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Contemplating the Philosophy of Existence in Yoruba Culture

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Abstract

The philosophy of existence presented in this paper stresses the ontological, communal, and ethical posture of the Yoruba people. Different from the metaphysical description of western philosophy (monism and dualism). In the Yoruba thought system, the human person, *eniyan*, is composed of *ara* (body), *emi* (spirit), and *ori* (inner head), referred to as *ayanmo* (destiny). In this paper, the Yoruba worldview is juxtaposed with other African philosophies such as the Akan conception of Okra. This is germane because it reflects the distinctness of African metaphysical structure. This being said, in terms of existence, the Yoruba people also place *iwa* (character) as central in grappling with the basis of the communal and personal identity. In this realm, the individual transcends a mere biological being. The individual only flourishes with respect to the synthesis between the self and the other. The individual is guided by divinatory engagements and normative responsibilities. In this paper, the concept of death and immortality has also been discussed about the Yoruba way of reflection. The Yoruba appear to have cushioned the effect of death into the realm of immortality through cyclicity of existence. The phenomena of reincarnation and *Egungun* (masquerade) enable the unique continuity of existence. Although modern critiques like those of Adegbindin object to the latter by questioning the veracity of the metaphysical pose of *Egungun* (masquerade) – this paper defends its ontological foundation. Quite related to this reasoning is the important role art plays in ensuring that disembodied existence can become embodied and pragmatic in the social space of living. Finally, the crux of this study is to contemplate the verisimilitude of the philosophical worldviews of the Yoruba people, based on their ethics, communal value and continuous existence within different modes.

Keywords: Personal identity; individualism; communality; *iwa* (character); existence; death and immortality

1. Introduction

The Yoruba philosophy of existence is rich and the worldview of the Yoruba people within the Southwest region of Nigeria and beyond. Their conception of existence is distinct from the meta-physical emphasis of Western philosophy, rather, it is an ontological and ethico-sociological recognition of the human person. The Yoruba people are upheld as part of their values and collective community development. They also value honesty, humility, and diligence. And more importantly, they value communal life. All these are taught in their informal training starting from home. According to Kanu and Omojola (2020, 329), Yoruba values are inherent in their formation, as they assert that while growing, children are taught to greet elders, sweep the surroundings, and they are also taught from time to time to respect elders, to have value of honesty, charity, industriousness, cleanliness, humility, support-members helping themselves to develop someone's project, as a group or people of the same trade helping themselves. All these are taught through proverbs, songs, art, communal life, and folklore during moonlight play. Having all these qualities is to be seen as an individual with *iwa* or *omoluabi*. Being an *omoluabi* or someone with *iwa* is very relevant within the Yoruba philosophy of existence. However, not possessing all these qualities is to be considered as an individual of little or no value.

The *ara* (body), *emi* (spirit) and *ori* (head) are also quite important in what constitutes an individual in Yoruba culture. A person is guided by a guardian spirit, but in case these spirits fail to protect, some sacrifices are offered to remedy one's destiny or *ori* from disaster; failure to rescue an individual from such is to ascribe such a person as *oloriburuku* (a person with bad destiny). This is because *ori* plays a core role in determining how well or how badly an individual will fare in existence. That is why the Yoruba people pray to their *oris*, their inner heads, for good fortune. Also, the problem of death seems to have been neutralised in the Yoruba philosophy of existence since the body is only an act of *Obatala* and the breath *emi* is immortal which continues to exist in different forms, either as *abiku* or by reincarnating to the same family it was or even exist as *Egunḡun* where it can communicate with descendants. The Yoruba people go as far as using art to embody disembodied existence for pragmatic purposes. Although Adegbindin objected to the veracity of ancestral embodiment in *egunḡun*, notwithstanding, this paper offers a philosophical defense of its ontological foundation within Yoruba thought. This study is crucial because it presents a novel Yoruba philosophy of existence in the global continuous discourse of what it means to exist.

2. The Yoruba Race

The Yoruba predominantly occupy the Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Ogun, and Lagos states in the Western region of Nigeria, in the central north region, including Kwara and Kogi states, and also some regions of the Benin Republic. In addition, there are also some Yoruba people living in various regions of South America, including Brazil. The Yoruba are found to use the Yoruba language as their predominant means of communication; nonetheless, other members belonging to other sub-tribes such as Ijesha, Oyo, Ibadan, Ijebu, Ekiti, Egba, and Yewa can also communicate through other dialects. It is important to understand that, similar to other ethnic groups, the Yoruba have also been influenced by modernisation due to contact with other cultures. This encounter has also had the same effect on Yoruba's religious, political, cultural, and economic life.

The Yoruba worldview of reality is closely related to their philosophical understanding, which encompasses a detailed explanation of the universe and the place of humans therein. Very frequently, this world is put under philosophical scrutiny in the hope of reconciling the dynamic fluid nature of human life. The paper will look at the African worldview philosophy of existence, in particular the Yoruba culture, which is directly related to how they perceive the world. According to Oladipo, "A worldview is not a product of fantasy. Rather, it is usually the result of a long process of reflection and speculation on the human condition" (2002, 155).

3. Yoruba Concept of a Person

The Yoruba term for a human being is *Eniyan*. *Eniyan* in Yoruba also means an individual or human nature. Akanbi Deborah Modupe holds that *Eniyan* consists of two parts: *Eni*, which means self; and *Yan*, which means to flourish (Okoro 2023, 182-183). Thus, *Eni* is the Self that ought to recognise that flourishing life is realisable only within a communal existence, which is characterised by peaceful relations. *Yan*, as such, connotes that which has the propensity to transcend. In this instance, *Yan* foists upon *Eni* the responsibility to act rightly or the obligation to comply with moral principles and ethical rules that are meant to institute social cohesion. Barry Hallen theorises that Yoruba's *eniyan*, the individual, consists of a tangible physical body (*ara*) which is occupied by several non-physical or spiritual components (2002, 289). He puts forward the opinions of scholars such as A. B. Ellis, S. Farrow, Rev. Samuel Johnson, P. Talbot, Olumide Lucas, William Bascom, Bolaji Idowu, and Pierre Verger (*ibid.*) regarding what constitutes *eniyan*, synthesising their opinions as follows:

- (i) The Body: Although Lucas is the only one to actually mention it specifically, it might be understood that the rest took it as part of the natural makeup of the person, hence not requiring specific mention, and called it *ara*. This body is the handiwork of the stylistic creator *Obatala*, who has been given the mandate to design man the way he wants. The body is like the container that helps to accommodate existence itself, the soul. The body is just like a mask (appearance) of existence; it can decay under any given circumstance. Whether through sickness, spiritual attack, accidents, suicide, etc.
- (ii) The Soul or Spirit: A rudimentary, essential vital force initially referred to by Talbot and subsequently established by Lucas; designated *emi*. The soul is the opposite of the body because while the body is accidental, the soul is substantial and immortal. It drives the body. I can say of the body that it is a tool in the hands of the soul to perform its activities; it is a mere container. However, it (the soul) can leave the body when the situation is not suitable or when called upon either by *Olodumare* or tormented by other spirits. But crucial to recognise about the soul is that it is the form of existence.
- (iii) Ori (Spiritual head): Although *ori* is part of the human physical body, it possesses a vital force among the Yoruba people because it determines how an individual would survive in existence. It is one's *ori* that determines the kind of *ayanmo* (destiny) with which one is saddled on earth. It is said to have been chosen before worldly existence, and in fact, it is a matter of luck whether one chooses a good or bad *ori*. It is Ajala Alamo that is said to be responsible for the creation of the variants of *ori* and *Orunmila* is the witness of the kind of *ori* one chooses before coming to the world. The effect of *ori* is quite significant in the Yoruba philosophy of existence as presented in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Here, although Odewale willed to escape the prophecy concerning his destiny to kill his father and marry his mother, he was rendered powerless by fate, when he unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, which consequently, led to his downfall.

Aside from this triplex categorisation of the human person, there are the guardian spirit components of an individual which are separated from the personality's essence and to whom he can make offerings: Ellis and Lucas stress that the guardian spirit of the big toe, whose interest is primarily to give protection to the *eniyan* on a journey, is named *ipori*. The above sources also refer to a second stomach guardian spirit, but neither discusses additional information regarding its function or role, by the name of *ipin-ijeun*, although William Bascom wonders if it is a separate spiritual entity. The consensus of all the sources is that the Yoruba recognise a guardian spirit or minor god, personally responsible for the luck of the individual, good or ill, named *ori*. In a seemingly paradoxical manner, Lucas emphatically emphasises the identification of Okan as a protective spirit. (*ibid.*)

Olatunji Alabi Oyeshile aligns with the stance that Yoruba human nature is triplex in composition, having *ara* (body), *emi* (the spirit or soul,) and *ori* (that is, duality of *eniyan* as physical head or

carrier of human intellect and as decider and destiny shaper named *ori-inu* (non-physical inner-head) or *eleda*. *Ara* illustrates the body parts constituting a person that are *Opolo* (brain), *Okan* (heart), and *Ifun* (intestine). (2006, 154). Oladipo concludes that the Yoruba understand both *Opolo* and *Okan* as qualities of human consciousness, including thought patterns and emotions. *Opolo* is equated by them with sanity and intelligence to the extent that —when a person is insane, they would say — *Opolo re ko pe*, in the sense that the brain of the person is not complete or not orderly (1992, 16). Here, *Ori*, being the physical head, is a part of *ara*, indicating that the five senses, through which the outside world is perceived, are all contained in or controlled by the head. Additionally, the whole functioning of the central nervous system is controlled by *opolo* (the brain). Conversely, the psychological heart, as *Okan* defines it, is not only closely linked with the circulatory system but also conceived as the seat of emotions and corporeal vitality. (ibid.).

4. Individualism vs Communitarianism

Based on the fact that a human being is supposed to be responsible and reliable, native Yoruba society comes together to raise a child for the advantage of the child and the advantage of the society. When there is pregnancy, an *Ifa* priest is consulted to find out the type of child to be born. Even on occasions, a family might be given a prophecy of a given type of child and how to prepare and care for such a child will be discussed alongside the announcement before pregnancy. A woman with a future king in the womb will know beforehand for example. Upon arrival, a naming ceremony will be performed to welcome the child to the community, and it is a responsibility of all members of the community to take care of him through proper formation or informal education. This is contrary to Western or Cartesian epistemology which stresses the ego as the ontology of man. The word *cogito* 'I' is less essential when nurturing a child who for the Yoruba people is an entity of the society. This does not align with the Western philosophy because they (Yoruba people) believe that there is an interwovenness in human destiny which must be secured, this does not factor in the Westerner worldview. The belief is that an individual is responsible and can make rational choices that must not be necessarily connected to the whole or community. For the Yoruba, there are forces that determine human activity and they demand a harmonious existence among people in the community. Hence, it becomes a tradition to indoctrinate generations. Thus, the Yoruba proverb that *Eniyan kan lo n bimo, igba owo lo n to* is used to mean that although an individual gives birth to a child, it will be the collective efforts of individuals that will raise the child. In normal Yoruba society, a diviner must be consulted before any crucial decision being made; as Idowu believes, “the full responsibility of all the affairs belongs to the Deity... through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles; it is the Deity who is in control” (Kanu 2020, 331). Sacrifices are used regularly to satisfy the gods, since it is also believed that the evil world can alter destinies. Thus, the practice of daily prayers, as manifested in the form of sacrifices, is significant to one's *Ori*, as noted in the perspective of Abimbola. (ibid.).

The practice of *Iwapele* (or well-balanced) meditative recitation, accompanied by serious reverence, is deemed adequate for the improvement of the *ori-inu* of most. It is taken for granted that individuals who possess a well-balanced nature can utilise efficiently the most rudimentary form of communion between their *Oris* and the almighty *Olu-Orun*: a prayer or plea, named *adura*, for divine intervention. What happens in this type of prayer is as follows: *Eshu Elegbara* (a god) establishes contact with the spiritual plane on the supplicant's behalf, and relays the prayer to *Aye*, the bringer of *ase* or the spark of life. He relays this prayer without changing it in any form. The petitioner may then be satisfied with a personal answer. In situations where individuals do not possess the requisite knowledge or ability, appeal to the *Ifa* oracle of the deity *Orunmila* is permissible. Any message directed to *Orun* (non-physical world), whether it assumes the form of a mere individual plea or that of a more intricate ceremony performed by a qualified *Babalawo* (a divinatory priest), is activated by invocation of *ase*, (spiritual power) (ibid. 332). The community guides individuals to a mature age

and at times initiates them, especially male children, into a cult for support and protection.

Human persons are guided in choosing a trade that is suitable, as dictated by the diviners. Even in marriage, the community still pays attention to the choice of partner. In times of trouble, they still run back to their family and community for solutions. If there is any failure after all these have been done, they blame it on Ayanmo (Destiny or Fate); thus, the saying that *Ayanmo ko gbo Oogun* (Destiny has no remedy). This is also connected to the selection of *Ori*; thus, those with hard cases without remedy are said to be *Oloriburuku*, that is, having a bad head. And that is why *iwa* (character) is overemphasised in the Yoruba community, because without this *iwa*, it becomes difficult to ameliorate a weakened destiny from being disastrous. Apart from this reason, the *Iwa* is said to be what distinguishes an individual from being a mere animal. This *iwa* is normative and unifies the Yoruba people in making sense of their existence.

In all human societies, moral values are significant in controlling the conduct of individuals. Due to the significance given to morality, individuals have internalised the values and norms that enable them to select appropriate behaviour as situations arise. Thus, morality has an inherent connection to human behaviour. That is, it is concerned with right and wrong action, judgment, and belief about what is good or evil, without which no society, no human society, can develop. It is clear then that morality has an inherent connection with human conduct or behaviour; for if this were not the case, there would be no ground for either praising or blaming people for their actions, nor for teaching them the ways acceptable in the society. (Oladipo 1987, 42).

Iwa (character) has numerous derivatives, and the saying goes: “that good character must be the leading trait of one’s life” (Idowu 1962, 154). Based on this understanding of *Iwa*, it is not unusual to hear such an aphorism: *Iwa*, or good character, is one’s guard. The term *Iwa* sometimes has an ambivalent meaning because it is used in different senses to characterise a person’s character, either good or bad. Wande Abimbola has elucidated different meanings of the term (1975, 393). We are at least able to distinguish about four or five meanings where the term is used, all related to one another.

Etymologically, *Iwa* is derived from the root *wa*, meaning existence or being, with the prefix *I* added to it. The fundamental meaning of *Iwa* can thus be readily interpreted as “the state of being, living, or existing” (Oyeshile 2021, 6). *Iwa* has a secondary meaning of character or moral conduct, which is the result of the idiomatic extension of its original lexical meaning. Contrary to this assertion, *Iwa*, as a character, constitutes the crux of human life. (Abimbola 1975, 394). In short, *Iwa* mentions the moral dimensions of human life that are distinct from other spheres of human activity, like economics and science. In yet another sense, the term *Iwa* is employed to denote virtuous or evil character (*ibid* 2021, 6). This sense of the statement can be demonstrated in such statements as,

<i>Iwa okunrin naa dara</i>	The man’s character is good
<i>Iwa okunrin naa ko dara</i>	The character of the man is not good
<i>Iwa omo naa ko dara</i>	The character of the child is not good

The fourth use of the word, *Iwa*, pertains to the concept of good character as in the phrase *Obinrin naa ni iwa* (the woman has good character). The fifth sense, which derives from the previous senses of *Iwa*, is related to talk of *iwapele* (a good or virtuous character) and *iwabuburu* (an evil or bad character). Yoruba culture places premium emphasis on *Iwa* as a basic aim of human existence. To realise one’s aim in life, which is a good life, one must embrace *iwapele* (*ibid.* 1975, 394). A human being who declines to show virtuous or human characteristics is said to be a brute. The Yoruba proverb for a person like this is: *ki seniyan, nse lo sawo eniyan bora* (He is not a human being; he only takes the form of one). However, a mannered individual is referred to as *O seniyan* (he acts like a human). He can also be addressed as *Omoluabi*, a name that designates a person who acts like one of aristocratic birth, or one morally equipped with values and virtues. All the above

explanation has nothing to do with one's biological nature but means the term *eniyan* (person) is applied metaphorically to express the moral properties and ontological status of a man (*ibid.* 2021, 6).

Be that as it may, although the community tends to saddle several responsibilities for the individual and as such, soften the burden an individual may struggle with if left alone; this ontological status is somewhat problematic because it tends to limit the freedom of the individual to make first-hand choices that explain his existence and could help improve the world. In addition, cultures progress and evolve in time, but before this change occurs, it demands a level of antithesis or contradiction which rebel against the existing order. This can only be possible when there is an ego that recognises the self, as a constituent of existence, rather than that which is overpowered by the communitarian mechanism. The concept of *iwa* for instance, when analysed critically might not be as objective as the Yoruba philosophical system has it. In this regard, the western notion of the individual becomes attractive in constituting change and authentic existence. However, the self alone is not sufficient in the quest for existence. Therefore, a balance between the individual and the community would be crucial for a rational existence.

5. Death and Immortality

The knowledge that Death will ultimately and in some manner take man from the world, even following all his endeavours to make it his eternal home, and such a nice one, at that is certainly the ultimate challenge for man. Frightened by the proximity of Death, man sometimes hopes that he was never brought into existence; but having been brought into existence, he has no option but to accept Death as the price of living. Now it's his turn to turn a deaf ear to it so that he could enjoy the little time he has to exist on earth; then he would pay the cost when the hour comes. Alternatively, he may try to oppose Death and endeavour to nullify its authority. And this naturally amounts to a mammoth bet. But the ultimate victory will ensure eternal living. In the Yoruba belief system, the Yoruba people appear to have succeeded in neutralising or, say, cushioned the effect of Death's authority by using art as ammunition. They are immortal (Lawal 1977, 55).

In Babatunde's work *The Living Dead*, he narrates how death and those who were his servants constantly plague *Ifè* town. Usually, every fourth day of the week, they descend from heaven to *Ojajife* market, where they took several people's lives with their destructive staffs handed over to them by death, which means that at the end of the day, a lot of people in *Ifè* tasted calamity from the bitter sauce of death. Those who were lucky not to be destroyed by the followers of death wept bitterly to *Lafodigo*, who was the incumbent *Oni*, and to *Alase, Orisala, Odua, Orisala Ijugbe* to come to their aid. But unfortunately, these *Orisas* couldn't chase them away. It was *AmaiyeGUN* who promised to rescue the people. He got a coloured cloth which he sewed as a costume which made his body unexposed completely from head to toe, with a glove made of cloth, he then sacrificed a ram, cock and other rituals, which he used in creating the costume. Afterwards, he summoned the people in the community. In their presence, he dipped his left leg in the costume he had made which was up to his knee. The people saw it and sang his praise. He put in his right leg in the costume, to the same effect. Lastly, he wore the gown which covered his body completely as well as his face. He then pulled the costume and kept it somewhere safe in his room. Only to discover Death would visit *Ifè* the next day. He then met the *Oni* to reassure him of his promise to the people (*ibid.*).

When the next day came, *AmaiyeGUN* and those who supported him were not in their costumes, but rather headed straight to *Ojajife* market, where Death usually struck. They hid on distinct branches of large trees. After a while, when the people of the town began to come to the market, Death and his servants pounce on them, causing destruction and killing them with their vicious staffs. That was when *AmaiyeGUN* alighted from where he hid and made a sound like *Egungun, Khao Khoo*—Death, and his servants became petrified at this voice, left their staffs, and fled away.

Amaiyegun didn't stop there, he and his followers chased Death; caught him and his followers then struck them with their own staffs on the head, Gbo! So, they all fell one after the other as they were struck by their own staffs. According to this Yoruba myth, since then, Death and his servants' effects have been cushioned and have not visited Ife, the historical home of the Yoruba people. To put this straight, it was through the use of a mask, in the form of Egungun (masquerade) that man defeated death. That being said, to grapple with the importance of art in the philosophy of existence of the Yoruba people, one must comprehend the role of artworks in terms of the Yoruba concept of man, death, and immortality.

The Yoruba believe that their ancestors can be embodied in artworks of different kinds. The artwork is proportional; the same way as the body is a mask that accommodates the soul. Consequently, even when the soul has been dematerialised from the body, the soul can inhabit in sculptures to communicate and influence those who are physically inhabitants of the community. In Yoruba land, for instance, hunters odes are seen as heroes and people who protect the community from hazards. As such, they are seen as people who don't die. But they continue their journey afterlife. Notwithstanding, in doing so, when their soul leaves their body, an *ipa* (sacrifice) is performed as a sign of respect and honour for the heroic and courageous deeds of these hunters. In addition, it is to support them with the spiritual strength to live in the afterlife. However, they become legends and ancestors in the hearts of their descendants and even the entire community. Their existence in the physical world can be assured through symbolisation or effigy that may not necessarily have a resemblance to the deceased, or better still, the attire worn by the deceased can be worn on the effigy to portray the presence of the ancestor. The belief is that the soul of the ancestors reside in the effigy. This stresses the point that, in artworks, the Yoruba can embody a previously disembodied existence. For instance, the Yoruba have strong reflection on disembodied existence, kings, obas never die, they only make a journey into another space. Also, it is the same stroke for *Esu*, *Ogum*, *Sango*, and *Oya*, just like hunters, they can be symbolised using diverse forms of art work, be it from molded clay, carved wood, or bended metal – only *Olodumare* who is supreme and beyond space cannot be properly represented in person. Since he is the totality of existence.

Furthermore, in Yoruba land, *Ebeji* (twins) is a phenomenon that accounts for the importance of artwork in uniting the living and the dead. In Yoruba land, if one of a twins dies, the family is told to carve a wooden representation of the other twin, so that the one who is alive would not join the dead one. Here, it is clear that the souls of the departed twins can still exist in physical space by occupying an artwork. It is crucial to state clearly that this explanatory model of the Yoruba philosophy of existence is not merely based on speculation, but rather, the reality throughout the periods of the living of the Yoruba people.

In Yoruba cosmology, what we have discussed so far means that the soul is everlasting and can dwell in various objects. The Supreme God, *Olodumare*, for instance, having made up his mind to create man, asked one of the deities, *Obatala*, to mold man's material from clay. And having molded the image, *Olodumare* breathed life (*emi*) into it, so that man is a sort of sculpture brought to life by the breath of *Olodumare* (*ibid.* 55). The sculpture lives so long as the life breath, or what is otherwise called the soul, remains in it. Withdrawal or loss of the soul brings death; the physical body (*ara*) stiffens, and, when buried, returns to clay, which it was first. Death is not, however, the end of life to the Yoruba. It is merely a dematerialisation of the vital breath or soul, and therefore a transformation from earthly to spiritual life (a form of After-Life), where the dematerialised soul is free to choose to stay there forever, although it can make occasional returns to earth via reincarnation (*atunwa*). It is this belief in an Afterlife and in Reincarnation that ensures the Yoruba immortality. There are two types of reincarnation for the Yoruba. One is when a dead ancestor is believed to have been reborn within the same family: The returned ancestor in a child can be found by physical resemblance, similarity of character or temperament, by dreams in which the ancestor tells one in the family that he has returned, or by divination to the mother while pregnant, (*ibid.* 55). These kids are called

Babatunde (Father comes back) or Yetunde (Mother comes back) if they just so happen to be the same sex as a recently deceased relative.

In such instances, the deceased soul has returned to the world to start a new life in a new physical body. Indeed, among some Yoruba, children so born are accorded the same treatment as if they were the deceased parents, (ibid. 55). In the second type of reincarnation, it is the soul of a series of spirit children or *abiku* (born to die) that enters in secret into the womb of a pregnant woman and who is born in what can be considered a 'borrowed' body. Of course, *abiku's* concealed soul is only on earth as a form of traveler; since it will depart the 'borrowed' body soon in order to return to its unborn companions. So, the woman who loses a string of children is assumed to be tormented by the *abiku* spirit; it is the same entity that has been "coming and returning" in different sexual incarnations (Omolade 1973, 4). But the important thing about Yoruba belief in reincarnation is how far it has gone towards an identification of the human body with sculpture, and a view of it as a mere mask of mortal life. The reincarnated ancestor and *abiku* are both mere masqueraders. At the time of death, it is the temporal mask, *Obatala's* creation, that will perish; the human soul, being a constituent of *Olodumare's* breath, will not. (Idowu 1962, 43). Ancestors are celebrated during the *odun egungun* (masquerade festival), where the spirits of ancestors are embodied in different bodies and celebrated by their descendants. These *egunguns* act as a bridge between the physical realm and the non-physical realm to pass important messages to their people or protect them. Although Adegbindin argued in a seminar presentation, African Traditional Thought, that ancestral embodiment in *egungun* during the *egungun* festival or *oro* has been demystified by several persons who socialised in the system. They argue that the *egungun* festival or *Oro* festival has no metaphysical substance, rather is based on tricks and crafty manipulations, as such, such thought is flawed. Notwithstanding, this can be objected simply by stressing the intangibility of testifiers on manners of knowledge and that individuals who claim to have socialised in a system have no absolute say on the verisimilitude of the embodiment of ancestor in *egungun*. This problem can be associated with the core issue of traditional African epistemology, which accommodates oral literature. For instance, a genuine 'legend' can be altered by a faction of persons, for whatever reason it may be, but since it is not within the positivist parameter, it becomes open to invalid attacks. But this does not negate its validity. Having said this, the aim of this kind of reasoning is not to rubbish the value of testifiers, rather to make it clear that testimony alone is not enough to suggest that there is no metaphysical event involved in *Egungun* as a Yoruba culture. One can argue that those who claimed to had socialised in the doctrine of *Egungun* and found it not metaphysical, only got involved in its inauthentic practice.

In a concluding note, the Yoruba Philosophy of existence is the reflection of the Yoruba people about human existence. It is quite the same with most African metaphysics of existence. However, they have distinct features when it comes to emphasis and language differences. The Yoruba conception of a person is similar to that of the Akpan and the Igbo culture because it believes that the physical and non-physical elements of existence are connected and have consequences for a person's moral and social status. The Igbo and Akpan cultures are interrelated elements that function in distinct roles. In Akpan, *okra* describes the soul, which represents one's personality. The *sunsum* constitutes both an individual's personality and the breath. It is believed among the Igbo people that there is *mmuo*, the spirit responsible for reincarnation. For the *Nkpruobi*, it is the personality's soul that dissolves with the physical body after death. The *Ndu* is just like the Akpan's *honhom*, and Yoruba's *emi*; it is the force that gives life. (Oyeshile 2002, 108).

Notwithstanding this distinction, among these entities, some intersect in their function. Gyekye believes that the *okra* represents the inner life of a person and is the soul. It is the primary element of life and destiny *Nkrabea* of a person (ibid.). The *okra* is also related to *honhum* breathe (Gyekye 1984, 201). According to Gyeke, the *okra* and the *honhum* are not the same since the latter is only the tangible product of the former (ibid. 2002, 109). From this exposition so far, it can be deduced that at the same level, *okra* shares the same function as the Yoruba *ori* (destiny), on the other hand,

the *okra* is connected to *honhum* which is a manifestation of *okra*, but the Yoruba *ori* is not in any way connected to *emi* (breath).

This brings about the distinction among the Akan, Igbo, and Yoruba descriptions of the human person. In addition, the Akpan *sunsum* is termed as spirit, which is the element of an individual's personality, ego, and looks (ibid.). It is immaterial and can decide to leave the physical body during sleep and never return, resulting in the death of such a body. It has positive and negative effects on its subject, just like the *okra*, and can be compared with the Yoruba's *emi*, Igbo's *Ndu*, and *Nkpruobi* due to its force to generate life.

This *sunsum* shares some similarity with the Yoruba and Igbo *Chi* since both are also responsible for a person's element of individuality. With this said, we can observe that several apparent overlaps in Akpan's description of a person are not the case in the philosophy of existence of the Igbo and Yoruba cultures.

In all, while the Yoruba philosophy of existence stresses more on *ori* and *iwa*, the Igbo philosophy of existence, for instance, stresses more on ancestors and forces in a communitarian order. In distinguishing the Yoruba philosophy of existence, for instance, from other cultures, Oladipo, in his paper, *The Yoruba Conception of a Person* argues that Akan's *okra* is similar to some extent with *emi* since both are fundamental in directing man's existence. Notwithstanding, they are not the same (Ojo 2024, 27).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the philosophy of existence has been discussed within the Yoruba cultural belief system, which is embodied in their definition of the human person, *iwa*, communal living, *ori*, death, and immortality. In respect to these, the human person exists as the *ara* (body), *emi* (spirit), and *ori* (spiritual head). And this drives the individual activities within a communal system. It is in this communal system that an individual is made and ought to conform to the moral, political, and religious demands of the society. To deviate from these expectations is to be considered low in the rank of existence. An individual must possess *iwa* to be regarded as *eniyan*; otherwise, such a person is seen as an ordinary person without real existence. In addition, *ori* in the Yoruba cultural system as that which determines the progression, regression or even staticness of human existence, and the community has a crucial role to play in this event. Death is not the finality of existence in human existence, since the soul still exists in the realm beyond the physical and can reincarnate into the family it left or the spirit of the dead can be embodied again through *Abiku*, *Egungun*, and Artwork. Although the truth-value of the ancestral embodiment in *Egungun* as a masquerader has been questioned by Tade Adegbindin, notwithstanding, my response is mete out in this paper. The significance of this study is to contribute meaningfully to global reflection on what it means to exist—and to explore the possibility of existence beyond death.

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