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SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE BELIEF IN THE CONCEPT OF DESTINY ON THE YORÙBÁ PEOPLE OF NIGERIA.

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Abstract

In recent times, a lot of changes are noticed in the life of the African people in general and the Yoruba people in particular. Such changes are in the areas of politics, culture, beliefs, myths and legends, and so on. People attribute these changes to various reasons the most common of which is the interference of foreign religions and their attendant civilization. Such influence is so great that it almost completely erase the peoples' overall concepts of the world in which they live in. The degree of influence however differs from one aspect to another. This paper does not intend to go into this, rather, it focuses on one aspect of the Yorùbá beliefs which can be said to be exceptional when it comes to the influence of foreign cultures and civilization. i.e. the Yorùbá belief in the concept of human destiny. The paper carefully examines the Yorùbá belief in the concept of destiny and its influence on their behaviours and attitudes.

Introduction

The controversy surrounding the reality of destiny according to the Yorùbá belief has been on for a very long time now. This is not strange because the means of knowing about the thinking of the Yorùbá and their various concepts about the world around them and the supersensible world is from oral traditions through which they give vent to their notion of **Ori** (personality soul/inner head) and destiny which we are out to discuss in this paper.

This paper discusses the reality or otherwise of destiny according to the Yorùbá belief. It also discusses the influence of destiny on the people's behavior and reactions to happenings around them vis-a-vis the effects of such reactions on the peoples' social life. At the end of discussion, a conclusion is reached with suggestions made as to what the society's reactions to the issue of destiny should be.

What Is Destiny?

The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines 'destiny' as "power believed to control events", while *A Dictionary of the Yorùbá Language* refers to Destiny as "Àyànmó/Ìpín. Before we go further on our discussion on Destiny, we would like to make a difference between **Orí** and **Destiny**.

Adéoyè (1979, p.170) asserts that in the Yorùbá context, Destiny, (**Orí**) is also referred to as 'Kádàrá', 'Àyànmó', 'Ìpín', 'Òrun', 'Àkúnlèyàn' and so on. 'Destiny' is the word used for the physical head but among the Yorùbá, the physical (visible) 'orí' is a symbol of the 'orí inú' (the inner head or the inner person) which is regarded as the essence of personality.

In his own record, Ìdòwú (1962, p.171) tries to differentiate between '**Orí**' and **Destiny**. According to him, it was the '**Orí**' (inner head) who knelt down and choose destiny for the individuals. This is why '**Orí**' is referred to as 'Àkúnlèyàn'. It is the '**orí**' who comes to the world to fulfill man's destiny on earth. He writes that:

Ohun orí wá sẹ,
Kò mà ní saláì sẹ é
(What the '**Orí**' comes to accomplish
He cannot but accomplish it).

This infers that in principle, destiny cannot be changed.

However, the Yorùbá believe that there are some factors that can alter one's destiny either positively or negatively. We shall come to this later.

The Yorùbá View about Destiny

Like many other tribes in Nigeria in particular and West Africa in general, traditional Yorùbá are associated with various beliefs that cut across different strata in human existence. These include the belief in the existence of '*Olódùmarè*' (God) who is regarded as the creator of heaven and earth (*Èlédàà*). He is the Alfa and Omega, the beginning and the end of all things, the custodian of life and death, wealth and poverty, long life, prosperity and so on. (*Ìdòwú*, 1962, 1973, Jacobs, 1977, *Olájubù* 1978, Quarcoopome, 1987).

They give Him several names and attributes to show His greatness. These include: *Òyígíyigì* (the biggest one), *Atérerè kári-ayé* (the ominipresent), *Alágbàwí èdà* (man's solicitor), *Olówógbogboro tí yọ'mọ rẹ lófìn* (the one who uses His long hand to pull out His child from trouble) and so on. It is this same God, *Olábòdé* (2002, p.5) refers to as "*Oba bí Olórún kò sí*" (No king as God), '*Oba tó dá wa, tí kò ní iyá tàbí bàbá, tí kò sì sẹ é wádìí*' (the king without a beginning or an end, the king who creates us, the king who has no parents and cannot be investigated). There is also the belief in the existence of divinities who are regarded as lieutenants to '*Olódùmarè*'. They are means to an end and not end in themselves. (Jacobs 1977, pp.117-122). They are the mid-way between man and his creator. The Yorùbá believe that they are the carrier of their supplications to God Almighty because according to Adéoyè (1979, p.5), just as one cannot get to the king or the Head of States without going through a protocol, God Himself should be accorded such respect.

There is also the belief surrounding '*Orí*' and human destiny. The Yorùbá word '*orí*' literally translated simply means 'head' as in the physical head of a human or an animal. However, giving concession to our discussion on destiny which in Yorùbá language means '*orí inú*' and translated as inner or spiritual head symbolizes human destiny.

The metaphysical understanding of the nature of '*orí-inú*' and human destiny in traditional Yorùbá belief is that human being is made up of the following elements: *ARA*, *ÒJÌJÌ*, *OKÀN*, *ÈMÍ*, *ORÍ*. (Gbádégesin (1983, p.4). *Ara* refers to the physical body which houses other components. '*Òjìjì*' is the human ghost. It is the visible representation of the spiritual essence. '*Okàn*' is the physical heart, the seat of intelligence of thought and action. '*Èmí*' is associated with breathing. When a man dies, it is said that the '*èmí*' is gone.

Orí is the personal '*òrìṣà*'. '*Orí*' is the one that guides, accompanies and helps the person before one is born, during all life and even after death, assisting in the fulfillment of one's fate.

Quarcoopome (1987, pp.100-101) states that Africans in general, believe that Destiny was chosen by man himself while God gave ascent to it and that individuals are aware of his or her destiny but he only forgets in the process of his transition to this world. The Akan for instance, believe that the destiny given to man cannot be avoided or changed. To them, there is no means by which one can escape or by-pass one's destiny.

In Yorùbá belief, '*Orí*' plays a major role in man's existence on earth. To them, '*Orí*' is one of the divinities, the divinity of the individuals. It is '*Orí*' that individuals send to other divinities who in turn take the message given them by the '*Orí*' to *Olódùmarè*, the divine God. This infers that '*Orí*' (Destiny), acts as man's solicitor before other divinities such as: the witches (*àjé*), the '*ajogun*' (death, pestilence and other creatures living with man on earth).

Although, Yorùbá people believe that all things created by God was perfect, yet there is also the belief that there are two types of '*Orí*' namely the good and the bad '*Orí*'. For the good destiny, it is believed that whatever obstacles one may face, if he chooses the good

destiny, he is bound to succeed and vis-à-vis if he chooses the bad destiny, no matter how hardworking that person may be, he may not succeed because he has been destined to fail right from heaven. This belief goes with the following Yorùbá sayings:

Bí olóriburúkú bá fì oṣẹ nàín wẹrí, - if a bad-destined
man uses nine pence soap to wash his head
Burúkú tó n'be lórí rẹ kii mó - the bad luck
will not be cleaned
Onísẹ̀gùn tó fẹ́ gúnṣẹ́ kádàrá - the herbalist
who wants to make charm for destiny
Araa rẹ́ ló n' tẹ̀n jẹ -
deceives himself.

There are other sayings such as:

Ìpín ò gbébo - destiny does not
honour sacrifice
Àyànmọ́ ò gbóògùn - destiny does not take
medicine as an antidote

All references above points to the Yorùbá belief that destiny cannot be changed. Whatever a man does, his success or failure is attributed to the kind of destiny he chooses from heaven. This according to the belief accounts for why a number of people would embark on the same project with equal resources at their disposal, equal efforts introduced, yet some will succeed where others fail. Two students may cheat during examination; one of them would escape while nemesis will catch up with the other. This is why the Yorùbá says: "*Kádàrá Táyé, yàtò sí ti Kẹ̀hìndé*" meaning Táíwò and Kẹ̀hìndé, though born by the same mother, have different destinies. They also say "*ohun tí ẹnìkan ṣe là, ni ẹ̀lòmùíràn ṣe tẹ̀*" (what a person does and becomes famous, another person does it and he is disgraced). To them, the end for which a person is made is

inextricably been pre-destined by *Olódùmarè*. It seems therefore, that once the matter of a person's destiny is settled in heaven, that is the final.

This assertion, though contrary to the belief that everything created by God, is good and perfect, this has always been a point of controversy among scholars. However, the only explanation to why evil still befall man no matter what they do to prevent evil bore down to the issue of destiny.

The belief though is seriously manifested among the Yorùbá, yet we must not loose sight of the fact that the same Yorùbá people believe that given certain conditions, a person's destiny can be altered either by *Òrúnmìlà*, by '*Oṣo aráyé*' or even by one's character. This assertion is borne out of the belief that what is good requires prayer to maintain its goodness and what is bad requires prayer to make it good. This may account for why the Yorùbá attach much importance to sacrifice as a means of achieving the desired goals. And so, they will never succumb to any form of failure. Hence, they obey all instructions pertaining to sacrifice just as they believe that:

<i>Rírú ẹ̀bọ níí gbèni</i>	-	there is benefit in
observing a sacrifice		
<i>Àìrú kùì gbèniyàn</i>	-	failure of which may
be disastrous.		

This is because even on one knows the content of what he/she chooses from heaven probably until here on earth.

They believe that sacrifice is needed to thwart all enemies' diabolical plans against man's destiny. Such sacrifices include the following: '*ẹ̀bọ ẹ̀jẹ́*' (votive sacrifice), '*ẹ̀bọ ẹ̀tùtù*' (proprietary sacrifice), '*ẹ̀bọ ojúkòríbì*' (preventive sacrifice), '*ẹ̀bọ ipilẹ́*' (foundation sacrifice), and the likes. (Awolalu, 1979, Quarcoopome, 1987). Because of the belief that the creatures mentioned above are capable of changing one's destiny from the good to the bad, there is the need to appropriate them so that one can have his way.

Apart from the above, the Yorùbá believe that people can change their destiny with their own hands. The Yorùbá say: "he who is put in God's care should not climb the palm tree with a banana trunk rope". Many things we do on earth amount to using our own hands to change our good destiny to a bad one.

The belief holds it that a person is born into this world with the good '**Orí**' as derived from the Deity, but on getting to this world, some evil agents who are opposed to doing good, that dwell on earth with man, can change the good '**Orí**' to a bad one. In like manner, if the character of someone is bad, his choice of fate cannot become a reality. Hence, the Yorùbá will say "orí inú ẹni bẹẹ ti ba ti òde rè jẹ", literally meaning that the person's inner head has damaged his destiny. No wonder, whenever evil befalls them; they attribute such to the handiwork of those agents.

Awolàlú (1979,p.91) writes that:

To the Yorùbá, nothing happens by chance.
Something is caused by someone either directly
or indirectly by the use of power, and they also
believe that there are individuals who have access
to these mystical powers which can be employed
either for good or evil purposes.

This is in line with Awolàlú and Dopamu's view that '**Orí-burúkú**' (bad inner-head, ill-luck personality soul, or tragedy-laddened inner person) is also as a result of one's lot from heaven, the Yorùbá believe that:

Basically, all '**orí**' is good as derived from the Supreme Being. But the condition of man in the world, how he spends his life in relation to his environment, and his general conduct, can always make a change in the state of his '**orí**'. In the light of this, man can have good '**orí**' or bad

'*orí*' depending on various factors. A person's character may spoil his good '*orí*' and even make it bad to the effect that his whole cause of life is adversely affected. Sorcerers, witches and evil men can make a man's good '*orí*' to deteriorate. (Awolàlú and Dopamu, 1979, p.159).

In like manner, family curses, economic policies, political structures, bad leadership, bad governance, violation of spiritual and divine laws, disobedience of divine injunctions by the divinities who assists Olódùmarè in the theocratic governance of the universe and the likes can change people's good destinies to bad ones. This implies that the actual fulfillment of destiny by '*orí*' or personality-soul depends largely on how a man acts in the business of daily living.

Abímbólá, (1968, p.116) opines that the Yorùbá believe that no amount of sacrifice can save man from the hands of these evil forces except one's destiny. For instance, in the Ifa Corpus, (Òsé Méjì to be precise), there are statements such as the followings:

<i>Èrò Ìpo</i>	-	People of Ìpo
<i>Èrò Òfà</i>	-	People of Òfà
<i>Orí mi ní ó gbà mí</i>	-	My destiny will save me
<i>Lòwó, eleye</i>	-	from the hands of witches.

Here, we would like to make reference to a film written by Múyìwá Adémólá titled '*Orí*' where Bísádé, the main character in the film was to meet a devilish young man who meant destruction for him, but if he could escape the danger, the rest of his life would be blissfully spent in opulence. This accounts for why his destiny made him insane for two years because according to the diviner, triumphant spirits will never succumb.

The Yorùbá believe that '*Orí*' is the divinity closest to the individuals who we can easily mediate with. Quarcoopome (1987:104) states that '*Orí*' is the bearer of destiny and it ensures the

fulfillment of whatever a person has come to do on earth. No wonder why in Odù Òyèkú Méjì of the Ifá Corpus, we have this:

Njé ohun gbogbo tó bá n' dún mí - whatever gives me
worries

Nó maa rò fòrù mí - I will always inform
my destiny

Orù mí là mí o - My destiny should
make me prosper

Ìwo, lalágbòràn dún - You are he mediator.

There is also the belief that there is no other divinity that favours man except man's destiny. Ògúndá Méjì of the Ifá Corpus reads:

Orí pèlẹ́ - Orí (destiny), I salute you

Àtètè nìran - Quick to bless

Àtètè gbeni k'òòsà - Who blesses a man before any god

Kò sòòsà tíí dánìgbè - No god favours

Léyìn orí eni - except one's destiny.

Other Yorùbá beliefs include: belief in the magic and medicine, belief in life after death (reincarnation), belief in witches and witchcrafts, belief in 'Àbíké' (born-to-die) to mention just a few.

Social Implications

There is no doubt the fact that the Yorùbá believe in the existence of hidden powers which negate their right to good things of this world. This is more pronounced in their belief that witches, wizards, sorcerers, evil spirits and so on, co-exist with man and they play negative roles on human existence on earth, hence, the common practice of appropriating these powers either to safe or to defend their destiny. (Ògúnolá, 2004).

In the past, at the birth of a baby, the parents find out from the

oracle divinity (*Òrúnmìlà*), what the future of such a child would look like. If the oracle says that the child's destiny is good, they make sacrifice to ensure the child's good destiny is not turned to a bad one and vice versa, to change a bad destiny to a good one. The type and method of sacrifice depend solely on whatever the oracle says.

At the introduction of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam), and their attendant civilization, people tried to debunk the Yorùbá belief in the existence of destiny as a philosophy. However, the Yorùbá people say: "*bí a ti n'ṣe nílé wa, èèwò ibòmíràn*" literally, 'what we do in our home is forbidden in other homes'. This implies that the reality or otherwise of the reality of destiny as a driving force that controls peoples' behavior or attitude towards life in general may depend on experience of individuals or group of people.

To the Yorùbá people however, destiny is real and so, it is not surprising that whenever evil befalls any man, he believes that some forces are attempting to alter his destiny negatively. He tries to ensure that such plan does not materialize. For instance, when he embarks on the same project with another person, and that person thrives while he fails, he goes about looking for a solution to overcome his purported or 'imaginary' enemies. He becomes veritably imbalanced.

The Yorùbá belief in destiny can also be noticed in the names they give to their new born babies. Such names include:

- (i). *Orijàjoògùn* - the inner head defends more than medicine or charm.
- (ii). *Bíbíire* - to be born well.
- (iii). *Ìpínlayé* - the world is that of destiny
- (iv). *Orímóògùnjé* - destiny accounts for the efficacy of medicine, and so on.

When a wife to-be is preparing to enter into a marriage covenant with her to-be husband, the families of the couple pray and advice the bride thus:

- (i). *Mú orí lo, máà mú ewà lo* - go with your destiny and not your beauty.
- (ii). *Kí orí kí ó sìn ó lo* - may your destiny pilot you

The Yorùbá people also believe that the destiny of the father can influence that of the child, hence, when they pray or experience and bad incident, they invoke the father's destiny even if the father was dead.

There are situations where people are asked to make sacrifice to their father's inner head (destiny) in order to find solution to a problem. In like manner, when they pray, they wish their father's '*orí*' (destiny) will forbid bad things to happen to them.

Although the two foreign religions, Christianity and Islam must have influenced the Yorùbá people especially in the area of culture and literature, it is doubtful if the belief in destiny can be erased from the peoples' thinking because they would want to know why people are hardworking, yet they record failure upon failure especially where a lazy man succeeds. Who is behind the success of the handicapped? Why do we have exceptionally bright students where others are exceptionally dull? Why do twin children undertake the same project putting the same effort and with equal resources at their disposal but one succeeds while the other fails? To the Yorùbá, it is nothing but destiny that is responsible for such situation.

As earlier stated it is believed that people of the underworld, with their mystical powers, can take one's good destiny and give to another person and vice versa. People are therefore guided by this belief and so they become suspicious of one another. If somebody who they feel is not hardworking enough thrives, such person may be accused of using another man's destiny which is referred to as '*Aásìkí*' and the resultant reaction is to have nothing to do with such person. They also warn their people not to go near such person.

With the introduction of Christianity and Islam, coupled with the attendant civilization, one would expect this belief to have been

eroded away but instead, we discover that Christian Pastors and Muslim Mallams alike confirm that some evil forces who have a pre-knowledge of one's destiny is, are gathered to change such destiny from good to bad. Such claim makes the diviner to be restless and would always want to look for a way out.

Conclusion

We have seen from the above that the Yorùbá believe in 'orí' as the receiver of destiny from God is real. We have also asserted the all 'orí' are good since they originate from *Olódùmarè* (God). We have also shown that all destinies left heaven in very good condition and that destinies can only be altered by the sinful nature of the world which includes adverse human acts.

We have established the fact that the belief of the Yorùbá people in the concept of destiny has always been influencing their behavior and general attitude to life. We have also pointed out that man generally cannot afford to experience misfortunes such as failure in business, early death and so on, the cause(s) of which are beyond human explanation without blaming such misfortunes on his destiny, 'Orí' known as the inner head.

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