Yoruba Ontology: A Critique of the Conceptualization of Life After Death

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the puzzle of life after death. It explores the meaning, types and causes of death so as to contemplate the purpose of life. Thus, the paper takes into consideration metaphysical, moral and epistemic issues in the belief in life after death (or life after life). This exploration is done considering the Yoruba philosophy of death (*iku*), life (*iye*) and life after death (*aye atun wa*). We note that, for the Yoruba, life as seen in the body is ephemeral, whereas death (that is, the separation of the soul from the body—*iku ara*) is a transitory process of life to a renewed life. The paper shows that the Yoruba's idea of death is not an end to life but a change in its form. It is argued, then, that the Yoruba ontology has the implications that: (a) life is a continuum and, (b) man is not his body, (c) hence, a theory of immortality of the soul is implied. The paper observes that, though certain contradictions exist in the Yoruba worldview, the ethos of the belief seems significant. The paper examines the notions of *imo* (knowledge) and *igbabo* (belief) in Yoruba epistemology and thus advances the thesis that their belief in life after death cannot be corroborated, though it is reasonable.

Keywords: belief, death, knowledge, life after death, ontology, Yoruba

Introduction

Some of the issues raised in philosophy of religion today have something to do with a belief in life after death. Issues such as the problem of evil, argument for immortality of the soul, belief in God's existence, discourses on punishment and sin, problem of destiny, are issues that bother on life after death. While belief in life after death is being widely discussed by religious scholars, philosophers are not left out of the discourse.

For instance, while a philosopher like St. Augustine provided intriguing arguments to defend the belief in life after life or life after the death of the body, there are scholars who are sceptical that such a belief could be defended. On their part, theorists like Frederick Nietzsche and Jean Paul Sartre have completely rejected this belief.

It is the goal of this paper to reflect on this belief anew. As one must ask: What does the belief in life after death entail? To cogitate on this, the meaning of 'life' and 'death' will be exposed. This will take us to a discourse on the ontology of man. Is man his body? Is man his soul? Is life soul, or body, or both? Can ontological divide be made in the realm of existence? How do we defend our belief in life after death if the body decomposes at death? Is the belief in life after death an epistemic, ethical or metaphysical claim? If the belief in life after life is not an epistemic or metaphysical kind, then of what relevance is it? Is the religious claim to such belief useful if it cannot be validated? In short: Can such a belief be proved or disproved?

To suggest solutions to the questions that we have raised above, this paper considers the Yoruba perspective to the issue. In other words, we investigate the belief in life after death so as to reflect on the Yoruba belief in life beyond this spatio-temporal world. Thus in this paper, the status of the Yoruba ontology, ethos and epistemology of such a belief are examined. To achieve this, this paper is segmented into three subsections. In the first segment, we conceptualize the meaning, types and causes of death in a bid to contemplate on the purpose of life. The second segment looks at the status of the Yoruba belief in life after death—therein, we discuss why the belief follows from the traditional Yoruba metaphysics of man. In the third part of this paper, we consider the nexus between *imo* (knowledge) and *igbagbo* (belief), and show the implications of the Yoruba belief in life after death.

Conceptualizing Life and Death: A Thematic Approach

The nexus between life and death cannot be overemphasized. While the distinctive nature and meanings of 'life' and 'death' appear to layman as clear and distinct, it seems to be a controversial subject of debate among scholars on what these terms actually entail. One should not shy away from the fact that laymen are sometimes confused and puzzled about the claim to 'life after death' even when they affirm the existence of life as distinct from death. In the midst of evidential challenges that laymen (and scholars alike) are bedevilled with if called upon to defend their claims, it becomes apparent that conceptual problem does arise. Therefore for ambiguity to be avoided, this section of the paper is geared towards conceptual elucidation of the notions of 'life' and 'death'.

We should begin the deliberation on the issue of 'life after life' by attending to the following questions: What is life? And, what is death? In an attempt to do a good deliberation here, one needs to know at the outset, that there is no privileged answer to the questions. That means all answers would have to pass the gamut of philosophical reflection (be it metaphysical, epistemic, logical and/or ethical grounds) if we are to accept them. This, to be clear, is the attitude we have chosen to maintain so as to confront the issues under consideration critically.

According to *The Cassell Concise Dictionary* (1997: 848), 'life' is "(i) the state or condition which distinguishes animate beings from dead ones and from inorganic matter and involves the ability to grow, change, respond to stimuli, reproduce, etc., (ii) the period from birth to death, (iii) the period from birth to the present time, (iv) the period from present to death, (v) any other specified period of a person's existence..."

From the above definitions, two important points are to be noted. First, life stands in opposition to death. That is, something that is not alive is dead in the same way that something that is not dead is alive. The first striking point is that nothing can be both alive and dead at the same time. That is, it is either A is alive or A is dead; not both. Second, the distinction between time of life and death can be drawn. This connotes that life, in this physical world, is ephemeral. Hence, there is a change in life-form at death. In this respect, the distinction between life and death has come to be shown, over the years, through the cessation of breath, consciousness and irresponsiveness of the biological organs.

The analysis we have considered above is yet to tell us in a precise sense what life is; however, it shows us the dialectical nature of life and death—as opposing concepts. This demarcation is essential because, through it, one will be able to confront issues such as the belief in the idea of 'a living dead' (*akuda-aya*) or that of 'life after life' (*aye atun wa*). As we need to note at the outset, the case of 'a living dead', as we shall later show, is flawed, whereas that of 'life after death' seems controversial though, is not purposeless.

Let us now look at the possible meanings of life and death so as to consider their nature and purposes from diverse scholarly backgrounds.

To cogitate on the meaning of life, the distinction between animate and inanimate beings will suffice. An animate being has certain features which distinguishes it from non-living being. These features include: breath, consciousness and respiration. Suppose that a human being lacks these characteristics, he/she is taken to be dead. To be dead, therefore, is to be unable to respond to stimulus, breathe, etc. as one could do before these events. This explanation, as it stands, does not fully capture the purpose of this paper. It is then necessary to examine the nature of death in greater details.

How, then, do we define death? When is someone said to be dead? And what is the nature of death?

Robert Kastenbaum identifies three meanings of death. These are 'death as an event', 'death as a condition' and 'death as a state of existence or non-existence'. Kastenbaum (2003:204) writes, "As an event, death occurs at a particular time and place and in a particular way." Again, he avers, "Death is the nonreversible condition in which an organism is incapable of carrying out the vital functions of life" (Kastenbaum, 2003:224). As a state of existence, Kastenbaum (2003:255) says that death is conceived "…rather to whatever form of existence might be thought to prevail when a temporal life has come to its end." While the first definition above seeks to establish the event that ends the life of a person, that is, it causes; the second definition looks at the inability of an organism to perform certain functions (such as breathing) which it usually performed prior to the proclamation of its death. The last definition considers whether life still continues at death or it terminates at death. Over the years, hundreds of definitions have been debated on when life is terminated or when death occurs.

According to Andrew F. Uduigwomen (1995:80), "…death is the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual from mankind to spirithood." He (1995:80) further posits that, to the Africans, "…death is the end of real and complete man." In this case, the dissolution of the physical nature of man from the spiritual nature of man is what constitutes death. This conception of death has also been expressed in the Western ontology of man. To corroborate this, Kastenbaum (2003:225) notes that, "The definition in the 1768 edition of *Enclyclopedia Britannica* is faithful to the ancient tradition that death should be understood as the separation of soul (or spirit) from the body." The philosophical issue here is centred on how one can prove that soul exists in the body. For example, Plato and Rene Descartes advanced theories that make ontological divide between the soul and the body. However, Gilbert Ryle argued against Descartes' distinction between the mind and the body. "What Ryle is saying is that Descartes represents the facts of mental life as if they belong to one logical category, where in the actual sense they belong to another. That is, he misrepresents the substance responsible for conscious or mental activities" (Samuel, 2011:159). In spite of Ryle's critique, the demarcation of mind from body is as lively as that of life and death in most metaphysics of man. Akhtar Salman (2011:183) emphasizes that even while people are mistaken, they "…regard life and death as categorically separate. The absolute, final, and immutable nature of death has made us accustomed to this view."

Like the Western viewpoint, Izu Marcel Onyeocha (1998:93) stresses that, "Death is recognised as the point when the spirit separates from the body. Because the spirit is closely associated with breathing, people know that the spirit has gone when a person stops breathing." Even if it is granted that human soul exists as distinct from the body, scholars are wont to argue that the entity responsible for breathing is not the soul, but the heart. Some scholars also note that it is not soul or mind that thinks, but it is the brain that does so. Against this backdrop, Alfred Martin (2003:70) posits that, "Until the late twentieth century, death was defined in terms of loss of heart and lung functions, both of which are easily observable criteria." However, recent researches in neuroscience and bioethics have indicated that death can be said to take place when human brain stops to function. Martin (2003:70) writes:

> The term brain death is defined as 'irreversible unconsciousness with complete loss of brain function', including brain stem, although the heart beat may continue. Demonstration of brain death is accepted criteria for establishing the fact and time of death. Factors in diagnosing brain death include irreversible cessation of brain function as demonstrated by fixed and dilated pupils, lack of eye movement, absence of respiratory reflexes (apnea), and unresponsiveness to painful stimuli.

From the foregoing discourse on the meaning of life and death, it seems fundamental to observe that two defining natures of life-death analysis emanate. That is, death is either seen as annihilation of consciousness or breath, or death is taken to be the passage of the soul or mind into another world. Something that is annihilated goes into extinction. That is, it does not function as it was before. Moreover, the separation of body and soul leaves the former perished, whereas the latter is believed to continue in existence in a new world. In whatever way one looks at it, Peter Berta (2003:13) maintains that, "The fear of death and the belief in life after death are universal phenomenon." Given that this assertion is true, let us now cogitate how the phenomena of life, death, and life after death have been expressed in the belief of the Yoruba. Before we do this however, let us quickly sketch the types and nature of death below.

Death has been taken to be both natural and unnatural. The former is taken to be good, while the latter is considered to be bad. For emphasis, Segun Ogungbemi (1997:70) while commenting on natural death holds that, "Death of this nature is a good thing because it provides the transitional process through which man completes his 'journey' on earth. Natural death is therefore not a complete annihilation of man's life." On the other hand, unnatural deaths are those taken to obstruct the life of man, which does not allow people to live to a fulfilled age. Ogungbemi (1997:74) stresses that, "While the Yoruba will attribute the death of old people to a natural cause, deaths of children and young adults are attributed to unnatural causes." He identifies accident, illness, suicide, sorcery, magic and witchcraft as causes of unnatural death. One important point that should be underscored here is that the demarcation between natural and unnatural deaths stresses the relation between 'event of death' and 'the time someone ought to spend on earth.' Danoye Oguntola Laguda (2004:114) asserts that death "was made for the specific purpose of recalling any person whose time on earth is fulfilled." In fact, one may begin to wonder whether a strong divide can be made between natural and unnatural death. We shall come to deliberate on this later. Aside the demarcation between natural and unnatural death; there is also a distinction between absolute and clinical death. Battista Mondin (1985:264) explains that, clinical death, "…is the one that provokes in man the cessation of the functions essential to the body, but not necessary, the separation of the soul from the body," whereas, absolute death, "…is the definitive separation of the soul from the body."

In the case of clinical death, "the patient is dead when the brain tissue is damaged to such an extent that the vital brain functions have irreversibly stopped, regardless of whether the heart is beating" (Lamb, 1985:53), while in the case of absolute death, "…death is not regarded as the end of life, but as a transition from this present earthly life to another life in the land of the spirits" (Laguda, 2004:114). Nevertheless, "In most human deaths, the loss of neurological function is accompanied by the traditional, familiar markers of death - the patient stops breathing, his or her heart stops beating, and the body starts to decay. In relatively rare cases, however, the irreversible loss of brain-dependent functions occurs while the body, with technological assistance, continues to circulate blood and show other signs of life. In such cases, there is controversy and confusion about whether death has actually occurred" (The President's Council of Bioethics, 2010:vii).

It cannot be overemphasized that a discourse on death ought to take the shades of death discussed above seriously if one is to adequately reflect on the ethical, metaphysical and epistemic significances of the issue of life and death. However, since we are concerned with the problem of life after death, it is absolute, rather than clinical death that fits well into our focus. While emphasis in the next section will be placed on the Yoruba belief in life after death, our emphasis will be on their metaphysical, normative and epistemological defence of such belief, thereby taking into consideration their views on natural, unnatural and absolute death. Let us now explore the Yoruba arguments for life after death.

Yoruba Belief in Life after Death: An Overview

The questions that should come to mind are: Who are the Yoruba? And, what are their positions on the issue of life after death? Until the former question is answered, the latter question cannot be accurately answered. The reason for this is simple. A people must first exist before they can philosophize. To ignore the people and the circumstances surrounding their being is to ignore the underlying philosophy behind their beliefs. Hence we ask: Who are they?

The Yoruba, as it is conceived in this piece, are restricted to people who reside in the South-west region of Nigeria, Africa. This conceptual limitation is partly due to the fact that (i) there is an existing compendium (Ifa Corpus) that cogitates the philosophical understanding of the people, and (ii) that the worldviews of 'Yoruba in Diaspora' might have been greatly influenced by the growing Western culture when compared to their counterpart in the South-west Nigeria. According to Tunde Onadeko (2008:16), "Today, the Yoruba live in three distinct regions: at home in Western Nigeria; in other West African countries, such as the southeastern Benin Republic and Togo; and outside of Africa, especially in South America, the West Indies, and Cuba (Diaspora)". To corroborate this, Oladele A. Balogun (2009:44) says that, "The Yoruba constitute one of the major ethnic groups of modern Nigeria.

They effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Lagos, and a substantial part of Kwara State." In this paper, the Yoruba are therefore taken to be the people who live in the southwest region of Nigeria as noted by Balogun. Having said this, let us now consider their belief in life after death.

Let us start this exploration by asking the question anew: What does life after death entail? By this belief, it means that man has two specific and distinct entities in him, namely: body and soul. While the body is a physical and ephemeral entity, the soul is believed to be a spiritual and immortal. This belief in life after death goes on to further entail that at the separation of the body from the soul at death (absolute death), the human soul moves into a new world or return to this world, where it continues its existence again. By this, it means that life that each person has is first lived in this physical world, followed by eternal life in the hereafter or a return to life in the old or a new body. Pantaleon Iruegbu (2003:23) remarks thus: "Life is one. But it is lived in different phases. Thus this life is one phase, life after this is another." He speaks further, "…death is as importantly celebrated as life because death is not final, but a transition to a life yonder (Ibid. 26). As if this is not enough, Bolaji Idowu (1998:134) maintains that, "The life of the ancestors in afterlife is a reality. It does not depend on the remembrance of them by those who are living on earth."

Let us now carefully discuss the Yoruba idea of life after death, stating clearly their ontology of man and cluster of belief systems that are held in conjunction with their understanding of hereafter.

In West African thought, the belief in God, divinities, ancestors, among other forces is often emphasized. God is known as *Olodumare* in the Yoruba belief. He is the creator of both human and non-human beings. While being the creator, Olodumare is believed to have helpers who assisted Him in the task of creation. He is the Supreme Being. Olusegun Oladipo (2004:359) points out that, "In Yoruba culture, for instance, Olodumare (the Supreme Being), who stands at the apex of the theoretical entities in terms of which the Yoruba explain human experience, is regarded as the creator (Eleda) and maker (Aseda) and the origin and giver of life (Elemı)." As the creator, Olodumare is the giver of life. To the Yoruba, therefore, man's life comes from God. Being an all-powerful being who knows the beginning and the end of life of each man, death is not something that is alien to God and to *Ifa*. The distinctive nature of the body and the soul is well captured in the Yoruba idea of destiny. Suffice to note that for the Yoruba the human body is mortal, whereas the soul is immortal like God himself. The nature of the soul is captured by Moses Akin Makinde (2007:150) thus:

> Immortality in Yoruba language means '*aiku*' '*Emi*' (soul) is immortal. The creator of *emi* is *Olodumare* (*Ajalaorun, Olorun*, or God etc.). Thus while *emi* (soul) is immortal, its creator, *Olodumare* is also immortal. Both are also spirits. While the soul as an immortal spirit is known as *aiku, Olodumare* is known as *Oba aiku*, i.e. the deathless or immortal king.

From the above excerpt, it seems clear that, for the Yoruba, the soul cannot die. It is only the body that dies. Hence while contemplating on the human personality; the Yoruba often discuss about three to four component parts of man. There is yet to be a consensus on this matter. The metaphysical parts of man, according to the Yoruba, will throw more lucidity on the belief in life after death among the people.

Man, to the Yoruba, has as part of his compositions: *ara* (body), *emi* (soul) and *ori* (destiny), *ese* (journey/path) and *okan* (heart or mind). This position is corroborated by Makinde (2007: 54) who affirms that, "…in the Yoruba conception of human personality, a person may be said to consist of three parts viz, *ara* (body), *emi* (soul) and *ori* (inner head)." According to Segun Gbadegesin, in the worldview of the traditional Yoruba (2004:134), "*Emi* is a non-material force responsible for life. Its presence ensures life and its absence means death. But the *emi* is itself immortal, and it may reincarnate in another body." *Ara* is used to explain all the physical parts of the body which include hands, chest, blood, veins, legs, head (*ori ita*), etc. In the words of Gbadegesin (2004:154); whereas *okan* as another component of the human person is to be interpreted as "…the heart or the mind (the home of consciousness)"; "*ori* is the bearer of a person's destiny as well as the determinant of one's personality" (Gbadegesin, 2004:134). Gbadegesin (2004a: 54) explains *ori* further when he posits that:

> Destiny is the preordained set of outcomes of life, wound and sealed up in the *ori*. Every human being is believed to have an allotment, and it determines what they will be in life. It determines the general course of life. *Ori* is its bearer and receptacle, and therefore its controller, hence the rationale for the claim in the second story that no *orisa* blesses a person without the consent of his or her *ori*. For since *ori* controls destiny, and since destiny is the allotment of a person in life, even if one performs sacrifice to the *orisa*, there is no guarantee unless one's requests are compatible with one's destiny.

Ephirim-Donkor Anthony concurs with the Yoruba worldview on human personality when he maintains thus:

> The line between the spiritual and the mundane when it comes to illnesses is blurry when the sick are at the mercy of traditional practitioners. If an illness is deemed to have a spiritual causative and diagnosed as such, then healing could take place by first placating the spiritual causative agency. Once placated, the healing or curing would manifest itself corporeally in matter of days. Well, this makes perfect sense since the spiritual takes precedence over the material (Ephirim-Donkor, 2016:4).

Reflecting on the nature of human personality, Kwame Nkrumah notes that at the philosophical level, anything that separates mind and body creates room for antagonism, conflict and contradiction. In his opinion, traditional African mind-set rejects this inharmonious dualism. He accepts that the interaction of mind and body is a reality, holding that, "The philosophical perplexity which darkens this interaction is removed by the demonstration of the possibility of a 'Categorial Conversion' in which matter is humanized (Nkrumah, 1964:87). On this, Nkrumah writes:

> The key to the solution of the mind-body dualism; the spirit-matter problem lies in categorial convertibility… By categorial conversion, I mean such a thing as the emergence of self-consciousness from that which is not self-conscious; such a thing as emergence of mind from matter, of quality from quantity (Ibid. 20).

This goes on to suggest that in Nkrumah's notion of African epistemology, no contradiction exists between matter and spirit. He accepts the materialistic concept of man because of its link with naturalistic instincts. Let us hear Nkrumah speak on this:

Following this argument, Nkrumah believes that the dichotomy which the Cartesian dualism created has been eliminated. So, through the categorial conversion (mind-matter; matter-mind), Nkrumah works out the basis of an African personality and deduces the African concept of man, which sees African man as a being that has dignity, integrity and value (Ibid. 68).

Having explained the composition of man in the Yoruba philosophical anthropology, it is vital to say that in the Yoruba worldview, the journey that a person will pass through in this world is determined by his or her *ori* (destiny) and *ese* (leg). As the Yoruba do say: *ibi ori ngbemi lo, ki ese mi yara gbemi de ibe* (where my destiny is taking me to, my legs should quickly take me there).

This destiny may be good or bad, depending on whether one is allotted a good or bad *ori*. Upon coming into this world, one's *ori*, according to the Yoruba, leads one through life. Every *ori* decides the amount of years one will use in this world before returning to *Olodumare* via death. It is then believed that one must die before he can join *Olodumare* in the hereafter. While it is *ori* that determines whether one is successful or not, as well as the number of years one will use before his/her death; it is *emi* (the soul) that determines whether one is alive or not. In other words, ori determines the time a man will live on earth, whereas the departure of the *emi* determines when the time has been used up. If one consults the cult of the *Ifa* (babalawo - *ifa* priest), the Yoruba believe that *ifa* can foretell how long one will live before returning to *Olodumare* to give account of one's deeds on earth. The idea that death of the *ara* is inevitable is strongly affirmed by the Yoruba and in most traditional societies. As Anthony Okeregbe (1998:303) rightly notes this, "In many traditional societies, death is seen as a natural, inevitable and irreversible state; and end to all human finitude, and a sort of transition to some world beyond the world of matter." Thus, the separation of the body from the soul and the time-allotted to each *ori* as emphasized by the Yoruba are used to stress that *Olodumare* does not intend man to live an immortal life in his/her temporal state. Accordingly, Laguda (2004:116) posits that, "The Yoruba believe that Olodumare determines a man's life in the world even before he or she is born. This is what they called *inu ori*, *ori* portion or lot. This is destiny."

When a man dies, the Yoruba believe that the soul returns to *Olodumare* to give accounts for his/her deeds. It is not all the souls that return to Olodumare that survive the death of the body, some souls will suffer for the sin (ese) committed while on earth. Sin, to the Yoruba, occurs when one goes against the commands of Olodumare. It also ensues when someone disobeys the dictates of the divinities and ancestors, or when one acts against humanity. Thus, John Ayotunde and Isola Bewaji (2004: 399) hold that:

> In the Yoruba language *ese* refers not only to religious infractions against the Supreme Being, the deities, and the ancestors, but also to infractions against fellow human beings. Indeed, the religious cases are *ese* only because the infractions are ultimately against fellow human beings. Thus, while a person may have done wrong, it does not necessarily follow that the person has sinned, if sin is understood in the purely Christocentric sense.

According to the Yoruba, anyone who sins will not experience a fruitful life after death. It seems fundamental to explain what a fruitful life after death is to the Yoruba and how this can be attained. In my bid to showing what a fruitful life after death presupposes, it is apposite that I consider different doctrines of life after death that one can identify in Yoruba cultural cum religious beliefs. Simply put, we have (i) immortality of the soul; (ii) reincarnation; and (iii) theory of transmigration of soul.

There is a need for a conceptual elucidation of these terms so as to clearly position the Yoruba belief. One can get a better exploration of these shades of life after death theories from Uduigwomen's explanation. In this respect, Uduigwomen (1995:75) maintains that, "Immortality is sometimes interpreted to mean that the identity, the consciousness, the memory of the individual persist after death." That is, if 'A' dies, his soul and his body thereafter go into the world beyond as it were before A's death. This conception of immortality is differentiated from transmigration of soul and reincarnation thus:

> Immortality is different from transmigration which is the belief that the soul of the deceased is capable of transferring into the body of another person, and animal or any other lower creature. It is also different from reincarnation abode, some of his physical and/or character traits are manifested in the grandchildren. This new born baby is sometimes seen to possess some of the essential features of the departed grandfather, and sometimes both possess more or less similar characteristics (Uduigwomen, 1995:75-76).

As we have noted above, to the Yoruba, immortality means *aiku* (deathless). In this case, the body does not have this capacity; hence it is the soul that is immortalized. It is not clear whether the Yoruba believe in resurrection of the body or not. But it seems clear that immortality of one's name is more recently affirmed. Uduigwomen (1995:79) opines that:

> For Africans, the life beyond the grave is neither better nor worse than the life on the side of the grave. Although some have painted the world beyond as blissful, traditional Africans consider it as unattractive. So, the goal of life is not the post-mortem life in the spiritual world. The fulfillment of the goal of existence takes place in this world.

This position, however, is contrary to the Yoruba understanding of immortality. In their proverb, the Yoruba do say: A*iye loja, orun nile* (this means that, life is a temporal market place, heaven is the eternal home). So, the Yoruba do not see death as evil insofar that the dead person is aged and has lived a good life that could allow him/her to be acceptable into *orun* (heaven). That the soul will live outside the body in heaven is a position that traditional Yoruba would believe and defend because they have an unconditional belief that God created the soul to live in the abode of the spirit. Hence, the belief in life after death is espoused in Yoruba traditional cultural philosophy.

Like the belief in immortality of the soul; the Yoruba also believe in reincarnation. Without doubt, reincarnation is another basis for the justification for the belief in life after death. Commenting on the African belief in life after death, Iroegbu (2003:26) stresses that, "…death is as importantly celebrated as life because death is not the final, but a transition to life yonder, and to life-again (via reincarnation) here in the world." The belief in reincarnation is evident in the Yoruba metaphysics of man. Children who are born immediately after the demise of aged people are given names such as Babatunde, Iyabo, Yetunde, Yeside, etc. (which means the dead father or mother has returned), to show that these dead ones are not actually gone. That is, they have come back to look after their families and continue tasks they are yet to complete in this world. Against this backdrop, Idowu (1998:134) avers that, "The life of the ancestor in after-life is a reality." Thus, A.O. Echekwube (1994:69) notes that reincarnation "can be generally described as the soul of a dead person taking a new body (metempsychosis). In this regard, when a person dies, his soul is believed to leave the person's body to dwell in another one." Ogungbemi (1997:77) writes:

> The idea of reincarnation among the Yoruba is indicative of the belief in the immortality of life. The actual word for reincarnation in Yoruba is *Atunwa*. As a matter of fact, the word '*Atunwa* implies the second rebirth of a person or the shooting forth of a branch, or born again'.

Through the concept of reincarnation, the Yoruba make a case for the continuation of life, whereby good people who died at old age come back to life. Suffice it to note, here, that those who died before their time (maybe as a result of the activity of witchcraft or accident) cannot become ancestors, hence they cannot reincarnate. Children and young ones who died before they are old cannot reincarnate because the Yoruba believe that it is the desire of God that everyone should become old—this is what demarcates natural from unnatural death. Apparently, when people die in the traditional Yoruba community, it is important that certain consultation of the Ifa priest is done to ascertain the cause of death. In this case, Ifa is consulted and necessary sacrifices are done. "In most cases, the kind of rites carried out depends largely on the circumstance of death, age and social status of the dead" (Laguda, 2004:118). Moreover, if it turns out that the person that died was an aged person, who has lived a good and responsible life, such a person is communally *will* or perceived to join the rank of ancestor. To join the ancestors, sacrifices and rituals are done. Hence:

> After these celebrations, the deceased is received warmly into the ancestral home and is given a place in the spirit-world. Failure to perform these rites, the Yoruba believe, will make it impossible for the spirit of the dead to ever know rest as it would remain on earth, roaming and prowling about, haunting people in human habitations. For these reasons, chains are put around some graves to control such restless spirits (Echekwube, 1994:52).

It is against this backdrop that the Yoruba often use *Adie-irano* (farewell fowl) as ingredient of ritual. After which, the hair of the deceased is shaved or plaited, depending on the sex of the persons.

Finally, the belief in life after death is expressed in the Yoruba belief in transmigration of soul (*aku da aya*). This is a mid-point between Yoruba cultural belief in immortality of the soul on the one hand, and reincarnation on the other. In a simple sense, transmigration of soul is simply the belief that a person that is dead is capable of re-appearing in another place (not in the heaven, but in this physical world). This dead person goes to this new place with his/her body and soul. Let us dramatize this belief of the Yoruba briefly using symbols. Suppose 'A; lives in town 'B'. After 'A' has been confirmed absolutely dead and buried in town 'B', 'A' later reappears in town 'C' still having his/her body and soul. That is, 'A' still remembers that he/she lives in town 'B' and that he/she died in town 'B' some time ago. One thing that seems fundamental, here, is that the Yoruba believe that a person can live, die, live again, die, and live again in a continuum, even in this world. A quick glance at Yoruba cultural movies and myths would clearly affirm a version of transmigration of life which they call *aku da aya*. This belief, to be clear, is quite dissimilar from the Yoruba believe in *abiku* (born to die). While the former is a claim of life after death, the latter appears not to. Whatever the case is, it is not our intent to discuss *abiku* in this paper.

Corroborating the position of the Yoruba on life after death, and the ancestral institution, Ephirim-Donkor Anthony, while reflecting on the cosmogony of the Akan people of Ghana, notes:

"African spirituality, first, maintains that an individual originates in a spirit realm as a deity (Abosom) and journeys to the corporeal world (the Wiadzie), pre-endowed ethically" (Ephirim-Donkor, 2016:1). At this point, he further notes, the table is now set for a person during adulthood to become ethically and morally concerned with material and spiritual matters and their consequences, on the basis of which the question is asked as to whether or not one makes ancestorship upon death after having attained eldership in this world. He also maintains that upon the death of an elder (Nana), a spiritual personality springs up from a deceased person called Osaman, which has the complete feature of the deceased person saved for the fact that it exists in an incorporeal form.

This posthumous personality, the Osaman, Ephirim-Donkor maintains, returns to a realm reserved solely for resurrected spiritual personalities, Nsamanfo (plural of an Osaman), where an account is rendered as to whether or not one lived a worthy life on earth. Here, if found creditable, an Osaman is allowed to join the ancestors known as Nananom Nsamanfo, that directly influence the affairs of their posterity on earth. This is the reason, according to Ephirim-Donkor, why the ancestral Nananom Nsamanfo are worshipped by the living in return for humanity well-being, healthy living, and protection from all harmful agencies (Ibid). Finally, on this, Ephirim-Donkor writes:

> There is a definite spiritual realm for all those found to be worthy after death, the Nananom Nsamanfo, that the Akan refer to as the Samanadzie. As the abode of the Nananom Nsamanfo, the Samanadzie is headed by the primordial woman and mother of all living beings, the Nasaman, in accordance with Akan cosmogony which speaks of the primacy of the mother. The Samanadzie, moreover, is apart and different from the abode of the Abosom, primeval nature gods and goddesses of incompatible power and intelligence thought to have been *There* in the very beginning with God. As God's "children", the Abosom are in charge of the universe at the behest of God (Ibid. 2).

On reincarnation, Ephirim-Donkor gives the Akan view thus:

> … everyone has the chance to be born again and again to live a meaningful life as long as one lives a good life but dies before he or she has chance to live a full life. So, we see how the spiritual impacts on the corporeal and human life, the body especially (Ibid.3).

Having explored the discourse on life after death from the Yoruba philosophical background, it seems fundamental that we consider the epistemic, normative and metaphysical relevance of this belief—in its varieties. This is what we hope to consider in the subsequent section.

Contemplating Life after Death: A Critique of the Yoruba Perspective

To start with, the belief in life after death appears to be a metaphysical and epistemic claim. As a metaphysical claim, it presupposes that there are two worlds—heaven and earth. That is, beyond this physical earth, life continues in an eternal place. This presupposes, also, that soul *lives on* in the non-ephemeral world. Moreover, as an epistemic claim, the belief in life after death suggests that it is not only true that an external world exists, it implies also that such a world (heaven) is knowable and that the human soul resides in the body *before* and *after* death via reincarnation, transmigration or eternal rest. Whereas these claims are debatable as a matter of philosophical cogitation, we seek to argue that the status of this belief leaves us rather to rethink its moral import, than to validate its metaphysical and epistemic hypotheses. Let us now consider some of the bases why the belief cannot pass the gamut of epistemic and ontological justifications, before delving into what we consider to be the appropriate framework to reflecting on the Yoruba belief in life after death. To come to grip with this aim, there is a need to make a demarcation between knowledge (*imo*) and belief (*igbagbo*).

The focus of metaphysics is on what exists. We cannot doubt the existence of the body since evidences attest that it can be divided, it can occupy space and it is visible. The Yoruba grant that the body exists. They also believe that the soul and *ori* are part of human nature, and that they leave the body at death. While death is taken to be the separation of these metaphysical entities, the soul continues in existence when the human body decomposes. Why one cannot deny the claim that body decays, one wonders what evidence Yoruba have to infer immortality of the soul if we mean by 'the soul' what is non-physical. How do we defend this metaphysical postulate is the crux of the epistemic dimension of this paper? The questions, then, are: Is belief the same thing as knowledge in the Yoruba epistemology? Does Yoruba culture have an epistemology that can resolve the contradiction or logical challenges in the cluster of beliefs lump up by the traditionalists in their belief in life after death? And, if Yoruba cultural belief is non-static as well as non-restrictive to only traditionalist account, then how can the contemporary philosopher resolve the challenges at the core of the Yoruba belief in 'life after death'?

While it is far from the truth that the Yoruba are non-logical, it is undeniable that their belief in life after death may contain some contradictions. A position that contains contradiction is itself not illogical; rather it fails certain logical rules. Our use of the idea of logic is not dissimilar from what Godwin Azenabor describes as natural logic. He writes, "By Natural Logic is meant critical, discriminating, rational and reasonable discussion in natural language. Logic here is concerned with clarity of expression, the avoidance of fallacies, vagueness, ambiguity and contradiction in Natural language" (Azenabor, 2002:48-49). So, there is a need to explore and confront the way the Yoruba have chosen to use terms, looking closely at the ordinary day expressions that the people make and how the reality of their belief systems cohere with their description of events—whether in this world or in hereafter.

First, the concepts of *imo* and *igbagbo* are fundamental in Yoruba Culture. Someone who has *imo* is believed to know. How does one know? Yoruba believe that it is only someone that has *imo* that has sourced for the evidence of a given claim. To them, only what one experiences can give one knowledge (*imo*). Hence, like Western empiricists, the Yoruba rely on the senses of touch, taste, sight, smelling and hearing as the basis for knowing. In this respect, it is only a person that perceives things himself that can claim to have firsthand knowledge of an event. However, someone who does not have direct experience of events cannot be said to know if he only hears second-hand information about the events. Rather, what he only has is an opinion or belief (*igbagbo*) about the events. Hence, Allzermalmer (2011) notes:

> The Yoruba break epistemology down into two different categories. These are *Imo* and *Igbagbo*. Imo is similar to what we call, in the west, but not exactly the same, as knowledge. Igbagbo is similar to what we call, in the west, but not exactly the same, belief (http://allzermalmer.wordpress.com/2011/06 /02/yoruba-epistemology/).

From the above citation, it is to be noted that there is similarity between Western and the Yoruba usage of the terms 'Knowledge' and 'belief'. It is then informative that when one considers what the nature of knowledge is, to the Yoruba, it must be capable of being known. Since the object of thought must be opened to experience, any discourse or subject that is not possible to be verified falls in the realm of *igbagbo. Igbagbo*, herein, does not mean faith. Rather, it means mere opinion or belief which may or may not be substantiated beyond reasonable doubt. So, the Yoruba still give room for a belief to be corroborated with evidences. The Yoruba proverb says: *Iro yin ko to amo oju ba* (the hearsay is not as lively as the real event). Barry Hallen (2004:299-300) notes that:

> If and when *igbagbo* is challenged by another person, again the best solution would be to arrange some form of empirical test. In this case, since this is information I myself only know secondhand, the most reliable solution is for concerned would be to test it directly, so that information progress from being *igbagbo* to *imo* for all concerned, myself included. Next again would be to call all relevant witnesses who may have heard the same or similar secondhand information (*igbagbo*) or, even more definitely, have firsthand (*imo*) experience of what I can say claim to know on a secondhand (*igbagbo*) basis.

From the Yoruba epistemology as cogitated above, one may seek to find out on what basis is the belief in life after death erected. Is the belief based on *imo* or *igbagbo*? It is vital to note that the traditionalists and their contemporary counterparts are divided on whether they have 'knowledge of the belief' or they have 'opinion of the belief'. As a matter of fact, to have the former is to claim that there are empirical evidences available to prove that life after death is a fact. To hold the latter, is to attempt to use belief to justify belief. In other words, it would mean that one is using opinion in justifying another opinion. In this case, the two metaphysical claims are 'constructed opinions'. That is, for instance, if one holds that the soul exists in an external world, this is the first claim (or belief) that requires a justification.

If this first position has not be validated, and the person again argues that this belief is true on the basis that people (other than the arguer) have noted that such belief is true, then two unjustified claims have emerged. Rather than basing the truth of a belief on another belief, one 'ought to' make good the argument by advancing instead an epistemic defence through *imo*. But we need to ask: Can this defence be made in the case of life after death? As Ogungbemi (1997:78) rightly argues, "There is no way we can empirically know or ascertain what goes on in the hereafter. All we can do is either speculate that something is there for man or simply confront the problem of death with an existential humanistic spirit which does not believe in life after death."

Inasmuch as we are sceptical that such epistemic defence can be provided, we consider it significant that those who make such claim should at least entertain a little bit of tolerance to counter positions since neither side of the argument has conclusive evidence. In this paper, we are not seeking an epistemic resolution to this contentious metaphysical cum religious debate in life after death. As a religious belief, one can only believe it since we do not have indubitable fact to corroborate this belief. What then are we permitted (by logic) to say about this matter?

Even while epistemic justification of claims may be harsh as a standard of testing the customary beliefs of the traditional Yoruba, at least, for the sake of argument and improvement of the cultural values of the Yoruba, one needs to stress that there are diverse incoherencies and contradictions in Yoruba cultural beliefs. It is such that if one belief is true, the other may be false, whereas others may be somewhat baseless. For instance, if one takes the Yoruba belief in *ori* seriously (that is, if *ori* means fixed destiny, whether the one given to us or selected by us from Ajala's court before coming into this world as the Yoruba myth suggested), then the claim that a child that dies before his time—experiences an unnatural death—does not arise. If this is taken, then the claim that the spirit will be wandering because it has not fulfilled its allotted time (in the case of *aku da aya*) becomes unattractive. To corroborate our argument here, Ogungbemi (1997:75) writes that, "How do we know that every man chose a number of years he wanted to live on earth or in heaven? Why is it that the death of a child or young adult is not attributed to natural cause of death since he might have chosen to die young? Is this not a bizarre assumption which attempts to confuse imagination with reality? Perhaps, it is."

While we contend that Ogungbemi's stance is non-sympathetic to the logical shortcomings of the Yoruba belief system, Laguda (2004:125) seems to be more apologetic when he writes that, "…Africans never intended to build a logical framework for their various beliefs but their major concern is to give certain beliefs and practices religious interpretations." In spite of Laguda's apologetism however, we think that the logical structure of a belief ought to be consistent if it is to be taken seriously (philosophically). This, to be sure, has necessitated re-modification of Yoruba cultural beliefs by contemporary writers. There is therefore a need for a post-traditional reconsideration of the grounds for cluster of Yoruba beliefs. For instance, how can a body that has decomposed at death move to another region in *akuda aya* thesis? We have countless testimonies that people that have died for some decades re-appeared with the same body and memory. Though we do not affirm that these stories are false, we doubt their reality unless they are established. It is often noted that these living dead disappear into the spiritual world immediately there is likely to be an empirical demonstration of their existence. How then does one corroborate this claim? There are many issues we cannot provide answers to. If this is the case, then does that mean that the belief in life after death is useless?

As the foregoing question demands: Is the issue we are discussing a mere rhetorical problem that does not have any import? Of course, our answer is in the negative. The discourse on life, death and life after death, in fact, is a crucial one that requires urgent attention than ever before. In this paper, our contemplation is to espouse its normative significance having shown that its metaphysical and epistemic imports are problematic. To cogitate on the normative strength of the belief in life after death, it seems crucial to note that some associated concepts are used in Yoruba metaphysics. These concepts include: man, destiny, death, life, ritual, God, soul, sin, heaven and so on. These concepts are used to certain normative ends, which is dissimilar from the epistemic and ontological ends they were used for.

For instance, the Yoruba believe that man is a composition of body and soul. The soul is what leaves the body to heaven to account for his deeds on earth. If the soul sins, then the Yoruba believe that the soul will be punished by *Olodumare* in the life after death. Herein, they strike the point that the soul should wash itself clean from *ese* (sin) before leaving this ephemeral world. To wash one clean from sin, the Yoruba socio-normative concept of *iwapele* (patience and good character), *omoluabi* (well-trained person) and *suuru* (patience) are encouraged. People need to develop these traits if their souls are to be freed from punishment. Hence, one could see why the Yoruba often emphasise that one should patiently, peacefully and carefully live a good life so that when one dies, he/she will become an ancestor. The fact of being an ancestor is tied to living a good life after death; the moral import of the belief in life after death becomes evident. This, indeed, is crucial for social togetherness that the Yoruba communitarian ethics seeks to project.

Moreover, the fact that ritual and sacrifices are injected into the Yoruba belief in hereafter seems to suggest that not only that the Yoruba desire the well-being of the deceased but also the good of the community. Sacrifices are meant for social and spiritual cleansing, and for seeking unity and cooperation among the people and the supernatural world.

The effectiveness of the notion of sacrifice cannot be overemphasized in aiding and promoting common good. During ritual rites, dos and don'ts are explained. People are then properly integrated into the community, where taboos are highlighted and frameworks for resolving social abomination are narrated. All these help to confront problem of vices that have pummelled contemporary society.

The discourse on death therefore enables us to reflect about our lives. While *ori* reminds us that we have specific time to use on earth, death probes us to be mindful that we are mortal beings whose life is ephemeral. In the midst of everyday reflection of our individuality and our death, 'life after death' thus helps everyone to be self-conscious of the implications of his/her actions, thereby helping persons to reshape their nature since sin is empirically punished in this world. This reward/punishment dichotomy is what provoked the Yoruba belief in life after death.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the Yoruba belief in life after death. The notion of life and death are discussed, taking into consideration different segments of the Yoruba cultural account of life after death. We showed that life is ephemeral in this world, whilst death is a transitory process to a new life via (a) immortality of the soul; (b) reincarnation; and (c) transmigration of the soul. These provoked a philosophical reflection on these metaphysical cum religious beliefs.

We went on to deliberate on the belief in life after death, thereby raising ontological, epistemic and normative arguments. The paper demonstrated through the exploration of concepts of *imo* (knowledge) and igbagbo (belief) that the Yoruba idea of life after death falls short of logical and systematic explorations. While we maintained that this illogically does not translate to the claim that the Yoruba are irrational, we noted that there exist some conflicting claims in cluster of beliefs upon which the belief in life after death was erected. The implication noted was that, if one of these beliefs (say, for instance, belief in *ori* (destiny) collapsed; then other beliefs erected on it are likely to collapse. Hence, the paper demonstrated that contemporary Yoruba scholars should begin to develop a defence for some of the ill-equipped and/or ill-thought-out metaphysics on life, death and, life after death, among other Yoruba beliefs.

However, we did not claim that the Yoruba philosophical analysis on life after death is useless even if we claimed that it lacked a well-articulated logical defence in its epistemic and ontological status. The liveliness and imperativeness of the discourse is shown on what we considered to be the normative imports of the belief. Hence, the moral imports of the belief was shown, wherein, we posited that it was aimed at social and spiritual cleansing, cooperation and at moralizing human nature. This makes the discourse crucial for contemporary reflection.

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