

A CRITICAL STUDY OF YORÙBÁ ONTOLOGY IN THE *IFÁ* CORPUS

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Abstract

Drawing heavily from Ifá oral text, this paper attempts to unearth the error which underlie the overt assumption that the nature of God in Africa is polytheistic and the idea that human destiny has only folkloric significance. More precisely, this paper is a response to (i) ontological questions that border on the seeming polytheistic nature of Yorùbá (prototypical African) religion; (ii) monistic theory that sees the human person as essentially material or, by extension, the scientific view that human beings are physico-chemical mechanisms; (iii) the fatalist interpretation of orí (controller of destiny, in the metaphysical sense) which rests on the assumption that human destiny is unalterable.

(Key Words: Critical Study, Yoruba Ontology, Being, God, Religion, Monistic Theory).

INTRODUCTION

Derived from the Greek word for “being”, “ontology” is a 17th-Century coinage for the branch of metaphysics that concerns itself with what exists. It is also “used to refer to philosophical investigation of existence, or being.”(Omogbe, 1998:117 – 118) (Craig, 1998:117 – 118) More copiously:

Ontology, understood as a branch of metaphysics, is the science of being in general, embracing such issues as the nature of existence and categorical structure of reality (Lowe, 2005:670).

In Yorùbá ontology, cosmology and the concept of the human person are the most consequential. Under the former, the Yorùbá place premium on such themes as the concepts of Supreme Being (*Olódùmarè*) and spirits or divinities. The latter relives the debate on whether the human person is both material and spiritual or, following the neuro-physiological reportage, whether human person is only material.

More significantly, the concept of person underscores the Yorùbá conception of destiny which, as we shall see, goes beyond folkloric or mythological constructs.

From the standpoint of *Ifá* (Bascom, 1969:33; Abimbola, 1976:45), therefore, this paper is a response to (i) ontological questions that border on the seeming polytheistic nature of Yorùbá (prototypical African) religion; (ii) monistic theory that sees the human person as essentially material or, by extension, the scientific view that human beings are physico-chemical mechanisms; (iii) the fatalist interpretation of *orí* (controller of destiny, in the metaphysical sense) which rests on the assumption that human destiny is unalterable.

YORÙBÁ COSMOLOGY IN THE *IFÁ* CORPUS

From time immemorial, the question of the exact nature of the universe has preoccupied the minds of most philosophers. This perennial question has indeed led to the emergence of two philosophical camps, namely, the camp of those who hold the teleological view of the universe and that of those who argue for the mechanistic nature of the universe (Omogbe, 1996:42–46). The teleological view of the world contends, among others, that the world came into existence by design and that it was fashioned or forged by God, while the mechanistic view simply conveys the idea that the world came into existence by chance. In the history of philosophy, such personages as Plato, Aristotle, St. Aquinas, the Stoics, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel hold the teleological view; Democritus, Epicurus, to mention a few, embrace the mechanistic view of the world.

It is noteworthy here that the mechanistic view of the world does not make sense in Yorùbá thought system. In fact, the mechanistic view of the world runs contrary to the ontological nature of Yorùbá belief system. Therefore, like St. Aquinas, Spinoza and others, the Yorùbá hold the teleological view of the world. In *Òfún-Ìrosùn*, it is stated that God (*Olódùmarè*) is the creator of the universe. The introductory lines of the verse read:

Òfún-ró-tótó, awo ayé
 Òdùmarè t'ó dá ilé ayé
 Kò ní fi ìdí rẹ han ẹnikan-soso láéláé... (Akintola, 1999:46)

Òfún, the earthly diviner
 God who created the world
 Will not reveal the secret to anyone...

The Yorùbá teleological view of the world is further established by an extract from *Òfún Méji* thus:

Àtẹlẹwọ f'òde sọkan,
 Àtànjàkò ya'ra rẹ lọtòtòtò,
 Ó díá fún Olódùmarè, Atẹ-ayé-mátúu...(Akintola, 1999:55)

Àtéléwó f'òde sòkan and Àtànjàkò ya'ra rẹ lótòtò,
 Once undertook divination for Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being,
 The king in heaven who founded the earth
 Which can never go desolate...

The foundation of Yorùbá cosmology finds its expression in three concepts, namely: (i) the concept of *Olódùmarè* or God; (ii) the concept of the world as comprising two worlds of both the geographical phenomenon called “earth” and the world of spirits; (iii) the concept of heaven as the divine abode of *Olódùmarè* and the divinities who can be regarded as “ministers” with different portfolios. Hence Yorùbá cosmology portrays a universe of:

- (i) The celestial world, being divine abode of *Olódùmarè*, and in which the divinities are subservient to the former’s authority and will;
- (ii) The world of the spirit beings, following the latter in hierarchy;
 The terrestrial world, the lowest in hierarchy and place of habituation for humans and other elements or components of nature (Abimbola, 1975:293).

It is common knowledge among the Yorùbá, however, that the universe is governed by two opposing forces, good and evil. Wande Abimbola establishes this view when he explains the historical conflict between *Ifá* and the *Àjé* (witches) who are renowned for evil acts. Abimbola points out that:

Since the *àjé* represents a negation of all that human beings cherish, and the *òrìṣà* are believed to be helpers and guardians of human beings, one is not surprised that there is such a bitter conflict between the *àjé* and the *òrìṣà*. Indeed, conflict and later on resolution seems to be a permanent feature of the relationship among the Yorùbá supernatural powers (Akintola, 1999:49-50).

Elsewhere, it is related that such divinities as *Elénìní* (the misfortune divinity) and *Ikú* (Death) were among the supernatural who descended from heaven to earth (Akintola, 1999:68 – 69). This portrayal of the universe, a significant aspect of Yorùbá cosmology, evokes the classical Aristotelian teleological view of the world which asserts that:

All contraries, good and evil, light and darkness, pain and pleasure, virtue and vice . . . are complementary. Each is useful and complements the

other in bringing about the order and harmony in the universe (Omeregbe, 1996: 44).

It must be stressed here that the concepts “good” and “evil” are most conceivably relevant in the discussion of Yorùbá ethics. However, the Yorùbá keenly conceive the two concepts as “two paradoxical ingredients with which the universe is constituted (Akintola, 1999:51).”

The *Ifá* corpus often makes references to the numerous Yorùbá gods called the *Irúnmalẹ̀* or the *Òrìṣà*. For instance, in *Ògúndá Méjì* (Abimbola, 1968:97 – 101)¹², the names of such divinities as *Òrúnmilà*, *Sàngó*, *Oya*, *Òòṣànláá*, *Èlẹ̀gbáaraa* and *Ògún* are mentioned. But the number is far greater than this. Adebowale Akintola explains further that:

According to *Ifá* tradition, there are four hundred and one (401) divinities in the Yoruba pantheon. Two hundred and one (201) of these are classified as higher (or benevolent), while the other two hundred (200) are lower (malevolent) divinities (Akintola, 1999:52-53).

The above seems to indicate that there was a plethora of deities vying for the status of God and may lead an observer to see the Yorùbá as essentially polytheists; besides, the colonialists and Christian missionaries brought with them such epithets as *Deus remotus*, *Deus absconditus* to indicate that God in traditional Africa had no place of worship or “the idea of his nonactive involvement in the affairs of the world... (Ukpong, 1983:88)” Because Africans have been found to link God to mountain, star, hills, seas, and so on, some people believe that there are different conceptions of God in Africa. This has led to the question of whether religion as practised in traditional African cultures was essentially monotheistic or polytheistic. In other words, there was a problem of defining the type of religion or worship of God existing in traditional Africa (Parrinder, 1970:81 – 83). To deal with this problem, some scholars (Mbiti, 1969:29-91; Idowu, 1973:137-202) have proposed the theory of Ontological Hierarchy of beings which sought to (i) establish the true position of God in the scheme of things or order of creation or cosmic arrangement; (ii) show God’s relationship with the numerous deities or lesser gods; (iii) show God’s relationship with human beings; (iv) justify the various rituals and modes of worship ascribed to different religious entities or supernatural beings.

In spite of the good point of the hierarchy of beings as an explanation of the nature of God and his relationship with other beings, the question of whether African religious practice is monotheistic or polytheistic still arises. Here, it must be stated that an assiduous study of Yorùbá religion will reveal “that monotheism has been attenuated through the many divinities whose cults form the objective phenomena of the religion (Idowu, 1962:204).” But this does not suggest that the term “polytheism” best describes the religion. In the light of the foregoing, Bolaji Idowu offers the term

“Diffused Monotheism” which “has the advantage of showing that the religion is monotheism, though it is a monotheism in which the good Deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him (Idowu, 1962:204).”

In the *Ifá* system, *Olódùmarè* (God) is vividly presented as the Supreme Being, whose powers surpass those of the divinities. The monotheistic view that all created beings should worship *Olódùmarè* is found in a verse of *Ọ̀sẹ̀ẹ̀-’Túrá* which reads:

Ọ̀yẹ̀lẹ̀-yèlẹ̀, Ifá ní n máa juba Ọ̀lòrun;
 Ó ní, nítorí oyin aá sí, a lọ ní kókó igi;
 Ọ̀yẹ̀.lẹ̀-yèlẹ̀, Ifá ní n máa juba Ọ̀lòrun;
 Ó ní ọ̀jọ kan l’áfòmọ yóo lọ l’òrùn ọ̀pẹ̀;
 Ó ní ọ̀jọ kan l’òjìjì-fèrẹ̀
 Yóò re’le Olódùmarè l’áfẹ̀fẹ̀... (Akintola, 1999:42)

Ifá advocates the worship of God;
 He says the bees will one day leave their hives;
 Ifá advocates the worship of God;
 For the mistletoe will one day leave the palm tree;
 He says the passing shadow will soon depart
 And return to God, the creator ...

It is interesting to note that the theme of the above verse is presented as the voice of *Ọ̀rúnmilà* himself. Similarly, a canto of *Ìwòrì-Wòdín* describes how human beings acknowledge God in such a monotheistic manner that often leads to unnecessary rivalry and confusion in the world. This canto rejects any exclusive claim to the knowledge of God and states how *Ọ̀rúnmilà* affirms that all religions in the world are avenues of reaching and venerating the one God (Akintola, 1999:45-46). Incidentally, the summary of this latter submission can be seen in the view posited by Xenophanes against anthropomorphism. Xenophanes, the legendary founder of the Eleatic school, criticizes the anthropomorphism of the Greeks and claims that:

... if oxens and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds (Russell 1996:58 – 59).

Ọ̀yẹ̀kú Méjì further highlights the monotheistic mode of worship among the Yorùbá. It ascribes certain hegemonic attributes to *Olódùmarè* and draws a verbal portrait of the latter thus:

Pápá nlá b'ojú kugú
 Ọ̀ràngún Èkùn
 A b'òràn pà-à-à l'ẹ̀hìn
 Ọ̀pẹ̀ nlá b'ídí yàkàtà . . . (Akintola, 1999:48)22

God, the boundless open field,
 Says Ọ̀ràngún Èkùn (or Ọ̀yẹ̀kú Méjì);
 God, the *hegemon* that is awesome,
 A colossal palm tree with no equals...

YORÙBÁ CONCEPT OF HUMAN PERSON IN THE *IFÁ* CORPUS

Man or the human person has been described as a difficult word to conceptualize. It is even contended that “we do not know what he is (Heschel, 1966: 5).” But, ironically, it is this purported obscurity of the concept that informs its philosophical significance, just like any other concepts that philosophy grapples with.

In Western philosophical tradition the concept “human person” has generated a lot of controversies. On the one hand, the human person is held to be material and, therefore, perishable. On the other hand, he is held to be both material and spiritual. The latter view of the human person has been the more contentious and, from time immemorial, Western philosophical tradition has been putting up a corpus of claims to substantiate this rather difficult position.

As a matter of fact, the perennial “mind-body debate” has not ceased to be one of the most inextinguishable intellectual discourses, especially among philosophers. Perhaps Western dualism gains untold prominence in Plato’s postulation of the “World of Ideas” which he considers to be the “real” world. In Plato’s formulation, we are taught that this physical world cannot be said to be real; it is a mere imitation or a poor copy of what we can find in the World of Ideas or World of Forms. St Augustine, obviously defending an important texture of the Christian faith, sees man as both physical and spiritual, arguing that the spiritual aspect of the human person has the ability to exist independently on its own. Kant also acknowledges the existence of the spiritual aspect of man since he postulates the existence of the “noumenal world”. By and large, the controversies surrounding the bifurcation of the human person as composing both the physical and the spiritual became profoundly disputatious since René Descartes. In short, in the history of philosophy, the dualistic bifurcation of man or the human person was borne out of Descartes’ rationalistic methodic doubt, the “Cogito”. However, in the West, the monistic theory (especially the Central State materialist theory) has continued to gain more currency over the dualistic theories, in part because its plausibility rests on empirical evidence (Campbell, 1971: 87).

The monists reject the spiritual aspect of the human person and insist that the study of neuro-physiological findings of the workings of the brain is a thing to go by. In other words, the monists are of the view that the relationship between what we call the spiritual (mind) and the physical (body) “is something science discovers by observation and experiment (Sober, 1991:276).”

The Yorùbá, like the Western dualists, approve of the view that human person is composed of both the physical and the spiritual elements. In fact, the Yorùbá can be said to hold the tripartite conception of the human person. Therefore, cognate to the Yorùbá concept of man are:

- (i) *ara*, the body which is the physical element. A tangible entity, it is composed of flesh, bones and blood;
- (ii) *ẹ̀mí*, often translated as the soul, is the spiritual element. It is immaterial and regarded as the vital force which gives life to the body;
- (iii) *orí*, literally “head”, regarded by the Yorùbá as the most vital part of a person, has both physical and metaphysical significance in Yorùbá ontology.

Babatunde Lawal espouses the significance of *orí* at the physical level by pointing out that it is “the locus of important organs such as the brain (*opolo*), the seat of wisdom and reason; the eyes (*ojú*), the lamps that guide a person through the dark jungle of life, the nose (*imú*), the source of ventilation for the soul; the mouth (*enu*), the source of nourishment for the body; and the ears (*etí*), the sound detectors (Lawal, 1985:91).” At the metaphysical level, *orí* usually assumes the term “*orí-iní*” and is popularly held to be the essence of human personality which “determines the existence and fate of the individual on the earth (Lawal, 1985:91).” According to Abosede Emanuel:

Orí is a person’s anatomical head which contains the brain ... However Ifá teaches that inside the physical head . . . resides another entity, a psychic impalpable force, that determines the individual’s fortune in life (Emanuel, 2000:221).

Emanuel further observes that *orí* is similar to the concept “destiny” as we have it in European thought system “except that with *orí* there is a factor of personal responsibility influencing the net effect (Emanuel, 2000:221).”

The concept of *orí* as destiny is given more meaning by a popular story or myth with which the Yorùbá often evaluate the success or failure of the individual. This myth relates that *Olódùmarè* always charges Àjàlá, the divine, heavenly potter, with the responsibility of moulding or casting the individual’s head before he departs from heaven to begin his sojourn on earth. After moulding different sizes of anatomical heads, Àjàlá follows the protocol of bringing the moulded heads before *Òrìṣà-nlá* who is expected to fill these empty heads with some divine lots. The lot that the *Òrìṣà-nlá* releases into a head depends on his mood and that is why some heads hold good destiny and others bad destiny. And since the individual is not present at

the divine abode where these heads are moulded and “blessed”, there is the likelihood that individual A who is about to leave heaven to begin his sojourn on earth choose good destiny and individual B bad destiny. But this point of view has really attracted certain reflective reactions.

It is argued in some quarters that the idea of *orí* as something chosen by the bearer without knowing its content garbles the ideas of praise or reward and punishment. In other words, individual B in our illustration, who now bears a bad *orí* or destiny, would most probably choose a good *orí* if he could decipher its content. Thus, what individual B is today should not be seen exclusively as his own making; rather he deserves some sympathy because he was veiled while he was to make a choice. Conceived in this way, however, the concept *orí* may encourage idleness, selfishness, oppression and other vices. It could also give rise to fatalism, the belief that all events are predetermined and outside the control of human beings. The foregoing, let us add, is predicated on the Yorùbá saying which reads:

Àkúnlẹ̀yàn ni àdáyé bá;
A kúnlẹ̀ a yàn pín,
A dé'lé ayé tán,
Ojú ní kán gbogbo wa.

That which is chosen is fixed;
We knelt down and chose our destiny,
On getting into the world,
Everyone becomes impatient.

The above is sometimes given some creative translation, thus:

Our heavenly choice
Determines our earthly life,
A wrong choice above
Results in suffering below (Emanuel, 2000:223).

A creation myth questions the plausibility of the above Yorùbá saying. According to the myth, *Olódùmarè* started off creation process first by moulding every part of the physical human body with divine clay. After this demonstrable task, *Olódùmarè* then ordered all the divinities in attendance to close their eyes while he breath his own spiritual essence onto the moulded human body. This spiritual essence, it is related, gave man his spiritual aspect, his life. The myth says that *Òrúnmìlà*, because of his unrivalled intelligence among the Yorùbá divinities, did not close his eyes during the creation ritual and that gave him the privilege to “witness” how *Olódùmarè* breathed his divine spirit into man. This explains why *Òrúnmìlà*, in a verse of *Èjì Ogbè*, is referred to as, “*Èlẹ̀rù Ìpín*”, literally, “witness of fate”.

Thus, the Yorùbá are chary of relying on some fatalistic dictum since they strongly believe that *Òrúnmìlà*, as “witness of fate”, can use his divine industry to “help the individual attune himself to his true *orí* (Emanuel, 2000:224).” As such they believe that *Òrúnmìlà*, if consulted, can reveal how a bad *orí*, for instance, can be changed to a good *orí*, usually after some propitious sacrifice.

Apart from altering human destiny or *orí* through the assistance of *Òrúnmìlà*, Bolaji Idowu adds that the human destiny or *orí* could also be altered by “*Ọmọ-Ar’áiyé*” (children of the world), *Ìwà* (character) and through appropriate sacrifices to one’s *Orí* (Emanuel, 2000:176-182). This last means of altering *orí* on Idowu’s list is in consonance with the idea conveyed in a verse of *Ògúndá Méjì* where *Orí* is depicted as “a god more sympathetic to human beings than all other gods (Abimbola, 1976:142).” Some verses of *Ifá* strengthen the veracity of Idowu’s list and help to explain that a chosen *orí* could be altered. A verse of *Òtúúrúpòn* highlights how *Ọmọ-Ar’áiyé* (witches and other evildoers) alter individual’s chosen *orí* or destiny thus:

... A díá fún Eníyán,
 A bù f’Ènìyàn,
 Àwọ̀n méjèèjì nít’Ìkòlẹ̀ ọ̀run bọ̀ wáyé.
 Wọ̀n ní kí àwọ̀n méjèèjì ó rúbọ̀
 Eníyán ní bí òùn bá dé’lé ayé,
 Òun ó máa ba ti gbogbo Ènìyàn jẹ̀ ní.
 Ènìyàn náà ní bí òùn bá dé’lé ayé tán,
 Ohun tí ó bá wu òun ni òun ó máa se.
 Kò rú.
 Ìgbà tí àwọ̀n méjèèjì dé’lé ayé tán,
 Lo ba dí pe bí Ènìyán bá bímọ̀ sílẹ̀ tán,
 Eníyán ó pa á.
 Gbogbo nnkan tí Ènìyàn ní,
 Ni àwọ̀n Eníyán m̀bà á jẹ̀... (Abimbola, 1976:166)

...Divination was held for Eníyán*
 It was also held for Ènìyàn**
 As they descended from heaven to earth
 The two were asked to offer sacrifice
 Eníyán vowed that, on reaching the earth,
 He would be destroying the lots of Ènìyàn,
 Ènìyàn, too, vowed that, on reaching the earth,
 He would be doing whatever he liked
 And refused to offer sacrifice.
 The two reached the earth and,
 Whenever Ènìyàn gave birth to a child,

* a euphemism for witches
 ** humans

Eníyán would kill it
 All the things that Ènìyàn laboured for
 Were all destroyed by the Eníyán...

The creative translation of the above will be more illuminating. Thus, before human beings (*Ènìyàn*) and the witches (*Eníyán*) left the heaven to the earth, they both declared what they would be doing on earth. The witches swore that they would be destroying all good things embarked upon by human beings. On their part, human beings declared that they would be doing things that would benefit them once they reached the earth. For them to have their wishes granted, they were asked to perform some propitiatory sacrifice and only the witches took heed of what they were told. Consequently, when the two groups reached the earth the witches had their wishes granted and began to kill the children of human beings and destroy their cherished belongings. Hence the witches succeeded in altering what could be conceived as the chosen *orí* or destiny of human beings.

The Yorùbá believe that *Ìwà* (character or moral rectitude) can alter a chosen *orí* or destroy it. In other words, they believe that *Ìwà* or moral rectitude conveys “the essence of being (Abimbola, 1975:93 – 394).” *Ìwà* is used to evaluate a person’s ethical practice and, for that reason, used in determining the worthiness of a person’s life. The Yorùbá therefore believe that a good character can alter a bad *orí* or destiny and change it to a good one and the other way round. That is why the Yorùbá often say: *Orí kan kì í burù l’Ótu, iwà nìkan ló sòro* (No destiny is so bad, that moral rectitude cannot correct it). This is amplified by a verse of *Ogbè-’Gundá* thus:

Òbèlènke Abínúyooró
 A dífá fún Olóríire ìgbà iwásẹ̀
 Èni l’órí rere tí kò ní iwà rere
 Ìwà ló màa ba Orí rẹ̀ jẹ̀. (Ogundele, an Ifá priest).

Òbèlènke, diviner of temperament,
 Performed divination for the primordial Olóríire*
 For whoever chose good destiny without rectitude
 Shall destroy his chosen destiny.

Orí, as a god who assists in the alteration of a bad destiny after accepting one’s sacrifice, is eulogized in *Ògúndá Méjì*. The verse corroborates Idowu’s implicit idea that misfortune sometimes befalls man due to his failure to offer appropriate sacrifice to his *orí*. This implies that the individual can improve his lot by offering propitious sacrifice to his *orí*. The excerpt from *Ògúndá Méjì* reads:

...No god blesses a man
 Without the consent of his Orí

* A name, literally, “he that has chosen good destiny”.

Orí, I hail you.
You who allow children to be born alive.
A person whose sacrifice is accepted by his own Orí
Should rejoice exceedingly (Abimbola, 1975:173).

At this juncture, it is clear that the whole tone of Idowu's thesis on *orí* is predicated on the belief that the fatalistic interpretation of *orí* or human destiny is untenable among the Yorùbá. A number of scholars have also advanced certain plausible views against the fatalist idea of destiny. The consensus is that it is improper to allot a fatalistic interpretation to the Yorùbá concept of *orí* or destiny since the fatalist idea is in contrast to the deterministic attitude of the Yorùbá towards life. As determinists, the Yorùbá are aware – as pointed out earlier – that the *Ajogun* (comprising of the witches and other evil doers), for instance, can alter human destiny. This realization has always informed why a Yorùbá man consults *Ifá* (every now and then) in order to know steps to take in fortifying himself against such evil powers. This determinist stance is in fact the reason why the Yorùbá allude to the proverb: *Bónìl ʃe rí, òla lè má rí bẹ̀ẹ̀, níí mú babaláwo difá ọ̀rọ̀rún* (the fear that today may not be the same as the morrow makes the diviner to consult the oracle more often than not). In this regard, attempts have been made to show that the issue of *orí* or the Yorùbá belief in destiny is compatible with the idea of freewill and moral responsibility.

Olusegun Oladipo, for instance, maintains a pragmatic approach to *orí* as destiny when he points out that the Yorùbá are not in any way fatalistic but are rather deterministic. He explains that their deterministic attitude towards life accommodates the concept of freewill and moral responsibility with which they explain away life puzzles (Oladipo, 1992: 36 – 49). He uses the paradoxical relationship that exists between law and liberty in the civil society. According to him, the existence of law in civil society does not in any way obliterate the fact that human beings are free in their interpersonal relations, as well as their relation to the state. The law in civil society guides and cautions individuals from using their capricious tendencies to retrogress the society into the “nasty” Hobbesian state of nature. The rule of law however does not mean that human beings are not free. Oladipo points out that:

...just as the significance which freedom has for men in civil society is predicated on the existence of laws, so does freewill depend on the existence of certain conditions, which determine the nature of human actions (Oladipo, 1992: 46).

Just the same way as Oladipo, Segun Gbadegehin explains that the individual, as a social being, cannot really isolate himself from society. This constraint necessarily makes a person to be morally responsible both to himself and society. The responsibility which a person has to himself and society conveys a deterministic notion of destiny since his personal ego cannot override social reality. Thus, the need

to balance a person's personal ego and social existence evokes the contention that "the idea of destiny emanates from communal experience (Gbadegesin, 1984: 183)." M.A. Makinde refutes the fatalist thesis on *orí* on the premises that the Yorùbá, like any other human species, praise and reward the individual for good conduct and also blame and punish him for his misdeeds. This accentuates the fact that the individual, regardless of his chosen *orí*, is sanctioned by the Yorùbá on the account of his bad or antisocial behavior (Makinde, 1985: 62 – 64). S.A. Ali strengthens the foregoing by what could be regarded as an empiricist standpoint. He jettisons the fatalist thesis and ascribes freewill and moral responsibility to the Yorùbá who have "mental abstraction, intellectual perception, self consciousness and reflection, intellectual synthesis, rational language, and power of will (Ali, 1995: 103 – 104)."

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we used the Yorùbá as a macrocosm of all ethno-linguistic units in Africa and relied heavily on *Ifá* as a complete Yorùbá philosophy. We pointed out that the various controversies surrounding the existence of God (as we have in classical philosophical terrain) do not find a place in Yorùbá thought system; rather the Yorùbá are interested in problems about the immanence of God, the moral attribute of God, the name and worship of God. We posited that it is mistaken to use the term "polytheism" for Yorùbá (prototypical African) religion since *Olódùmarè* (God) has a central and dominating position in the religion and other gods are mere divine functionaries. We jettisoned the dualist conception of the human person, supporting our position with the inescapably metaphysical aspect of the human person, the "*orí-iní*" (literally, inner head), whose affinity with the divine cannot be denied. We showed that *orí* has a pervasive force in the concept of the human person among the Yorùbá and that it is perhaps the most consequential aspect in the discussion of the human person.

However, we cast doubt on the fatalistic interpretation of *orí* since such a thesis does not accord with the practical experience of the Yorùbá. Besides, certain *Ifá* verses have shown that the fatalistic interpretation of *orí* is weak and cannot be sustained, judging by certain forces that tend to alter the individual chosen *orí*. The logic of the foregoing is not limited to the sphere of Yorùbá ontology. As a matter of fact, it suggests that the understanding of the issues discussed in Yorùbá ontology may aid our understanding of human reality generally. For instance, our discussion of Yorùbá cosmology illuminates the fact that African religious ideas about God closely approximate the highly reflective Western theism. Also, our discussion of the concept of the human person – as illustrated in the *Ifá* corpus – accentuates that the human person is a rational being and, by virtue of that, a moral being. This, in turn, underscores the preeminence of *ìwà* (good character) in the conception of the human person. As a crucial principle in Yorùbá ethics, *ìwà* (good character) plays a significant role in the assessment of a person's destiny and this suggests that the issue

of freewill and moral responsibility is not frivolous in the conception of the human person. The individual, regardless of his “chosen” destiny, is therefore expected to imbibe good character in order to remove perversion and decay from our human society.

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Oral Source

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