

Human Personality and the Yoruba Worldview: An Ethico-Sociological Interpretation

by

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Introduction

Our main concern in this paper is to provide an ethico-sociological analysis and interpretation of the idea of human personality in the Yoruba worldview. There is an interesting pool of scholarly literature on human personality in Yoruba thought generated around the philosophical discussions and accounts of what constitute human personality in Yoruba worldview which clearly shows that scholastic concerns have overwhelmingly dwelled on issues dealing with metaphysical interpretations and explanations of destiny, human nature and the reality of human existence.¹

In many of this earlier metaphysical discourse on human personality, the emphasis and focus have usually been on what constitute the nature of personality. Various interpretations such as monism, dualism, soft-determinism, fatalism and naturalism have been given by scholars. Central to this discourse on the nature of human personality in African thought is the adoption of the comparative methodological approach by scholars viz-a-viz the Western philosophical perspectives.

While the above approach and interpretation are of a truth, of philosophical importance, our focus is to explore another philosophical dimension about human personality in the Yoruba thought system. Hence, our fundamental assumption behind this is that there are significant dimensions besides the metaphysical approach to the Yoruba concept of human personality, which are of philosophical interest, and thus an ethico-sociological appraisal of human personality, because of its promising and viable insights for understanding contemporary Nigerian society. Therefore, we argue that the concepts of *Omoluwabi* (good person) and communitarianism in relation to personhood are definitive in understanding what constitute human personality in Yoruba culture. And in giving an ethico-sociological interpretation of human personality, our discussion dwells and proceeds from the concepts of *Omoluwabi* and communitarianism.

***Omoluwabi* (good person) in the Yoruba Thought System**

The concept of *Omoluwabi* in Yoruba thought probes deeply into the Yoruba understanding of characteristics features constitutive of a person. Thus, this concept is a demand for an explanation for determining a paradigm of reckoning with the social worth of a person. Via the concept of *Omoluwabi* from the Yoruba, there is a demarcation and perhaps a distinction between the human being in generic sense, and the human person in a specific sense.

With respect to the former, it is reasonable to raise fundamental questions as what is a human? What is the nature of a human? (These fundamental questions are indeed, of biological and philosophical relevance). Where the first question- ‘what is human?’- is an empirical question which may yield an answer based upon an objective description of human observable behavior the second question- ‘what is the nature of human?’- is a metaphysical question inquiring into the constitutive elements of a human being (Dzobo, 1992: 123). The question of what is a human is a demand for scientific explanations of molecules that make us different from other living species. Hence, we can ask what is a person or what is the nature of a person within the Yoruba philosophical context, and more fundamental who is a person when an attempt to provide an answer is a departure from the metaphysical or empirical realms to the sociological-normative realm which engages an enquiry into the peoples’ perception of their cultural and personal identities.

Having set the tone of the discussion, the question is who is an *Omoluwabi*? The concept *Omoluwabi* is an adjectival Yoruba phrase, which has the words- “*Omo + ti + Olu- iwa + bi*” as its components. Literally translated and separately, *omo* means ‘child’, *ti* means ‘that or which’, *Olu-iwa* means the chief or master of *Iwa* (character), *bi* means ‘born’. When combined, *omoluwabi* translates as “the baby begotten by the chief of *iwa*”. Such a child is thought of as a paragon of excellence in character.

This is the popular conception of *omoluwabi*, but it has some ambivalence. Segun Gbadegesin identifies one when he interpreted *Olu-iwa* as ‘God, the creator of every baby’ and as every baby is an *omoluwabi* (2007:87). Though, Gbadegesin’s interpretation is not absolute in Yoruba lingua structure, as *olu-iwa* could denote a dignified parent with excellent character. However, *olu-iwa* may create an exemplar of character or a baby as a person of dignity; yet, there is no guarantee that the baby would remain an exemplar of character like the creator of the biological father. And the ambivalence can also be seen in possibility that the child may turn out to be an *Omoluwabi* while not born by someone with good character.

Hence, the conception of *omoluwabi* by Sophie Oluwole (2007) is more semantically instructive, thought provoking and reflective of the Yoruba cultural experience which suggests *Omo ti o ni iwa bi* (a child whose character takes after...) as the full rendition of *Omoluabi*. According to her, the phrase “*Omo- ti- o ni- iwa-bi*” definitely does not make a complete sense because it is a phrase that still yearns for a completion because it raises the question: “*Omo ti o ni iwa bi tani?*” (a child whose character takes after...who?) (Oluwole, 2007: 12).

In completing this interrogative phrase, Oluwole harps *Omoluabi* as “*Omo ti o ni iwa bi eni ti a ko, ti o si gba eko*” (A person that behaves like someone who is well nurtured and lives by the precepts of the education s/he has been given). Therefore, the Yoruba word *Omoluabi* may thus be appropriately rendered as a conflation of three interrelated descriptions. These are:

Omo ti o ni’ wa bi (A person who behaves like...)
Eni ti a ko (Someone properly nurtured)
Ti o si gba eko (And who behaves accordingly) (Oluwole, 2007: 13)

This combination thus gives us a good picture of *Omoluabi* in Yoruba culture wherein a person is given a deep knowledge, wisdom, and therefore be trained to be self discipline and to develop a sense of responsibility that shows in private and public actions which earns individuals social integrity, and personality in Yoruba society. And in contrast with *eniyan-keyan* or *eniyan la-san*, which means ‘caricature person’, and *omokomo* (a worthless child), an *Omoluabi* can also be defined as a ‘good and cultured person’. Hence, it is common among the Yoruba to use the adjectival *eniyan-gidi* meaning ‘an ideal person’ as a synonym to *omoluwabi*, a ‘good person’.

And in his discussion on “Identity and the Artistic Process in the Yoruba Aesthetic Concept of *Iwa*”, Rowland Abiodun describes “an *omoluwabi* as someone who has been well brought up or a person who is highly cultured” (1983: 14). Thus, when people are described as cultured or uncultured – as *omoluwabi* or *omolasan* – as the case may be, a general description is being given of personhood as to whether or not an individual is socially integrated or is a misfit or a cultural deviant within a given social setting or social organization (Oyeneye and Shoremi, 1997: 253).

And in the same vein, in an attempt to elucidate the concept of *omoluwabi* (good person), Wande Abimbola makes it clear that *omoluwabi* is a function of exhibiting and demonstrating the inherent virtue and value of *iwapele* (1975: 389). Thus, *Iwapele* via Abimbola tells us is “good or gentle character” and it is ultimately the basis of moral conduct in Yoruba culture and a core defining attribute of *omoluwabi*, set as a conglomeration of principles of moral conduct demonstrated by an *omoluwabi* with the most fundamental of these principles include: *oro siso*, (spoken word), *iteriba* (respect), *inu rere* (having good mind to others), *otito* (truth), *iwa* (character), *akinkanju* (bravery), *ise* (hard work) and *opolo pipe* (intelligence).

In unity with the above, the spoken word is highly respected among the Yoruba hence, to be categorized as an *omoluwabi*, one must be capable of intelligence use of language. J.A.I. Bewaji, stresses this principle of *iwapele*, as demonstrated by an *omoluwabi* when he asserts that:

The demand for, and expectation of, decent, responsible and insightful use of the language is reflected in all aspects of communication, be it in verbal salutations, musical constructions, poetic performances, religious and spiritual displays and utterances, or in the negotiations of important formal and non-formal pacts, deals, treaties and business, etc. (Bewaji, 2004:159).

Thus, the Yoruba accord great respect for intelligent and the expert use of language, especially via the appropriate use of proverbs, and as such, an *omoluwabi* is expected to exhibit/demonstrate this capacity whereas the Yoruba regards the sagacious usage of the spoken word is an embodiment of good character because they believe it is the harbinger of peace and war; the engine of culture and civility; the hallmark of conversational prudence and the epitome of intellectual maturity that may be the precursor of social, political, religious and cultural responsibility.²

Furthermore, in conceptualizing *omoluwabi*, we must also examine at least three other elements, the *iteriba* concerning respect, the *Inurere* concerning having a good mind or intention with others, and *Iwa* which representing character. First, *iteriba* (respect) is a salient feature for being an *omoluwabi* whereupon it is expected that a person must be respectful to other beings irrespective of one’s age, class or social stratification (even the elderly are expected to accord due respect to the young, for respect begets respect). Such respect also implies recognizing the rights of others not only on the ground of their age, i.e. old-age, social status, political status, moral uprightness, but on the ground of their being human. Second, *inurere* (having good mind or intention towards others) constitutes a fundamental moral and psychological attribute a person is expected to have, along with being truthful and honest (Abimbola, 1975: 393). And third, *iwa* (character) makes a person more valuable or less valuable; and this is where there is a distinction between good character (*iwa rere*) and bad character (*iwa ibaje* or *iwa buburu*).

Hence, when a person is known with the latter, there will be negative appreciation of the humanity of the person which explains why the Yoruba will refer to a deviant as *eniyan lasan* or *eniyan-keyan* (caricature person). It is instructive to note that *iwa* (i.e. good character) adds to the quality of appraisal that an individual garners; yet, it does not solely determine the humanity of the person in question, and for this reason, we can say that all human persons are human beings, but not all human beings are human persons (understood in the sense of *omoluwabi*). Therefore, *Iwa* character plays an important role in the making and passing of rights, and in the integrity of individuals because a human being without good character, though human, but is no less than *eranko*, an animal.

The point here is that the absence of proper culture, moral probity, and integrity devalues the personhood of a person to the level of just ordinary things- *eniyan lasan*, *lasan*, or animal-*eranko*. Thus, such a being or an individual loses the personhood of being a member of society which being human being demands. In other words, such a person would not be deemed fit, for confidence, trust or responsibility; and would not pass the gamut of being qualified as an *omoluwabi* in a Yoruba cultural context. Perhaps, to strengthen this view and belief of the Yoruba on *iwa* as the fulcrum of human personality, let us quote an extract from the *Ifa* literary corpus, thus in *Ose Meji*, verse ten, it is stated that:

Inu bibi o da nnkan, suuru baba iwa;
Agba t'oni suuru, ohun gbogbo l'o ni;
Dia fun ori, a bu fun iwa.
T'iwa nikan lo soro;
Ori kan o buru n'ile Ife; t'iwa nikan lo soro.

Indignation does not bring forth anything good;
Patience is the best of character
A patient elder has everything;
The truth of this thesis is adequately demonstrated
in the incidence of destiny that lacks character.
Nurturing as well as exhibiting good character is difficult;
No destiny is bad in prestine Ife;
It is only nurturing and exhibiting good character that is difficult.

The import of the above is that it is not the case that it is only *ori* (the guardian soul symbolic of destiny) that is solely responsible for what personality a person eventually becomes in life. Rather, it is man's character that aids man's destiny. Therefore, in knowing one's personality, whether of repute or disrepute, and the 'how' factors that are quintessential to developing human personality, the elements of good character are imperative.

On the above premise, it is instructive to note the perspective of S. Ade Ali on the concept of *omoluwabi*. For him, the concept of a person, *omoluwabi* has biological, metaphysical, epistemological and ethical connotations, which must be possessed and actualized before a human can qualify as a person in the Yoruba cultural context. Hence, among the criteria he listed are: self-consciousness, rationality, abstraction, freedom, memory, intellectual intuition, intellectual perception, intellectual synthesis, and induction, rational language, a true power of will, a powerful analytic judgement, preservation and affection (Ali, 1997: 55). And, the qualification of being a person in Yoruba as enumerated by Ade Ali, has some implications, thus:

The implication is that such people like idiots, senile, imbeciles, crating, kleptomaniac, or neurosis agents, moral outlaws, social deviants, dumb and deaf, even children (though potentially persons) are left out on the basis that they cannot fully (perhaps at the moment) fully actualize the salient characteristic features for being a person (ibid.).

From the above review of Ali, we can add a caveat by positing that an *omoluwabi*, is for the Yoruba, a person of virtue; a well-behaved individual of almost an impeccable character who has to a considerable extent, have good anatomical, and psychological factors necessary for being a human; ha person demonstrates fairly well, the intrinsic psycho-physiological potentiality of human features as well as the normative principles of *iwapele*. Hence, it is the total actualization of the positive use of salient characteristic human features-mental, physical, psychological together with evidential moral uprightness, which makes a being a person, and thus an *omoluwabi* in Yoruba cultural context. However, an *omulawabi* is not a perfectly ideal or an iron cast with no flaws, because the Yoruba abhor all claims of absolutism in whatever ramifications, and belief that as humans, we can only and ought to only strive towards the ideal; because perfection and absolutism is illusionary in their thought system.

Communitarianism and Personhood

Having discussed the normative essence of personality in Yoruba worldview, let us now explore its sociological conception. One implicit assumption of this question is that the Yoruba traditional society, like other African traditional societies is an egalitarian society based on the principle of communalism. The fundamental question in this regard is: what would be the conception of personhood/personality in a communalistic society, and what was it like in the experience of the traditional Yoruba?

There is wide array of possible answers to these related questions. For one, it is possible for people to conclude that given its emphasis on communal values; collective good and shared ends, communitarianism invariably conceives, the person as wholly constituted by social relationships. Secondly, it could be argued that it tends to whittle down the moral autonomy of the person. The implication of these implicit assumptions of communitarianism is that it makes nonsense of the normative conception of personhood earlier discussed. In other words, it makes the being and life of the individual person totally dependent on the activities, values, projects, practices and ends of the community, and consequently, it diminishes freedom and the capacity to choose or question or reevaluate the shared values of the community (Gyekye, 1992: 102). In view of these assumptions, there is the need to critically examine this veracity in relation to the sociological relationship between communalism and personhood in Yoruba culture, nay African thought.

In a definitional context, a community is a social-political arrangement usually made up of persons, group of persons who are linked together by interpersonal bonds, which are not necessarily biological. And therefore, community is predicated on the social being and belongingness of people with communal values, which serves as the foundational basis of communalism which define and guide social relations in the form of attitudes and behaviour that should exist between individuals living together in a community who not only share a social life but also a sense of common good (Gyekye, 1996: 35). Hence, the values include sharing resources, burden, and social responsibility, mutual aid, caring for others, inter-dependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, social harmony and mutual trust ((Oyeshile, 2006: 104). Whereas the basic thrust of communitarianism is that “instead of such values as individual interest autonomy, universality, natural rights and neutrality, communitarian philosophy is framed in terms of the common good, social practices and traditions, character, solidarity and social responsibility” (Daly, 1994:xvi).

Given the above conception, what we call personality is defined, shaped and developed within the context of a community. Segun Gbadegesin harps on this in his conception of personality or personhood. According to him, “a person is what he is in virtue of what he is predestined to be, his character, and the communal influence on him. It is a combination of these elements that constitutes human personality” (Gbadegesin, 1992: 183). He writes further:

A person whose existence and personality is dependent on the community is expected in turn to contribute his own quota to the continued existence of the community, which nurtures him and partakes in his destiny. This is the ultimate meaning of human existence. The crown of personal life is to bear fruit (beget offspring); the crown of communal life is to be useful to one's community. The meaning of one's life is measured by one's commitment to social ideals and communal existence (ibid: 184).

The point Gbadegesin is trying to make in view of his sociological conception of a person is that human personality can develop to its fullest capacity by being immersed in the life of the group. And conversely, scholars like Edward Blyden, John Mbiti, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, Bolaji Idowu and Ifeanyi Menkiti all have something to say on the relationship between communitarianism and personality, especially in African thought. One common thing to these scholars is that they hold on to a radical communitarian theory of person in African thought, and for them, the community determines the social, religious, political and moral being. Thus, the various versions of their radical communal thesis can be reduced to the idea that community values take precedence over individual values and therefore the welfare of the individual must be seen from the standpoint of the welfare of the community, since the individual cannot exist without the community (Oyeshile, *Op. cit.*: 108). Of all these radical exponents of communitarianism, Menkiti is more contemporarily outspoken, therefore, his views shall be considered in explicating the radical communitarian perspective of personhood.

In his communitarian theory of personhood, Menkiti (1984: 172) claims that in the African conception of personhood, as contrast to the Western understanding, the community takes priority both ontologically and epistemologically over the individual. That is, it is the community that defines a person as a person. While agreeing with Mbiti's dictum that 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am', Menkiti posits that personhood is achieved after a process of incorporation.

The meaning of this is that in order to attain personality, one must undergo a process of social and ritual transformation until ones attains the full complement of excellence. This transformation, Menkiti tells us, is determined by the community through the prescription of certain norms. Hence, he argues further that infants are not persons because they cannot be said to obey the norms of the community. Likewise, the dead are also denied personhood simply on the ground that they are no longer within the human community. According to him, "the designation "it" is used for both the infant and the dead person; and in addition, infants are denied personhood because there is no ritualized grief at their death" (Ibid.).

In a critical reaction to the radical communitarian conception of personality in African thought, we have the moderate communitarian theorists championed by Kwame Gyekye and Tunji Oyeshile. The central claim of these scholars is that while personhood is partly determined by communal values, fundamentally, there are other things apart from the community which make a human being enjoy the attribute of personhood. Gyekye in particular argues that a person is endowed with certain attributes which are prior to community formation. Thus, it is these attributes, such as, rationality, the capacity for virtue, ability to make moral judgments and to choose that confer personhood on the individual (Gyekye, 1992: 111).

Therefore, without these attributes, we cannot talk of the community, and the function of the community, in Gyekye's view, is to discover these various attributes and nurture them to maturity in various individuals. Personhood for him, cannot be achieved or acquired because since the birth of a child, he or she has automatically becomes a person. But the critical question is of what implication is this position on human personality, and does personhood automatically confers personalityhood? While these questions are unanswered by Gyekye, let us see the position of Olatunji Oyeshile.

Oyeshile is emphatic on the claim that besides the community, the biological factor also determines personhood, and that a necessary relationship between the individual and community as the individual destiny cannot be separated from the community destiny and vice-versa. While agreeing with Gyekye that infants and the dead cannot be denied personhood because they have moral potentials, Oyeshile claims that the failure of having a social status (personality) (emphasis mine) does not strictly imply having no personhood (Oyeshile, *Op.cit.*: 106).

Conclusion

The discourse thus far on the idea of human personality in Yoruba worldview raises some new conjectures as to the nature of the relationship between personhood and personality. Within the gamut of Yoruba philosophical thought, it may be asked: is this relationship transitive, reflexive or symmetrical? While this is an issue worthy of further philosophical investigation, it is apposite at this point to conclusively note that human personality is not all about decoding the metaphysically shrouded notion of destiny and its close ally of material earthly success.

Therefore, what we have shown in this paper is that there is a more fundamental dimension to human personality in Yoruba thought system via an ethico-sociological interpretation. Hence, the positions established in this paper are quite resonantly different and offer better explanation when compared with the popular and myopic metaphysical and ethnographical accounts/writings of earlier scholars on human personality. Conclusively, we can reasonably say that the conditions of being qualified as an *omoluabi* together with the demonstrative capacity of communitarianhood conjointly confer what we call human personality in the Yoruba worldview; while the individual is seen as autonomous in nature, the community is the basis for the actualization of individual values, aspirations and goals. Thus, as the community partly determines personhood in traditional Yoruba and African culture generally, so does the elements of *omoluabi* continually mould and nurture personhood in human personality, in the cultural milieu of the people.

Notes

¹A cross-section scrutiny of the following works attest to this fact: Olusegun Oladipo, "The Yoruba Concept of a Person: An Analytico-philosophical Study", *International Studies in Philosophy*, XXIV/3, 1992. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962). Wande Abimbola, "The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality", *La Notion de Personne en Afrique Noire*, (Paris: Center National de la Recherche Scientifique) No.144. M.A. Makinde, "An African Concept of Human Personality: The Yoruba Example", *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Philosophy of Understanding: Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, Vol.7, No. 3, 1984. M.A. Makinde, "A Philosophical Analysis of the Yoruba Concept of *Ori* and Human Destiny", *International Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. XVII, No. 1. E. O. Oduwole, "The Yoruba Concepts of *Ori* and Human Destiny: A Fatalistic Interpretation", *Journal of Philosophy and Development*, Vol.2, No. 1&2, January, 1996. Barry Hallen, "Eniyan: A Critical Analysis of the Yoruba Concept of Person" in *The Substance of African Philosophy*, C.S. Momoh (ed.) (Auchi: African Philosophy Project's publication, 2000). O. A Balogun, "The Yoruba Concept of Person: An African Solution to the Traditional Mind-body Problem", *Journal of Yoruba Folklore*, No. 1, 1999. S. A. Ali, "The Yoruba Conception of Destiny: A Critical Analysis", *Journal of Philosophy and Development*, No. 1, Vols. 1 & 2, January, 1995.

²A Detailed Consideration of these Moral Principles has been brilliantly attempted by Sophie Oluwole, using the insights from Yoruba folklore. For more details, see "The Rational Basis of Yoruba Ethical Thinking", in Sophie, B.Oluwole, *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head*, (Ikeja: Excel Publishers, 1992) Pp. 55-72.

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