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Determinism in Traditional Yoruba Concepts of *Ori*: A Soft-Determinist Perspective

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Abstract

For the traditional Yoruba, the idea of *Ori*, which metaphysically-speaking translates as human destiny is rife. However, there are various discussions suggesting that since it is possible for an entity to have either been given or chosen an *Ori*, before coming into this world, such an entity can neither be praiseworthy nor blameworthy for their agency during physical existence. The underlying implication that undergirds the discourse on *Ori* is the lack of justification, any attempt to amend a destiny that had been pre-natally chosen or affixed upon an entity. Through the method of critical analysis, this research argues that on the one hand, all traditional Yorubas believe in the idea of an unalterable destiny, which informs agency. On the other hand, they do not shy away from the attempt to amend a bad destiny for a good one via efforts such as rituals. As a way of showing that the idea of a preordained destiny persists as well as that attempts to improve a bad destiny, this study argues that a soft-deterministic approach to the traditional discourse on destiny is more fitting over the hard deterministic or fatalistic interpretations that it has garnered over the years.

Keywords: Destiny; Hard Determinism; *Ori*; Soft Determinism; Yoruba

1. Introduction

In this essay, we shall concern with the question of destiny and how it relates to human freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. There is no doubt that most scholars have maintained that the Yoruba world-view is deterministic or even fatalistic. Edun Oduwole (1996) is one of the foremost representatives of a fatalistic approach to the Yoruba idea of destiny. This however, could mean that moral agents are not liable to being praised or blamed since they could not have acted otherwise. The latter implication of this is that we cannot even punish offenders since their destiny has made them

as such. On the contrary, this essay will argue that though the Yorubas are in a way determined, there is still room for freedom which also comes with its responsibility. For the task at hand, it will be helpful to undertake an exercise in conceptual clarification of the term “determinism.”

Determinism is a term which clearly denotes “lack of freedom and presence of causal coercion whether obvious or not” (Cayne, 1992:541). Determinism is simply the thesis that every event, with respect to the past, present and future, has a cause. It is more of a scientific approach, through it; we can predict the outcome of an event if we know the necessary and sufficient causal conditions. In other words, determinism is the view that everything that occurs in the universe must be the effect of a cause, must be produced by, is dependent on, and conditioned by what brought it into existence. Some determinists specify the character of the causes to the events. Others leave open the issue of what kinds and types of things could be the (causes) of events that must have a cause. However, there are two kinds of determinism: hard and soft determinism. The hard determinism does not allow for freedom while soft determinism gives room for freedom (Balogun, 1997: 331). The hard determinist on the other hand does not admit any element of freewill in her analysis (see Holbach 1961). The implication is that persons cannot be held responsible for their view since they can always claim that there were conditioned by forces outside them and could not have done otherwise.

With the brief clarification of key terms realized, we now proceed to investigate why we hold that the Yorubas have a form of determinism which allows for individual freedom and responsibility. The next section addresses this as the one that follows raises some challenges to the thought system.

2. The Yoruba World-view on Destiny and Determinism: An Assessment

For us to be able to understand how the Yoruba conceive soft determinism, it would be helpful to commence with a brief note on these group of people. The Yoruba constitute one of the major ethnic groups of modern Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Ekiti, Lagos and a substantial part of Kwara State (Atanda 1980: 1) Besides Nigeria, the Yoruba are also found in sizeable numbers, in South-eastern part of the Republic of Benin, Togo and Dahomey in West Africa, the West-India and South Africa. There is also a thriving Yoruba culture in South America and the Caribbean, especially Brazil and Cuba where the descendants of the unwilling immigrants to the new world have been able to keep their identities and guard their cultural heritage (Gbadegesin 1983: 174). While the Yoruba are dispersed throughout the world, this paper focuses on the Nigerian Yoruba. The reason for this choice is that the ancestral home of the Yoruba is in Nigeria and each of the Yoruba in the Diasporas still traces its origin to this home where the culture thrives best. Our exposition of the deterministic strand of the Yoruba thought system relies on Oladele Balogun’s 2007 paper entitled: *The Concept of Ori and Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft Deterministic Interpretation*.

To begin with Balogun (2007) engages in an analysis of some key terms. Whilst justifying this he says:

Before delving into a critical exposition of the metaphysical nature of the Yoruba concepts of ori and human destiny, there is need to make explicit, such metaphysical concepts that will subsequently enhance our understanding on the theme. Hence the clarifications of concepts like *ori* human destiny, fatalism and determinism (or predestination) (Balogun, 2007:118).

A person in Yoruba thought is according to Hallen and Sodipo (1986: 105) made up of three important elements: *ara* (body), *emi* (life giving element) and *ori* (Spiritual head, which is thought to be responsible for human destiny). In the Yoruba concept of person, *ara* (body) refers to all the tangible elements that make a person both externally and internally such as the brain, kindly, intestine, heart etc. and not just the body frame which houses other constituents of a person. (Balogun

1997: 333). *Emi* (the life giving entity), the Yoruba believe, is an immaterial element that provides the ‘animating force’ or energy without which a person cannot be said to be living at all, talk less of being conscious (Oladipo 1992: 19). It is according to Bolaji Idowu (1962: 169), “closely associated with the breath and the whole mechanism of breathing which is its most expressive manifestation”. In other words, *emi* (the life giving entity) is regarded by the Yoruba as the life-force of a person; its presence or absence in a person makes the difference between life and death. The third element, *Ori* which is of immediate concern to us in this paper, represents the individuality element in a person. *Ori* is the element responsible for a person’s personality and represents human destiny. *Ori*, an immaterial entity, otherwise called ‘inner-head’ is intractably connected with human destiny. It is responsible for the actuality and worth of man in the material world. For the Yoruba, *ori* is believed to be not only the bearer of destiny but also to be the essence of human personality which rules, control and guides the life and activities of the person (Idowu 1962: 170).

Hence, *Ori* is the element which symbolizes human destiny and the whole of a person’s personality. Kola Abimbola (2006: 80) seems to go beyond the views of Hallen and Sodipo, S. Oladipo and Bolaji Idowu in his account of the nature of a person in Yoruba thought, when he added a fourth element, *ese*. Literally translated, *ese* means ‘leg’, but within the content of human personality, it means “strife”, “hard work” or “struggle”. According to Abimbola (2006), *ese* introduces the principle of individual effort, strife or struggle before the potentialities encapsulated in one’s *ori* can be actualized. As a symbol of power, mobility and activity, *ese* is a vital part of human personality both in the physical and spiritual senses.

Human destiny is the mysterious power believed to control human events. Destiny or predestination is the believe that whatever happens or that will happen in the future has been preordained and happened according to an earlier master plan. It is the belief that every person has his biography written before coming to the world which consequently implies that anything one does is not something done out of free will but something done in fulfillment of preordained history (Oladipo, 1992: 36). Such a belief as this is usually accredited to a divine mind or Supreme Being, who is said to have pre-existentially fixed all the events that, could possibly and would take place in a man’s earthly existence.

An appreciation of the soft determinism in the Yorubas thought is discernable via a closer assessment of the notion of *Ori*. There are various myths on the methods of acquisition of *ori* in Yoruba thought. While it will not be exhaustive embarking on an explicit examination of those myths in a paper of this nature, the central salient points shall be outlined. According to the Yoruba, it is believed that before coming into the world, everybody was obliged to go and choose an *ori* from among a large number of oris stored in *Ajala*’s warehouse. *Ajala*, (a potter) has the duty of molding human heads. The process of human creation is not complete without him. While *Orisanla* (arch-divinity) is understood by the Yoruba to be the maker of *ara* (body), who later passes the lifeless figure to *Olodumare* (Supreme Deity) to put *emi* (life giving entity), *Ajala* is responsible for the creation of *ori*. *Ajala* is a skilled potter, a drunkard, a debtor and an irresponsible and careless creature (Morakinyo 1983: 78). In any case, *Ajala* through his utter carelessness is responsible for molding heads of different shapes and qualities (some are good and many are bad). In the house of *Ajala*, every man makes a choice of his own *ori*, after which every man coming into the world passes through the water of forgetfulness *Omi igbagbe*, which is the boundary between heaven and earth. In another myth as accounted by Bolaji Idowu (1962: 173–174) and Morakinyo (1983: 72), the acquisition of one’s *ori* is done by kneeling before the high authority *Olodumare* (Supreme Deity), who confers one’s portion, that is, what a person would live up to on earth. This type of acquiring ‘*ori*’ is referred to as *Ayanmo* (that which is affixed to someone). In all these myths, *Orunmila* (arch-divinity), the founder of *ifa* (oracle) system of divination, is noted to be a witness of man’s choice of destiny. Little wonder he is referred to as *Eleri-Ipin* (the witness of destiny) and the only one competent to reveal the type and content of ‘*ori*’ chosen by each person.

For a better understanding on the acquisition of *ori*, Bolaji Idowu (1962: 173) gives a trimorphous conception of the Yoruba belief in destiny. According to him, the choice of one's destiny could be one of these three ways:

A person may kneel down and choose his destiny, this is called *A kun le yan* (that which is received kneeling). He may kneel down and receive his destiny – that is called *A kun le gba* (that which is received kneeling). Or he may have his destiny affixed on him—for this, Yoruba give the name *Ayanmo* (that which is affixed to one) (Idowu 1962: 173).

Understandably from the above, the Yoruba believe that destiny once chosen by one or conferred is unalterable. In other words, it becomes doubly sealed up such that the earthly existence of the person is an aftermath of the type of *ori* one chose or conferred on one.

From the above, the Yoruba understanding of 'ori' can be conceived in two related senses. It refers to the unconscious self, who makes a free choice of one's life-course before Ajala or *Olodumare* (as the case may be); it also refers to that which is chosen – the individual destiny or portion. As the former, *ori* is the personal spirit or guardian ancestor of an individual. As in the latter, the choice so made by *ori* (the personality spirit) is however unknown to the (now conscious) person after he has come into the world. It is thus possible for a person to embark on a project which his *ori* did not choose, that is, for which he is not predestined. Failure is the result of such efforts (Gbadegesin 1983: 183). This underscores the metaphysical relevance of the knowledge of one's nature of *ori*. Hence the need to consult *Orunmila* – the god of divination, in order to determine the nature of one's *ori*'s choice and whether or not one is following the right path.

Balogun, in the above overview of the relation between one's *Ori* and one's life experiences, counters other scholars who have failed to see that fatalism is not an appropriate labeling but an error. He argues against this fatalistic interpretation.

First, virtually all Yoruba African philosophers (Olubi Sodipo, Segun Gbadegesin, Moses Makinde, Segun Oladipo, Egun Oduwole, Samuel Ali and amongst others) who have commented on *ori vis-à-vis* the freewill-determinism problem have overlooked a point that is quite clear in the exposition of the two important religious scholars on this issue (i.e. Bolaji Idowu and Wande Abimbola). Indeed, virtually all these Yoruba African philosophers who have written on *ori*, human personality, *vis-à-vis* freewill cite these two religious scholars, but these philosophers all overlook one point, which is obvious in the writing of these religious scholars: *Ori* is limited to issues of material success (i.e. things like wealth, riches and success in one's profession). *Ori* has nothing to do with moral character, and as such it does not affect all of human actions and/or inactions. *Ori* in Yoruba thought is concerned only with issues of material success in life at a general level. Arguably, nowhere in any of the ancient Yoruba scriptures (i.e. the *Ifa* literary corpus, *Ijala* and *Iwi*, *Egungun*, and *Esa Egungun*) is there the claim that moral character can be pre-determined by one's earlier choice of *Ori* (Ofuasia et al 2021). Given this critical point that *Ori* is not about moral character, but about issues of prosperous or impoverished destiny, then establishing the case for soft-determinism becomes more resonant with the Yoruba cultural belief (Ofuasia 2016).

The second problem has to do with the fatalistic conclusion of some of these scholars, which if carried to its logical conclusion; it will be unjustified to hold a person responsible for his actions since the causes of his actions are external to him and beyond his control. With the fatalistic interpretation of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny, the practice of performance of character formation becomes otiose, since it is not a product of man's making. Besides, the doctrine of fatalism, rather than promising perfect understanding and removing the temptation of viewing things in terms of human wickedness, as Oduwole argues, it indeed nullifies the efficacy of reason, stifles creativity and spirit of hard-work. But is there a way out of this dilemma? Is the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny rigidly fatalistic and hard-deterministic, or does it appear so merely at the surface level?

A surface look at the Yoruba concept of *ori* seems to suggest that the Yoruba are incurable fatalists and hard-determinists. Although in theory, the destiny of a person is said to be unaltered because

it became doubly sealed after its choice, but in actual sense, it does not seem to be so. Upon a deeper reflection and practical experience, several factors have occasioned an alteration in destiny on earth; either for good or bad. An individual's destiny may be changed for good or for bad. Instances of this abound within the Yoruba cultural milieu. The Yoruba believe in the consultation of the god of divination (*Orunmila*) to know the kind of *ori* one had chosen and to perhaps alter an unfavorable destiny through the help of some spiritual forces and by the application of the right type of sacrifices. *Ebo* (Sacrifice) among the Yoruba is believed to be capable of influencing human destiny either for good or bad. Sacrifice is a form of communication between the natural and the supernatural realms of the Yoruba cosmos. According to Kola Abimbola (2006: 62–63), sacrifice is forgoing, relinquishing or doing without something in the expectation of gaining something else (Balogun 2007:125).

Unlike a fatalist who easily resigns himself to fate with respect to future situations, the Yoruba as soft-determinists are hopefully gratified of being able to help future situations. In the same vein, they are rationally conscious of being held responsible for present actions deliberately performed by themselves (Balogun, 2007:126).

Indeed, a soft-deterministic conception of destiny in Yoruba thought is truly reflective of and coherent with the belief of the people on moral responsibility and freedom. It is because of the freedom, morality and responsibility which are accommodated by this conception of destiny that make the alterability of destiny meaningful and consistent. Situating the concept of 'ori' and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought within the framework of soft-determinism can help in taking care of the inconsistencies and problems associated with the fatalistic interpretations of the Yoruba concepts of *ori* and human destiny. Such problems are occasioned by practical existential experiences of the Yoruba in noting some factors (such as one's action, sacrifices, evil machination etc.) as potent forces in altering one's destiny even when fatalism suggests that the choice of one's *ori* is irrevocable and unalterable. With soft determinism, the possibility of changing an unfavourable destiny; of worshipping the guardian ancestral spirit of hard work; of consciously guiding against other's interception of a favourable destiny, become apparent.

Samuel Ade Ali (1995: 104), in consonance with this Balogun (2007) soft-deterministic interpretation of the concepts of *ori* and human destiny argues that the Yoruba conception of destiny is repugnant of harsh words of hard determinism, repudiating fatality and necessity. The temptation to consider the metaphysical nature of the Yoruba belief in *ori* and human destiny in the light of fatalism or hard determinism (as Bolaji Idowu (1962), Richard Taylor (1982), Egun Oduwole (1996), etc. have done) is natural; however, incorrect. It is only inexplicable traits of a person either towards evil or good that the Yoruba explain through appeal to destiny. Destiny in this sense signifies an act not done out of freewill and which only implies a transcendental relation that explains the unusual, baffling and untoward complexities of life which must come to pass no matter what. Only destiny understood in this sense is analogous to fatalism. Outside this sense, and as it is often the case, the belief in 'ori' and human destiny in Yoruba coheres with the notion of *afowofa* (self-causation), where one is held responsible for actions deliberately performed by oneself, while attributing to his *ori* those whose causes transcend him. It is when the effort to rectify a bad destiny or to maintain a good destiny come to a naught that the Yoruba recourse to fate (fatalism).

3. Critical Comments on Yoruba Soft Determinism

The preceding section has concerned with the notion of determinism as spelt out in the traditional Yoruba thinking. Soft determinism is the strand that Oladele Balogun (2007) arrived at and this surpasses the earlier submission on the subject matter. Firstly, is it the case that one can choose and in some cases have a bad *Ori* and as such would only be striving in this world to do evil and other bad things? In other words, is it the case that every destiny chosen or affixed on human is necessarily good for self and society? This is one of the flaws noticeable in Balogun's analysis of the Yoruba

thought system on determinism.

Second, it could be argued against Oladele Balogun, the place of *Ori* and the belief in immortality. Is this a myth? This is following Hume's (2007) conviction that we cannot recall whether or not we lived before our present life and hence, it would be wasteful thinking about afterlife. While Balogun (2007) shares the belief in predestination and afterlife, there is no substantial reason to believe or hold the position that we picked an *Ori*. This is one of the problems that we highlighted as we commenced this essay.

Third, with claims from the Italian Neurosurgeon Sergio Canavero about the near-term feasibility of head transplant onto a new body in humans in 2015, does this not reduce to pure speculations and conjectures the Yoruba world-view that there is an *Ori* who makes a choice in the heavenly abode? If we can swap one *Ori* for another, does this mean we can swap destinies and the challenges which come with them? These are serious questions for a soft determinist conclusion on the Yoruba notion of destiny and freedom.

4. Conclusion

It cannot be over-emphasized, the notion that the Yoruba world-view is deterministic and this has implication that a moral agent is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy for any action since, his/her destiny had been pre-ordained. Contrary to previous philosophical accounts on the Yoruba concept of destiny, Balogun's (2007) paper establishes that the concepts of *Ori* and human destiny in traditional Yoruba thought fit very well into the frame work of soft-determinism. Such a metaphysical interpretation, the paper argues, can help in taking care of the inconsistencies and antinomies associated with the earlier metaphysical interpretations of the Yoruba concept of *Ori*; providing a philosophical justification for punishment and moral responsibility in traditional and contemporary Yoruba society. This essay also raised some serious problems and challenges that a soft deterministic interpretation of the Yoruba thought system implies. It is therefore the position of this study that indeed, a soft deterministic approach to moral actions and deliberations is able to make freedom possible despite a determined *Ori*. This is because it allows for the responsibility that comes from the freedom enjoyed by moral agents.

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