how to bridge the gap and thus see existing realities in terms of our conceptual essences. According to Camus, we never will and hence, absurdity,

that peculiar privative relation between the human desire to understand and the refusal of the world to accommodate us; man's desire for meaning and the world's lack of it. (Thus) absurdity is a property of neither man nor the world alone but of their confrontation.<sup>11</sup>

Within this eternal impasse (that of finding a bridgeable alternative that confers meaning on our enterprise as human beings in the world), we are confronted with two possibilities. We can either rise above our fate by a deliberate choice of revolt while accepting in totality our mortal finite limit or be resigned to it.

It is the extension of this thinking that underscores the fact of life's contingency. First, that man's situation can be otherwise and that there is nothing necessary about it at any given moment and second that it is essentially brittle. This is a position that is generally held by all existentialist philosophers, with varying panacea on how to redeem what is generally accepted as the hopelessness of human existence marked by mortal temporality. Martin Heidegger for example canvasses for Dasein's openness to Being and attentiveness to the call or the dimension of the holy. Gabriel Marcel calls not for a revolt against God but an appreciation of our existence as a gift needing a loving response or what he terms 'creative fidelity'. Nonetheless the existential human condition persists as illustrated by Saul Bellow:

but what is the philosophy of this generation? Not God is dead, that point was passed long ago. Perhaps it should be stated Death is God. This generation thinks – and this

is its thought of thoughts—that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power. Death waits for these things as a cement floor waits for a dropping light bulb. The brittle shell of glass loses its tiny vacuum with a burst and that is that.<sup>12</sup>

With death, in the end, everything shatters completing the circle of absurdity, the fickleness and meaninglessness of human existence.

## **YORUBA EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY**

The Yoruba live essentially in a theocentric world and as such, the world views, thoughts and ideas that define their attitudes and responses particularly to issues of human existence are saturated by transcendental metaphysical considerations. Theocentricity here bears no relevance to the specific types of religion as indeed the idea of monotheism is, to put it lightly, a late arrival among many African communities.

Traditional African communities were essentially polytheistic with several gods interacting with the people and showing much interest in their affairs particularly those concerning morality, modes of interpersonal relationships, governance and authority. The prevalence of cults of ancestors (the living dead) and divinities only help in underscoring the prevalence of a religious traditional African milieu long before the advent of orthodox monotheistic religions. It is of course interesting to note that the one God of the orthodox religions was indeed part of the pack of the many gods. The emergence of God as the Supreme Being, from whom all other gods derive, is it would seem a later influence.

Nonetheless, when Professor John Mbiti concludes that the African man lives in a religious universe, the submission stays incontestable and incontrovertible. As he notes,

for African peoples, (theirs) is a religious universe. Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon. It is filled with religious significance .... God is seen in and behind (all) objects and phenomena: they are His creation, they manifest him, they symbolize His being and presence.<sup>13</sup>

For the same reason, namely, that of an unmistakable religious universe from which all and every other thing derives and crafted with meaning, Mbiti submits that there are therefore no African atheist.<sup>14</sup> According to him,

The minimal and fundamental idea about God is found in all African societies...everybody knows of God's existence almost by instinct and even children know Him.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, Professor Moses Makinde argues that

Since the Africans live in a religious universe, then all their activities must be influenced by one kind of religion or the other. From this it can be more specifically stated that an African system of morality based on African cultural belief must have a religious foundation.<sup>16</sup>

By the same logic similar deductions can be made generally about African existential philosophies. Indeed, the emphasis by Makinde to ‘all their activities’ include both the mental and the physical. Thus, in thinking and in action, the choices that the Yoruba make in ordering their lives and the reasons that they give for these choices are laced with religious metaphysical assumptions. Let us briefly examine Yoruba existential philosophy and consider what it offers regarding human freedom, the claim that essence precedes existence, issues of ethics and the nature of life itself.

### **EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN YORUBA PHILOSOPHY**

In general terms, what constitutes the theoretical framework for the entire fabric of Yoruba philosophy is oral tradition as contained specifically in the Odu-Ifa from which most of the myths that inform the peoples beliefs, their presuppositions, social attitudes and practices derive. The Odu-Ifa is a literary corpus that is most extensive in the range of subjects that it covers the contents of which are only decipherable by the Ifa practitioner, the babalawo.<sup>17</sup> The skills are taught and the knowledge is usually passed down from generation to generation.

The contents of the Odu are in the form of verses. These verses are often in the form of myths and the language is usually of such depth and obscurity that comprehension is sometimes difficult particularly for the untrained and uninitiated generally referred to as ‘ogberi’. The myths themselves narrate a sacred history by relating events which took place in primordial time. They are generally impervious to the niceties and sophisticated technicalities of the rules of formal logic and those of science. Because these myths have the benefit of age and for the fact that they remain fixed in form, undiluted, undistorted and unaffected by modernity, they are regarded as bundle of truths. While no one bothers to ask for definite authorship, tradition defers to Orunmila, a divinity whose essence is intelligence as the repository of knowledge. It is from this bundle of myths that Yoruba philosophy derives.

### ***EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE***

The Yoruba believe that Olodumare or Eleda is the creator of everything both living and non-living. The myths of creation are vividly unanimous on this issue. Even though God makes use of lesser gods to mould and shape, he alone supplies the vital breath, in the case of humans and incorporates the soul (*emi*). Mbiti notes that

over the whole of Africa creation is the most widely acknowledge work of God. This concept is expressed through saying that God created all things, through giving Him the name Creator (or Moulder or Maker) and

through addressing him in prayer and invocations as the Creator.<sup>18</sup>

Specifically, when it was time to create man, according to Yoruba mythology, Olodumare mandated Obatala or Orisanla (god of creation) to mould man out of clay. This effigy is the physical body (*ara*). Olodumare then came along and created the soul (*emi*) which is non-physical. Professor Wande Abimbola equally submits that

After Orisanla had moulded human beings he passed the lifeless figures to Olodumare who by giving them *emi* gives them their souls and vital force. The human being so created moves on to the house of Ajala who gives them *ori* (inner head).<sup>19</sup>

Ori is man's essence; the substance containing the details of his existence on earth. It is a conscious choice that is made while kneeling hence the descriptive tag to the process as *akuleyan* (what was chosen kneeling down).<sup>20</sup>

That which once chosen is irrevocably unalterable and its content is not known to the subject. Only Ajala, the maker of *ori*, knows which *ori* or destiny is good and which is wretched. And it is only Orunmila, sometimes referred to as Eleri-Ipin (the witness to *ipin*), who is competent to reveal the type of *ayanmo* or *ipin* chosen by each person. To know one's destiny (or *ayanmo*), Orunmila has to be consulted through Ifa. For the Yoruba, in sum, essence precedes existence in total contrast to the submission made by Western existentialist philosophers that existence precedes essence.

Morakinyo reiterates that Yoruba existential philosophy on essence and existence

seems to be saying the opposite and stressing that every human being has some essence in him (before existing) and that this essence must be actualized. It is for the purpose of actualisation of this essence that we are existing at all.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, without essence there is no reason for be-coming. There is no reason to come into existence. To be sure and certain that this is actually the case among Yoruba, individuals who are restless and who would rather be confronted with details of their essences often do so by consulting Orunmila, the deity of Ifa. Through special ceremonies of divination, specific details of such essences have indeed been revealed.

### ***YORUBA ON ETHICS***

From the firm assertion that Africans live in a religious universe, we can deduce that the Yoruba universe is no different and that their system of morality is based and informed

by such religious foundation. Prof. Bolaji Idowu, a Yoruba Methodist minister, was in fact categorical:

Our own view is that morality is basically the fruit of religion and that, to begin with, it was dependent on it. Man's concept of the Deity has *everything* to do with what is taken to be the norm of morality. God made man and it is He who implants in him the sense of right and wrong.<sup>22</sup>

Man does not invent values. He enjoys no such luxury. On the contrary, they are crafted for him by God, Olodumare, and man unconditionally must abide by these dictates. In any case, he has already chosen his essence within which his scope for any other form of choice is simply stifled. In tandem, Bolaji comments further;

The real source and norm of the unrestricted, universally recognized and binding moral values in the religion of the Yoruba is Olodumare .... He is Oba Mimo, Oba Pipe – “Pure King”, Perfect King”, He is Alalafunfun Oke – “The One” clothed in white who dwells above ...<sup>23</sup>

To ensure still that man acts right by following the dictates of the supreme lawgiver, while being moulded, he was fitted with Ifa aya – ‘the oracle of the heart’. It is this oracle of the heart that guides man and determines his ethical life. One is a good or a bad person in accordance with how he responds to or disobeys the guidance of his inner oracle. This oracle of the heart is a person's conscience – the law of God written in the heart.<sup>24</sup>

Man is thus powerless before these conscripting laws. He simply toes the line by responding to the promptings from primordial time. He is not free to debate or contemplate whatever may loosely be seen as options. The language of his conscience is always precise. Associated with this is the pervasive idea of taboo (*Eewo*), things forbidden which he must never do.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, the emphasis is on character (*iwa*). This, according to the Yoruba, is the very stuff which makes life a joy and blessing because good character is always pleasing to the maker of man, the giver of life, God. Character is everything and as it is commonly stated, it is “a sufficient armour against any untoward happening in life. Anyone who wears it need not fear anything.”<sup>25</sup> Components of good character include among others, chastity, hospitality, kindness and justice.

Yoruba have a strong belief in retribution, a reward system for acts that are good or and those that are bad. This belief is tied to the belief in destiny which is chosen and sealed in God's abode. It is affixed (i.e. *ayanmo*) once it is chosen (i.e. *akunleyan*). This is what a person goes into the world to fulfill. It is his essence. After death the individual must go back to God (Olodumare) to render account. As it is generally affirmed,

It is on account of After-life that we treat today hospitably, that we make good use of the present and not abuse it. The Yoruba aged look forward with longing or dread in anticipation of what may be awaiting them in the

new life where they are bound to fare according to their deserts.<sup>26</sup>

Other attending beliefs include partial reincarnation, cult of ancestors and transmigration of souls. The point that is being stressed here is that on matters of morality and ethics, man is not free. He does not choose his values but rather merely toes the line living according to the essence chosen before coming into the world and responding to the laws written on his heart from primordial time.

### ***CONTINGENCY OF LIFE***

For the Yoruba, life and living is a serious business because everything is tied to God (Olodumare) and by implication to religion. There is no ambiguity on this:

The real keynote of the life of the Yoruba is neither in their noble ancestry nor in the past deeds of their heroes. The keynote of their life is their religion. In all things they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity, their own part – is to do as they are ordered... Through all the circumstance of life, through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles, it is the Deity who is in control.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, there are no accidents. Conception for example is no accident. It has been perfected, first in the abode of the Deity. What we see therefore is mere manifestation of an already finished job. It is the Deity that makes a woman to be fertile and hence the deep worry and incessant prayers, sacrifices and consultations of the oracle to ease infertility and barrenness. Birth, puberty, marriage, even building a house, passing examinations and everything else that happens to man are all doings of the Deity.

Life is considered sacred since it is given to man by God and he only is free to take it at death and pass judgment. The myths of creation emphasise the point that there is nothing that is trivial and casual about the human life. Suicide is frowned upon and even when it is sometimes excused as an option to save face and avoid shame, there are sacrifices that must be offered to placate the gods. The notions of meaninglessness and absurdity are thus reconciled in the acts of the deity who does as he wills. If life is wretched, he makes it so, if life is good, pleasant and successful, it is equally his handiwork.

### **CONCLUSION**

The line that separates Western existential philosophy from Yoruba existential philosophy is bold and thus clear. The themes considered in this paper stand out as opposite views albeit with clear justifications particularly as both derive from tenable theoretical

frameworks that are ontologically and metaphysically warranted. While it is true that the corpus of Yoruba existential philosophy is in the main oral traditions made up of myths, philosophies, liturgies, songs and proverbs, this does not in any way diminish the cogency, authenticity and significance of their claims and submissions. Nor should noticeable contradictions and unscientific exuberances in the narrations delimit their value and seriousness. Oral traditions are

the only means of knowing anything at all of their  
theogony and cosmogony and what they think and  
believe about the relationship between heaven and earth<sup>29</sup>  
and indeed, the relationship between man and his fellow  
man.<sup>28</sup>

Yet as we charitably grant this particularity and celebrate nonetheless the purity, consistency and coherency of each of the thought systems, Yoruba existential philosophy seems rather limited and narrow in approach and appeal. It speaks only for the Yoruba. It is true that there are in fact noticeable convergence of ideas and thoughts when their submissions are placed side by side with some of the theistic existentialist philosophers of the West who equally have space and concerns for God, nevertheless its narrowness persists robbing it outrightly of any universal appeal.

The philosophy of Western existentialism on the other hand is essentially a universal broadcast to the whole human race detailing common concrete realities of the human condition without excuses or appeal to any outlandish metaphysics. It is essentially an address to man as man as he concretely confronts life and living. As long as Yoruba existential philosophy remains restricted, the seeming popular truth from existential philosophies of the West may thus continue to remain unrepresentative and alien. Yet something forces the view of universality of human condition and predicament such that when the argument of cultural particularity or immunity raises its head either to force the view of relativism, or even that of identity, there just might be a fair charge of bad faith, inauthenticity or perhaps sheer blind obduracy.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is an assumption of legitimacy here that forces the argument that individual communities of human beings do have their distinct existential philosophies which highlight their beliefs about the world which they experience daily and how they deal with its ups and down, how they interpret what they experience and what meanings they make of this in their attempt to understand the meaning of their own existence.

<sup>2</sup> See H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, *The Concept of Irony* (Princeton: New Jersey, 1989), 281.

<sup>3</sup> C. C. W. Taylor, *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 95.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 1- 2

<sup>7</sup> Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 44

<sup>10</sup> Gene Blocker, *The Metaphysics of Absurdity* (Washington D. C.: University Press of America, 1979), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 33 – 34.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Flynn, *Existentialism*, 53 – 54

<sup>13</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it is more correct to speak of ‘traditional Africans’ since today many Africans are indeed professed atheists.

<sup>15</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 29

<sup>16</sup> Moses Makinde, “African Cultures and Moral Systems” in *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy* (Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2007), 291.

<sup>17</sup> The Odu corpus is a body of recitals which belong to the intricate system of divination mainly associated with the cult of Orunmila, the deity of intelligence surpassed only by that of Olodumare, the Supreme Being. They consist of the religious philosophy of the Yoruba and till date serve as the most fixed and reliable reference for knowledge concerning everyday life from primordial time. There are two hundred and fifty-six of these Odu and to each of them, according to the Babalawo are attached one thousand six hundred and eighty stories or myths generally referred to as pathways.

<sup>18</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Moses Makinde, “An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Example” in *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> The picture from the conception of destiny—Akinleyan (that which is chosen kneeling), Akunlegba (that which is received kneeling) and Ayanmo (that which is affixed to one)—is of a complete person with consciousness, arms, and feet kneeling to choose and or receive

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his destiny. The same being will later carry on a conversation with the Gate Keeper of Heaven, Onibode, who actually double seals the destiny with an Amen. The myth does not care to explain how this formed person becomes a foetus in the womb that will gestate for nine months before visible birth.

<sup>21</sup> Olufemi Morakinyo, "Ayanmo Myth and Mental Health Care in West Africa," *Journal of Cultures and Ideas*, Vol. 1, No. 1 December 1993, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), 145. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 154

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 156

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 6

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