

Volume 1
Number 1
1978

JOURNAL OF YORUBA FOLKLORE

(ISSN 1117 — 5559)

Published by

THE YORUBA FOLKLORE SEMINAR COMMITTEE

Faculty of Arts

Ogun State University

P. M. B. 2002

Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

THE ETHICS OF THE HEREAFTER IN YORUBA FOLK-LORE

A. O. DAIRO

Introduction

The more you know of your culture and culture of other peoples the more you will yearn to protect, nurture and propagate the goodness in yours. This calls for the task to which I have set myself in this paper. That is, to focus on and explicate a belief which by and large sharpens and moderates the Yoruba ways of life. The religiosity of the Yoruba can only be best understood in their conception of the here-after. Therefore, our paramount concern in this essay will be the question of the probable origin of this myth, the belief in the here-after, the ethics generated by this belief as well as its uniqueness. I hope, however, that this essay will in no small measure extend the bounds of our knowledge on Yoruba folk-lore of the here-after.

It seems essential to me to examine carefully our use of the key words in this topic. Misunderstanding and misuse of these key words may easily cloud and distract the issue which requires attention. I am, therefore, devoting this aspect of the work to the explanation of the words.

Definition of terms

Ethics:

The word ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos* "custom" or "conduct". The closest term in English is manners. Ethics is the science or moral conduct. Morals are concerned with character and with the distinction between what is right and what is wrong¹. It could be relative in the sense that what is approved in one society may be disapproved in another. But it should be noted that certain ethical injunctions are general and universal. Ethics is directed towards the achievement of the highest good which is the road to the total well-being of man and his society. This highest good is the target of the Yoruba in order to qualify for the here-after with *Olodumare*.

Folk-lore:

Folk-lore is the survival of old rudimentary modes of life and thought in the habits and institutions of a people. In its broadest sense, it may be said to embrace the whole body of a people's traditional beliefs and customs; so far as these appear to be due to the collective action of the multitude and cannot be traced to the individual influence of great men².

There is no reason to suppose that the Yoruba form an exception to this general law. No doubt, the Yoruba had passed through a stage of barbarism and even of savagery. This, based on the analogy of other races is confirmed by an examination of their literature which contains many references to beliefs, e.g. belief in God, in divinities, in ancestors, in the here-after etc. and in practices like marriage, puberty rites, naming, burial etc. These can hardly be explained except on the supposition that they are rudimentary survival from a far lower level of culture. It is to the illustration and explanation of one of such relics of rudimentary times that I have addressed myself in this work.

Here-After:

Life is not interminable. Death is a necessary debt which everyone owes *Olodumare*. Death became a debt for man after the fall of man in Yoruba mythology. But the death is only a means of transition, from the visible world to the invisible world. The invisible world where every man returns after death is being referred to as the here-after. It is the belief that there is life after death.

In Yoruba folk-lore, *Orun* (heaven) is often referred to as a place of everlasting rest. *Orun* is the home of human soul, before birth and after death. The soul of man had been in existence at *orun* with *Olorun* (owner

of heaven, i.e. God) before the earthly pilgrimage. After its mission on earth, it returns to its home from where it comes. *Orun* is the home of all spirits or souls including that of the supreme Deity, divinities and ancestors. The soul is only a foreigner on this earth. This is shown in Yoruba popular dirge- 'Ile lo lo tarara' (he has gone straight home).

Therefore, eschatological hope of the end of all things when the righteous will resurrect in bodily form to receive the judgement of God is a foreign theology to the Yoruba³. To them, the journey to *Orun* takes immediate effect after death. After all the necessary rituals, the deceased moves straight through the gate of *orun* to the presence of *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) to receive whatever judgement awaits him. To avoid any disturbance on the way, the Yoruba embark on elaborate burial ceremonies and give freely to the deceased. The elaborate burial ceremonies are to send the dead off to the world beyond. It is believed that if the dead is not properly buried, he may be denied the right of abode in the next world. To the Yoruba, such dead are seen here and there after burial. They are known as *aku-da-aya*. The free gifts are meant for the dead's use in the world beyond. It is believed that whatever they give to the deceased is not lost as he has assumed the supernatural power to repay them with greater blessings. In anticipation of this, the Yoruba pray -(Oku a moo re o" may the deceased be grateful). To date, this belief is still taken seriously by the Yoruba due to their interest in parties and ceremonies. Regrettably, the core of this folk-lore has been lost.

Opinions differ as per the location of the here-after. Some say it is above, some say it is beneath while others say it is on earth. As regard the nature, no human being can state authoritatively as none had ever been there and come back. But the reactions of most people, gathered from the questionnaire administered on them reveal that the place is a place of everlasting bliss for the righteous and a place of everlasting doom for the wicked. We should note that this work is not aimed at focusing the ethics of the Yoruba only on here-after as this folk-lore may then tend to be interpreted as nothing but a matter of collecting the wages of virtue. However, qualification for this everlasting life of bliss is progressive through the conquest of social evils. The kingdom is both hope and demand, promise and duty. That is people look forward to being there and work towards its realisation. Life in the hereafter is that of obedience to *Olodumare* and of service in love to him and our neighbour. In Yoruba theology, *Orun* is an event which had happened in the past, which is still happening in history and which has its ultimate end in the hereafter.

On the whole, the belief is that the hereafter is just like the earth, but without labour, sorrow and toils, with amenities for peaceful existence and happiness considerably enhanced. It is a life of an unending fellowship in the community of one's kith and kin who had gone before into the world beyond.

Origin Of The Here-After In Yoruba Folk-Lore:

The origin of the here-after in Yoruba folk-lore is not known with exactness, but it could be traced back to the condition of the world at creation in Yoruba mythology.

The myth has it that when the world began, everyone could go to heaven and come back at will. Everybody had immediate and direct contact with *Olodumare*. Heaven was very near to the earth, so near that one could stretch one's hand and touch it. Sickness and death were unknown. There was a kind of Golden Age as there was perfect harmony between God and Man. Then, something happened, and a giddy, frustrating extensive space occurred between the heaven and the earth⁴.

In Yoruba mythology, the stories surrounding the cause of this extensive space range from greed on the part of man who took more than enough food from heaven to dirtiness when a woman with a dirty hand touched the unsoiled face of *Olodumare*⁵.

However, the motives are all one: man sinned against *Olodumare* who immediately raised a barrier which threw man off from the unrestricted bliss of heaven. The privilege of free intercourse of man, taking the bounty of heaven as he liked disappeared. Sickness, suffering and death, unknown when God and man were near each other became man's lot. This means that all human sufferings, the ultimate evil, and death, became man's lot as a result of man's sin against *Olodumare*. Therefore, nearness to *Olodumare* and the other spiritual powers is a pre-condition of human happiness and a progressive society⁶. This has its ultimate end in a return to where they denied themselves because of their sin. This is a clear indication that the Yoruba recognise and acknowledge *Olodumare* as the final guardian of their moral code.

It is a fact of life that timid or even furtive people seek shelter under the depths of space. A reader may ask if this space argument is not a consolation and postponement of fear. This is a question no one can answer with affirmation. But to deny the existence of the dead is to deny the existence of human beings. Actually, this belief in Yoruba mythology cannot be avoided of the fact that man loves life and resents death. If death is the ultimate end of man, life will be meaningless and unintelligible. This might be the reason, why the Yoruba like other people of the world propound the theory of here-after and have a strong belief in it.

The Ethics Of The Hereafter In Yoruba Folk-Lore:

This ethics of the Yoruba has its origin in the activities of two major prophets of *Olodumare* - *Orunmila* (The First Prophet) and *Ela* (The Second Prophet). It is the teachings of these two prophets as well as the lives they led that summed up the ethics of the Yoruba.

Olodumare is the ground and foundation of Yoruba morality. As a God who "alone is perfect" and "Who hates evil but loves the Good", He expects and enjoins men every where to hate evil and love the Good. An example of this became manifest in the lives and ministries of the two prophets - *Orunmila* and *Ela*, who came to the earth, after *Orunmila* had gone back to heaven. He came to bear the sin of the world and he will come back to the earth. His life on earth was a perfect example of a perfect person, a model the whole world is trying to copy⁸.

In Yoruba traditional way of life, the question of what is, what ought not to be and what ought not to be was overcome. It is believed that *Olodumare* who created man puts His law in his inward part. The Yoruba described this as "*Ifa aya*" "Oracle of the heart" simply called conscience⁹. Moreso, the presence of *Orunmila* and *Ela* was to make the earth a human society. In *Ela* we see the truth of our nature. As a perfect but particular embodiment of the creative and saving will of God, he is active in all men disposing them towards moral perfection.

In Yoruba folk-lore, the quest for moral perfection is far more than a quest for private excellence. It involves the attainment of right relationship with *Olodumare* and with our fellow-men. It also includes right relation of re-created humanity to the natural world. The consummation is set in eternity which lies far beyond the range of profitable description.

In order not to lose the here-after, the Yoruba place much emphasis on good behaviour. Since *Olodumare* is the ultimate good who wants everybody to be good like himself, it is believed that anyone who acts contrary to His will, will have his judgement from two angles.

- (a) The judgement executed by the divinities of *Olodumare* here on earth. This is the judgement from *Sonponna* (god of small pox), *Ayelala* (the goddess of social justice), *Sango* (the god of thunder) etc. These divinities are vested with power to executive judgement on recalcitrants while on earth¹⁰. Their judgement always result in bad death.
- (b) The judgement of *Olodumare* in the here-after. This is the prerogative of the supreme Being. He decides the abode of each soul. But it is either *orun rere* (good heaven) or *orun apaadi* (Heaven of potsheds). Judgement here is based on individual character on Earth¹¹.

It is believed that the food in *orun Apaadi* is rubbish. That is why the prayer for the death -
Maje okun, ma je ekolo

Ohun ti won n je ni ajule orun ni ki o maa ba won je.

Eat no millipede or earthworm, join other to eat the best food in heaven. The heat there is said to be hotter than that of the furnace. This is why the place is called *orun apaadi* (heaven of potsheds). There, the suffering of the wicked is beyond human comprehension. It is said that a finger may burn for more than a thousand years. Moreso, the wicked are denied joining their ancestors. If at all they are finally forgiven probably after many thousands of years, they will be denied re-incarnation except to lower animals.

Yoruba value re-incarnation so much. A good parent must re-incarnate in his grand-children and great grand-children in order to perpetuate his good conduct, though this did not tamper with his existence in *orun*. This is why well-wishers pray at the death of a good person,

Baba/lya a ya lowo yin o²

May your father/mother reincarnate in your children..

No doubt, Yoruba people look forward to re-incarnation.

Since the life beyond is believed to be an extension of what operates here on earth and even more with unspeakable enjoyment, everyone strives to make that place his abode. This is why the Yoruba are always conscious of their behaviour. Realising that they will account for the way they lead their lives, the heaven-conscious people moderate their lives knowing well that the life here is temporal and heaven is their permanent home.

The belief in the here-after controls much of the Yoruba behaviour, socially, politically, religiously, and morally. The Yoruba will hardly behave irrationally without first "counting the costs". Therefore, to understand the Yoruba concept of the here-after is to understand their philosophy. But we should note that in the religions of the people, moral interest takes precedence over philosophical and theological interests. The moral interest corresponds with the practical and political character of the people themselves. In fact, the distinction between religious law and moral law is very hard to see. It is what religion forbids that society also forbids and society approves those things which religion approve¹³.

Major A. C. Leonard rightly observed this when he says:

The religion of these native is their existence and their existence is their religion. It supplies the principle on which their law is dispensed and morality adjusted. The entire organisation of their common life is so interwoven with it that they cannot get away from it. Like the Hindus, they eat religiously drink religiously and sing religiously¹⁴.

To live religiously in Yorubaland is to live ethically. The religion is thus ethno-centric. Religion and morality are inevitably "bed-fellows". Those who live religiously are the *Omoluwabi* (good people). The *Omoluwabi* are the candidates for the here-after. To be an *Omoluwabi* is the embodied will of the spiritual beings. Thus, the daily ambition of the Yoruba is doing what the gods sanction and neglecting those which gods forbid.

Suffice it to say here that there is a close parallel between the Yoruba moral code and the decalogue as far as prohibitions are concerned. With the exception of the first two clauses of the commandments which forbid the carving of images, Yoruba religions, like the Decalogue prescribes the same moral code. Mention will now be made of a few of them.

Fear God and do righteously to your God.
You must not bear false witness
Respect your parents and others.
You must not be heady
You must not be wicked.
You must not commit adultery
You must not kill
You must not be annoyed than necessary¹⁵.

For one to steal, commit murder, adultery or to be wicked is totally against the religions of the Yoruba. To make sure that people adhere strictly to only the dos of *Olodumare*, *Eewo* (taboos) are fashioned out to teach ethics in its pure form. For instance, it is a taboo to commit an incest. To break a taboo, one has offended the spiritual powers and this will impair the harmonious relationship existing between the spiritual powers and that person as well as the society as a whole. In order to avoid this, the Yoruba parents take seriously their obligation for all-round-training of their children.

The ultimate aim of Yoruba is to attain eternal life. Eternal life can be regarded as a fitting fulfilment of the exercise of moral autonomy in obedience to an autonomous moral standard. The Yoruba share the same claim with Christianity that the moral standard as the creative will of God is also the saving will which can

offer the hope of everlasting life. But a preoccupation with the attainment of eternal life may be morally offensive when it leads to a quite excessive indifference to the affairs of this life. It is surely no less excessive and dangerous to behave as though our "freedom" were confronted by a future that is completely indeterminate¹⁶.

No doubt people make mistakes when they assume their decisions are made solely by referring to the anticipated results. No decision would ever be reached if the observer was able to foresee what would happen but unable to judge whether he approved or disapproved of what foresaw¹⁷. People make reference to their moral standard in judgement. But it is a mistake to forget other factors which have their necessary place in the complex act of making a moral judgement.

We should note that reason for social degeneration of this age is the decline of traditional religious belief and the abandonment of moral and philosophical values associated with it. We are not trying to say that it is the religion of the Yoruba that can solely account for a high moral standard. It is believed that a morality of conventional decencies is possible even without religion. Genuine morality may be described as religious in its very nature but it is not essentially dependent on religion¹⁸.

The essence of our being on earth is to fulfil our mission and to inherit eternity with God. It is a present fact, we participate in it as we give allegiance to God and seek to do His will on earth. It is our task, we pray for it and we work for it. There the righteous will reign with God.

The Uniqueness Of The Ethics Of The Here-After

Times without number, and from time to time we hear of religious riot here and there in the country. Religious disturbances have reached its height in this country that even the government finds it difficult to control. But the most interesting aspect of it is that hardly can one hear of this in Yorubaland among the Yoruba traditional religion adherents.

The Ethics of the Yoruba teaches tolerance in its pure form. *Ifa* is never a static way of life or body of knowledge. The process of social changes is built into the *Ifa* system itself. It is a dynamic philosophical system. It can only incorporate the belief of other systems which are similar in function to its own. For instance, the much vaunted Christian belief, centred on love, charity, hospitality etc. share the same with *Ifa*¹⁹. One of the virtues that the adherents of the imported religion should learn from *Ifa* is the act of inter-religious relations. Yoruba belief so much in dialogue. This involves the sharing of understanding and experience which is a significant method of building community. It is also a means for expanding self-knowledge and a self-transcending knowledge²⁰.

We should not think that *Ifa* system is incompatible with the so called modern intellectual system. It is essential for those of us who are Yoruba to graft correctly the modern system which we are borrowing from other cultures. The impression is often given that since traditional Yoruba society is largely non-literate, therefore, the inhabitants of that society are ignorant or perhaps fools. The intellectual nature of *Ifa* shows that a non-literate society can preserve or develop and disseminate bodies of knowledge even without knowing the art of writing.

Yoruba religion is a living religion. Its importance is declining among the Yoruba themselves and becoming more and more important in other parts of the world e.g. North and South America. The Yoruba religion is not looking for proselytes and we should not believe in the superiority of the religion over the others, or that the only way is through the Yoruba religion.

What gives the Yoruba religious adherents the supreme sense of tolerance is just that is no hierarchical order in their religion. Each *Orisa* (god) is believed to be important in its own right. It is high time we shed our brains of all the vestiges of colonial mentality and return to our traditional Yoruba system. There is no other alternative unless we want to become a different people.

Conclusion:

We can see from the analogies offered above, the place of the Hereafter in Yoruba Folk-lore and the origin of the myth. Moreso, the impact it made in Yoruba traditional way of holiness is examined as well as the ethics it propagated which appear to be more unique than that of other imported religions. Equally, how

this sense of uniqueness generated in Yoruba attitude of tolerance in matters of religion is brought into a time-light.

It is evident that presently modernity has overtaken most of the events in this work. Most Yoruba people are now denying the faith publicly. But evidence abounds in Brazil and even in the U.S.A. that there are thousands of academics who now follow the way of Yoruba *Orisa* system²¹. Why then should we, the right heir of this system not be proud of it. Our lack of appreciation of our own things stems in part from our colonial brainwashing system which taught us to hate not only our traditional religion but also ourselves. Intellectuals should help the people (as it is presently happening) and make them know the essence of their own values and systems. There is nothing the religion of the world can offer that our traditional religion cannot offer.

It is true that there are some traditional ethical injunctions that may be regarded as obsolete and irrelevant for the modern people. In fact, there are some injunctions which have been overtaken by events and may not be allowed to see the brightness of the day. But we must realise that civilization and even modernity has disappointed us as it brought with it wretchedness and sorrow. People now agitate for a return to the traditional way of life for things to take its proper shape. But can this be in accord with experienced reality? The answer to this question can be either yes or no but we should keep ourselves reminded of this:

Perpetrate no evil for heaven's sake.

Perpetrate no evil for heaven's sake.

For when you get to the gate (of heaven) you will give account.

E ma sika laye tori a o rorun

E ma sika laye tori a o rorun, O.

Bi e ba de bode e o ro jo.

References

1. Abogunrin, S. O. (ed) (1986), "Religion and Ethics", *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*, Daystar Press, Ibadan, p. 2.
2. Frazer, J. G. (1923), *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, Macmillan, London, p. IX.
3. Idowu, E. B. (1962), *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Longman, London, pp. 196 - 197.
4. Dime, C. A. (1986), "African Religion and the Quest for Ethical Revolution", *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*, Abogunrin, S. O. (ed.), Daystar Press, Ibadan, p. 38.
5. Idowu, E. B. *op. cit.*, p. 22,
6. Dime, C. A., *op. cit.* p. 39.
7. Yoruba Religion is now being referred to as *Ifa*. *Ifa* is the name of the Father of Orunmila.
8. Oshiga, A. O. (1935), *Iwe Ikilo ati Ibawi, pelu Eko Isise Igbagbo ti Ijo Adulawo*, Anu Oluwa Press, Lagos, pp. 18 - 19. (English translation by the author of this work).
9. Dime, C. A. *op. cit.*, p. 38.
10. Olaniyi, T. A. (1983), "The Yoruba concept of the Hereafter" B. A. Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, pp. 35ff.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Mbiti, J. S. (1969), *African Religion and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London, pp. 164 - 165.
13. Adewale, S. A. (1986), "Ethics of Ifa" *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*, Abogunrin, S. O. (ed.), Daystar Press, Ibadan, p. 60.
14. Leonard, A. C. (1906), *The Lower Niger and its Tribes*, Macmillan, London, p. 429.

15. Oshiga, A. O., *op. cit.*, pp. 2 - 11.
16. Pierre Teilhard (Eng. Trans. by Norman Denny) (1959), *The Future of Man*, Collins, p. 227.
17. Woods, G. F. (1966), *A Defence of Theological Ethics*, Cambridge, p. 121.
18. Lewis, H. D. (ed.) (1951) *The Theological Frontier of Ethics*, George Allen and Unwin Limited, London, p. 15.
19. Abimbola Wande, "THE ORIGIN OF IFA" (Interview by Ellis Ige), *Sunday Sketch*, 28/1/79, p. 6.
20. Mala, S. B., "Principles of Dialogues: Text and Notations on Inter-religious relations", (an unpublished material), p. 4.
21. Abimbola, Wande, *op. cit.*, p. 6.