

Religious-Humanistic Basis of Morality in Yoruba Traditional Thought and Drive for Development

by

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Abstract

Adopting the Yoruba culture or thought as a foil, this paper offers a critical and analytical exposition argues that morality in Yoruba thought is founded on the basis of the synthesis of secular and non-secular (religious) undertones of interpreting reality. Second, it argues that this culminates into a religious-humanistic basis of morality, which impacts the course of human discernment of his/her predicament, definition of self and society as well as engagement or role in development. The paper submits that exclusive claims to either secular (communalistic and humanistic) outlook of morality at the neglect of non-secular rudiment or vice-versa would lead to a distorted understanding of morality and drive for development in Yoruba traditional thought.

Introduction

In contemporary African society, it is common to come across assertions that express or portray the moral crisis that dot certain aspects of the African ways of life. Van Der Walt (2003: 53-54) captured this impression, asserting that:

Elderly people lament daily that they are meeting behaviour that shocks them: sexual immorality, dishonesty, corruption, crime, violence and many other things... Middle aged people lament about children they fail to control. The youth complains of lack of example from the older members of the society.

The discerning mind would be critically disposed to concede to Van Der Walt's assertion due to the shifting temperament that guides the conservative old, the moderate middle age and energetic youth in today's world that is suffused with skeptical attitude to traditional norms, which has become instantiated by liberal and popular culture that is foisted by dominant post-modern and techno-scientific orientations. Such tendencies perhaps discount the enduring value of the traditional norms as one that could hardly suit the demands of today's reality. In this regard, Van Der Walt has argued that certain weaknesses in traditional African morality are accountable for the moral crisis that beset contemporary Africa (Ibid: 58-62). However, it is not enough to pinpoint the weakness or strength of traditional African morality, while the controversy surrounding the foundations of morality in Africa remains unsettled. This task is considerably prior and essential so that one would be furnished with an adequate understanding of whether or not the contemporary predicament of Africa is also conditioned by contributory moral crisis.

It is fundamental to briefly clarify the sense in which morality and culture is appropriated in the paper. In philosophical parlance, morality is the subject matter of ethics, a major branch of philosophy that critically interrogates the nature of moral principles, judgment, conduct and character. Traditionally, within the philosophical enterprise, there are no agreed upon conceptualization of the term as with other subject matters. This does not connote that the concept is bereft of speculative reflections by scholars. Following Nel (2008: 350), morality is the sense and view of what is right and wrong and that which constitutes an absolute reference for character and behaviour. It is an authoritative code of conducts in matters of right and wrong. This implies that morality refer to a set of standards guiding behavior, character and conduct as right or wrong. In other words, it is a tradition of conduct, which Gbadegesin (2014: 3-6) in agreement with Micheal Oakeshott accord as moral traditions.

Thus, morality or moral traditions connote behaving in accordance with the tradition which we are brought up (Ibid: 5); a network of customary conduct that exists in a society. In such society, the conception of right and wrong are determined by perceptions of what constitutes the good life for individuals on the one hand and general good on the other (Bewaji 2004: 396). Conceiving morality in the preceding sense presupposes a connection with culture. This is probably the case due to the point accentuated by thinkers like Tylor and Klukholn that culture deals in a large sense with the totality of the ways of life of a group or society. Culture thus is a cultivating site of religious, economic, moral, scientific and other dimensions of life in a society, as its etymological root in the Latin word 'colere' indicates.

Given this, the understanding that a society's culture exudes certain norms of moral tradition; stipulating principles or values that guide conduct, judgment and character of persons or groups as right or wrong is reached. Subsequently, considering the phenomenon of morality within the context of African culture vis-à-vis Yoruba traditional thought would not be out of place.

African Morality: Contentions

For the purpose of conceptual consistency in this discourse, it is granted that the appellations; ‘African morality’ and ‘morality in Africa’ are synonymous and used interchangeably to refer to the idea of morality in traditional African thoughts. On the idea of African morality, it could be stated that the skeptical taint that accompanies the claim for a plausible conception of African philosophy is also evident.¹ Perhaps, this constitutes one of the main contentions beside the nature, definition and significance of African morality. Basden and Nadel (as cited in Udokang 2014: 266) have asserted this skeptical point of view about morality in certain traditional African cultures or societies. For Basden, ‘the word morality has no significance in the Ibo vocabulary... where the natives remained untouched by outside influence’. Speaking of the Nupe, Nadel similarly asserts the non-existence of ethical and moral principles in Africa:

As for the realm of ethics, Nupe religion is altogether silent. There is no ontology, no mythology, exemplifying rights. Nor is there formulated doctrine concerned with norms of action or more common currency, the simple rights and wrongs of everyday (Ibid.).

Thinkers within African traditions have responded thoughtfully to standpoints such as the above and asserted contrary position on the idea of the non-existence of African morality, apropos cultures or societies in Africa. Opoku (1978), Ozumba (1995), Bewaji (2004), Nel (2008) and Udokang (2014) to mention a relevant few are of this position. Bewaji (2004) expounds the indubitable existence of African morality via Yoruba understanding; arguing that like other continental moralities, African morality is driven by the motive for good life; the ends of proscribing and prescribing norms of conduct, attitude of interpersonal relationship in the society.

In this sense, it is thus a phenomenal normative consideration for the dialectics of individual-communal existence. This means that for Bewaji, the conception of an existing African morality is not negotiable in thought. Rather, fundamental for reflective negotiation in Bewaji’s opinion is the impression that morality in Africa is religio-deterministic and its foundations is not elaborate enough to proffer a theory of humanism; an impression propelled by foremost African theological scholars and thinkers like Mbiti, Parinder, Rattray and Wiredu² among others.

In another light, Nel (2008: 35) posits that African morality alludes to the absolute (normative) system informing the assumption and judgment of the nature and character of actions that is construed from assumptions and actions of communities and individuals. In lieu of this, one could state that African morality is the rationale behind the society’s sense of responsibility toward the self and community, caught up in a web of interaction and inter-relation.

This sense of African morality is in line with Bujo's (2003: 22) dictum "cognastus sum, ergo sumus" – I am related, therefore we are; which is an allusion to the mutual embedment of living and non-living in African sphere, in the pursuit of the good life. This dictum is reflective in African communalistic notions like *Ubuntu* (Letseka 2013), *Ujama*, and *agbajowo la fi n soya*.³ These notions are conceived as existential and moral template for regulating character, attitude and conduct in the respective societies (Nguni Bantu, Swahili, Yoruba).

Towing the lines of thought in Opoku (1978) and Ozumba (1995), Udokang (2014: 267) argues that African morality exists and thinkers who hold contrary, are misguided about its nature, as it serves essentially as a vehicle of social order and stability. Udokang clamours that the solidarity of the African community is preserved in the inclusive moral codes that entail laws, customs, taboo, and forms of behaviour accepted or prohibited in the society. This implies that within Africa, morality is a formidable aspect of the cultural fabrics of life.

Wiredu's (1998: 306-316) remark that morality is universal and essential to all human societies and culture but does not exclude the possibility of a legitimate basis for differentiation in the morals of various peoples of the world projects plausible hindsight about the existence of diverse conceptions of morality notable across the continents. One could thus rightly speak of an African, Asian, American and Chinese morality among others. Following this, the insinuation that moral understanding is relative to norms of life and thought in the society is not mistaken. In other words, to speak of cultural or customary ways discerning social categories of reward, blame, retribution, aspiration and aversion, pleasure and pain, relationship among sexes and other dimensions within a specific society is not out of place.

Experimenting on this thoughtfully, Wiredu proffered the case of Akan's notion of morality, avowing that it is founded on the basis of humanism, not dependent on religious allusion to supernatural beings/entities. In Wiredu's view, it is the human (will/interest) that has value in Akan (– *onipa nii ohia*) and is capable of defining the good not the gods or God. Wiredu acknowledges the religious or theistic undertones in the cultivation of virtue at large though not affirming this as the basis of morality for the typical Akan person. The attempt of the Ghanaian philosopher in this regard is charitable for carrying out such study within another African culture or society. In this sense, the Yoruba culture would be used as a foil; not necessarily to counter or juxtapose Wiredu's account of the Akan notion of morality but to inquire in similar terms the essential question of whether morality in Yoruba traditional thought is solely secular or non-secular.

Morality in Yoruba Thought/Culture

Prior to engaging the notion of morality in Yoruba thought, it is pertinent to clarify briefly who the Yoruba are. The Yoruba are an ethnic group located in South Western Nigeria and Southern Benin in Africa as well as diaspora Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, Tobago (Akinjogbin 2008: 9; Lovejoy 2003: 92-93) and other parts of the world. Specifically, the focus is on the Yoruba sect in South Western Nigeria, where a large percentage of Yoruba are domiciled and share a common history, language, cultural as well as moral traditions.

Regarding moral traditions in Yoruba thought, Hallen (2004: 299-303) avers that an adequate understanding could be attained via uncovering the epistemological intricacies of moral personality, judgment and character. Hallen is of the view that discerning *imo* (to know) from *igbagbo* (belief/believe)⁴ has implication for justifying or accessing (*nwadi*) the veracity and reliability of beliefs that accompany moral prescriptions due to *isesi* (what the Yoruba say and do) that is derived from the oral traditions of the people. Hallen argues that the underlying epistemic distinction of first hand experiential source of claiming to know (*imo*) and second hand propositional claims (*igbagbo*) open to testing/verification envelopes discussions in Yoruba thought about a person's or other persons' moral character; to judge whether information of which they are the source (oral tradition) is likely to be reliable or unreliable (Ibid: 301).

In devising means to uncover the epistemological significance of certainty, reliability, veracity, unreliability or imprecision regarding the moral stand of persons within the culture, Hallen emphasized that the virtues of 'speaking well, hearing well and patience' are sine qua non instrumental values for justifying moral prescription in Yoruba thought. This impresses that morality in Yoruba thought is not just mere rendition of beautiful elocution or doling of unduly polite attitude and thoughtless regard/respect to tradition (Ibid: 302). It is simply not a matter of this is the Yoruba tradition or concept regarding what is wrong or right, permissive or prohibited. In a different light, Bewaji (2004: 399 - 400) argues through the framework of Yoruba concepts (virtues and vices) like *iwa irele*, *iwa pele*, *omoluwabi*, *iwa tutu*, *abuku*, *aimo*, *eewo*, *egbin*, *alebu* and *ibaje* that indicate religio-cultural motivation of moral prescription and proscription though essentially humanistic in orientation. Bewaji asserts that;

Being morally upright is not as much a matter of pleasing the supernatural forces as it is of promoting human welfare. Devotion to the deities is not as much in the interest of the deities as it is in the interest of the people: and when a deity fails to bring benefits to society, people feel free to sever the relationship.

Bewaji seems convinced that the essence of morality in indigenous Yoruba thought is not theistically deferred (religious) but one that reflects the practical nuances of right and wrong conduct (Ibid: 401).

Despite Bewaji's position, the view that Yoruba thought on morality is connected with religio-metaphysical expressions conveyed in taboo, ritual acts and passages of rites in the course of established beliefs about relationship with plethora of deities or supernatural beings can hardly be denied. Though as hinted, this basis does not conform to the claim that the Yoruba notion of morality is essentially religious⁵ rather that morality in Yoruba culture cannot be totally independent of attributions to religious accretion. For instance the theme of *eewo* – those things or actions forbidden among the Yoruba, radiates religious prohibition and permission in relation to each divinity in Yoruba thought and is applicable to people of the same ancestors who are accorded guardians or custodians of morality (Adegbindin 2014; 143).

As noted previously, it would be critically questionable to assert on such basis that morality in Yoruba thought is essentially religious as it would suggest that without religion, the people cannot have the conception of what is good or bad (Gbadegesin as cited in Adegbindin 2014: 144). In similar sense, alluding to the Wireadian Akan point of view that morality is severed from religiosity would negate the religio-metaphysical undertone inherent in the nature of morality in Yoruba culture.

Furthermore, Familusi (2012: 299-310) elaborated the Yoruba notion of morality, expatiating that it could best be reflected in the overt condemnation of immorality among the people. This simply suggests the point that Yoruba notion of morality is conceivable as rules in tandem with beliefs of the culture, such that the breach of such beliefs is considered as act of immorality. Familusi makes the point that within the parlance of Yoruba thought, moral rules are encapsulated in proverbial expressions (Ibid: 303), taboo and practice such as *magun* (thunderbolt) employed to mitigate the perpetuation of sexual immorality among women (which also have dire consequences for men involved with such women) in Yoruba culture (Ibid: 305). Also, expressions that accompany taboo such as *obirin ko gbodo foju booro*;⁶ *boobinrin ba foju kan oro, oro a gbe* – if a woman watches *oro*, *oro* would expedite undesirable sanctions on her (Ibid: 303) is a relevant instance here.

Oro in Yoruba culture is the secret cultic masquerade organization that involves and requires men's participation at the exclusion of women in the society. Thus, it is customarily and morally a non-negotiable injunction for women to run into hiding places or maintain absence during *Oro* cultic procession. The essence is routed via the cult's belief that women are liable to corrupting the spiritual core of the *Oro*. The implication that this sort of practice have for gender exclusion is contentious though this is not central to the concern of this discourse. One could discern Familusi's view of morality in Yoruba as pragmatic in nature as it rarely coheres with a notion of 'is-ought' distinction of the nature of morality as portrayed in most Western traditions of discourses on morality.

Morality in this sense within the Yoruba thought is basically lively, limited to the custom of what is considered as the 'is' rather than the conception of an ideal or 'ought'. Largely, it could be stated that the Yoruba sense of morality following Familusi is prescriptive in the sense of 'do not do this or that'. Indeed, it impresses morality as an authoritative code of conducts, character and judgment in Yoruba thought.

It also bespeaks the nature of Yoruba nay African morality as one that stems from religious to humanistic undertones. For the sake of precision, this could be regarded as religio-humanistic basis of morality. Religio-humanistic basis of morality presupposes that morality is derived from the essential nature or ontology of the typical African, who incorporates and acknowledges the idea of God, gods/goddesses, spirit, deities, ancestors in the universal scheme of things and disposes this to the discretional exercise of man (generic) in terms of lifestyle, choice or decision and actions, that have accompanying consequences. There is no doubt that the cause of consequences in this sense would vary from attribution to the gods or human as the case may be since the diminution or elimination of the essence of either agents' place or role in African ontology would create a vacuum in ontological balance that would be manifested in moral degeneration, immorality, social malaise, evil and other vices. Simply, the point made is that Yoruba thought of morality, typical of African morality is humanistic and religiously derived. Omatseye and Emeriewen (2010: 534) aptly convey this view when they noted "that man proposes, the gods enforce. Thus while appraising the ethical perspective in the African religious belief, the question as to how the gods and deities enforce moral laws and play mediatory roles becomes imperative". This notation points back the view that Yoruba moral orientation is neither exclusively secular nor non-secular but religio-humanistic and in this connection, Oyeshile (2007) as would soon be shown has added his voice.

Secular and Non-Secular Foundation of Morality in Yoruba Thought

Given the hindsight of scholars' positions considered above, it could be argued that morality in Yoruba thought is founded on the synthesis of secular and non-secular outlooks. The two outlooks permeate most aspect of Yoruba understanding of reality or life as they project both natural and extra-natural experiences and meanings conveyed in defining and understanding the ontological and existential conditions of livelihood (of persons, supernatural and non-supernatural beings, animate and inanimate) in the Yoruba enclave. Bewaji and Familusi hinging on the idea of phenomenon like *magun*, *eewo* (taboo) among others hinted above have readily indicated this; apropos the religious and humanistic bent of moral traditions deepened in customs, belief and practice of the Yoruba.

More so, moral injunctions like *a ko gbodo fi ada sa ile lasan, ki omo onile maa ba a binu si eni naa* – we must not use the cutlass to till bare ground so as not to incur the wrath of the earth goddess; *omode ko gbodo fi igi fa ila sile, bi eera ba ko si oju ila naa, iya omo naa yo ku* – a child must not use stick to draw a line on the ground if ants enter the line, the child's mother will die (Oduyale 1985: 244), are apt instances that extend to the relation between human, animate and inanimate entities (inclusive of environmental entities like the earth). Albeit, this is not the focus of this discourse, it is essential to note this to sustain the stance that is argued that morality in Yoruba thought is founded on the basis of secular and non-secular outlooks about reality.

Importantly, emphasizing that this point aids the avoidance of the extremist and distorted understanding of morality in Yoruba thought is in two senses. The first is that it obliterates the view that morality in Yoruba thought is fixated and limited to religious ways of thinking, hence establishing the scope of morality in Yoruba thought as one subjected to ontological and irreligious exigencies in specific conditions. Other wisely, it also signify that the essential humanist ground that suggest severance from religious undertones or linkages in the conception of morality in Yoruba thoughts is wrongly asserted. In this connection, we share Bujo's (as cited in Nel 2008: 41) point of view that African morality is not exclusively concerned with human persons or community which excludes a perspective of a monotheistic God.

Similarly, Oyeshile (2007: 82 - 99) submits that though it is impossible to discredit the prominent role religion plays in the life of Africans, morality from which the people derive and exhibit their sense of right, wrong, evil, bad etc. is not exclusively based on religion but also derived from sources of morality like rationality, prudence, societal custom, habit and peaceful co-existence in society. He argues that when these sources of morality are properly internalized, development of person and society would be enhanced through different perspectives. In relation to the moral crisis of Africa, he states that:

A case for a secular origin of moral values will show that religiosity (theism) or the lack of it (atheism) cannot be an obstacle to approaching and finding solutions to human predicaments. A secular approach to morality is a positive development towards common humanism as it is devoid of dogmatism and unnecessary sentiments which make resolution of conflict difficult in most African countries beset with one conflict or the other (Ibid: pp. 83 – 84).

Hinging his argument on Yoruba conception of morality through the prism of the ontological stuff of *Iwa* (character), Oyeshile following Wande Abimbola shows that the regard of *Iwa* as the fundamental principle of morality is conveyed in the aphorism of '*iwa rere lesa eniyan*' – good character is the beauty or guard of a person. In his view, *iwa* constitutes the aim of human existence and when estranged, results in personal and societal decadence.

Situating his view within the Yoruba framework of *iwa pele* (good or gentle character); a character trait that emanates from *Olodumare* (Supreme being),⁷ Oyeshile maintains that *iwa* is the determinant of moral personhood as *omoluabi* (– one who is well-born or morally upright) in Yoruba perspective. For an individual that lacks *omoluwabi*, the Yoruba sums up that ‘*ki seniyan, nise lo fawo eniyan bora*’ – he/she is not a human being, he merely assumes the skin of a human being (Ibid: 87). Simply, this indicates that the person is not well-behaved and it is doubtful such person possesses in any sense moral personhood or it is the case that such person is morally estranged.

Essentially, in Oyeshile’s view of the Yoruba conception of morality, such moral estrangement could be alleviated through penitence by offering sacrifice (*ebo*) to the divinities or *Olodumare* to ensure reconciliation or mitigation of ugly consequences that follow moral aberration, and the appropriation of good character over and above material possessions that often disrupt the essence of human existence, that is personal and societal (*Ibid*). Simply, Oyeshile shares the view that morality in Yoruba thought is both religiously and secularly derived since where the invocation of God, goddesses/gods, deities as arbiter of morality is not applicable, humanistic motivations (values) of morality is appropriated. Oyeshile notes that:

To say therefore that the attitude of the Yoruba concerning morality is ‘this-wordly’ and pragmatic does not mean that they have totally abandoned *Olodumare*, rather they appeal to *Olodumare* in cases where moral problems, dilemmas and crises cannot be simply solved by human efforts. And this suggests also that both the religious and secular origins of morality are complimentary (Ibid: p. 94).

Oyeshile’s insight above corroborates the view that morality in Yoruba thought is religio-humanistic but the essence of this stance would be well established when considered in the light of its drive for development.

Drive for Development

Development in this context means human and social progress. On the discourse of the link between traditional African community morality and development, Okpalike (2015: 1 - 15) addresses morality in Sub – Saharan Africa (Igbo in specific) against the backdrop of the popularized gap or disconnection in present day Africa due to the infusion of Western capitalist ideology and African moral traditions swept under carpet owing to the infusion which inoculated disparate worldviews (interpretation and operation of world).

However, Okpalike hints that the disconnect between African moral foundations and sustainable development is not a matter of blame game; whether African development would have blossomed without foreign contact but one of the failure to reconstitute a moral community that will serve as a springboard for sustainable development in the continent. Clamoring for what he calls ‘participatory phenomenology or intercultural rebirth of moral traditions in Africa’, Okpalike asserts that:

The African consciousness needs to be woken from its morbid and fossil state as Africans are constrained to interact with the new world order and contemporary globalizing human consciousness. These institutions must be at the background of the design and conjecture of African democracy, education, Christianity and so forth (p. 15).

Though Okpalike’s view seems ambitious, its appropriateness for contemporary demands is undisputable since Africa cannot afford to lag behind in the exchange of global reality or order. Importantly, the need to attempt this by fore mostly reconstituting the African moral community indigenously before appropriating external moral accretions⁸ cannot be treated lightly. Oyeshile’s effort in this direction is obvious, especially from the angle of Yoruba moral system, which is central to this discourse. Oyeshile (2007: 96) avows that the Yoruba moral system steeped in religious and secular origin abhor selfishness, wickedness, greed, adultery and other moral vices which have implications for man and social progress. The implication is that it engenders the cultivation of positive norms like fidelity, selflessness, truthfulness, cooperation, peacemaking among others. To a large extent, we agree with Oyeshile on this though it is essential to reiterate that taking cue from either exclusive stance of religious or humanistic orientation/basis of morality in Yoruba thought would foster flawed definition of self and society and perpetuate existential or ontological imbalance that would fraught the moral basis of development.

This is so since exclusive claim to non-secular or religious basis of morality have a tendency to disrupt the agency of human will to be directed to right course of decision or action, hence rendering germane issues that affect individual(s) livelihood to the wish or wills of the gods or deities, who ultimately assume the status of moral arbitrators of right, wrong, bad or good. This could be easily played out in contemporary situations that ordinarily demands making reasonable life choices that could defer undesirable consequences. The instance of knowledgeable couples aware of their genotypic combinations as AS and AS, yet presume or resign the fate of the unborn to the compassion of God, gods or benevolent spirit suffice here as an instance.

This echoes one of the challenges associated with Abiku in traditional Yoruba culture.⁹ This is not to suggest that we discountenance totally a willing (AS) couple's choice of conjugation but to recount that a knowledgeable couple's lamentation of 'had I known' after subscribing to the opiate function of religious beliefs is off the mark of reason and renders the couple worse off and un-progressive morally, financially and psychologically.

Another apt instance that faults the trend of exclusive religious cohesion of morality is the present looming economic crisis in an African nation like Nigeria (that experienced increase in inflation rate at 13.4% in April 2016), where the exchange rate of Nigerian naira (290) amounts to US (1) dollar, that is Nigerian currency becomes devaluated due to fall in global oil price – where oil remains the major source of economic mainstay in the country. Convincingly, one would concede to the claim that it would amount to logical distortion to make the choice of continually investing huge governmental funding in the bid to venerate or appease gods'/goddesses' wills or hold and resign to an unreserved moral will in the gods as the cause of the economic crises rather than making strategic efforts to revamp and revitalize the nation's economy. The point made here is that an exclusive re-course to religion as the basis of morality in traditional African thought would fraught the discernment of pragmatic choices and actions in contemporary situations that demand solutions beyond religio-moral appeal.

Ifa corpus, though mainly considered as a source of divination in Yoruba thought incites this understanding by pontificating the moral indispensability of *iwa-ire* (virtuous character trait) as a tenet that is vital to the certitude of human consciousness (not one associated with recourse to the gods' nature), in his/her dealings and participation in interpersonal and public affairs. A verse in *Oworin-Sedin* (cited in Oyeshile 2007: 91) from Ifa corpus demonstrates this:

*E jo re, e je o sa:
Iwa won ni'ma le won kiri.
O da fun Aniwonikun
Ti yi o ma beru t'osan toru;
O je hu'wa 're,
O je hu'wa atata
Aniwonikun, ki o ye 'sa kiri bi ojo.*

(Translation)

Leave him/her alone, let him/her run:
It is their character that chases them about.
So declares the Oracle about Aniwonikun
Who fears incessantly day and night
Will you but practice good character
Will you but practice sound character
Aniwonikun, and stop running about like a coward.

In the above citation, morality is not considered strictly as a matter of religious injunction but one that is also rooted in the audacity of human intentionality and consciousness, as to whether he/she has done right, wrong or is guilty. This verse bespeaks the trends of corrupt practices, compromise of agreement, bad governance, dishonesty among other vices that is prevalent in day to day interpersonal relationship and the state/government to governed relationship; especially in scenarios where the perpetrators of such vices; perhaps former public officials as it is often the case in a country like Nigeria, make attempts to hide or abscond the country to other nations to avert trials on the discovery and interrogation of embezzlement, mismanagement or misappropriation of public funds. The point that Ifa corpus recognizes that solution to development challenges may not necessarily be couched in religio-moral appeal is clearly exemplified with the pronouncement of good character as presented in the verse above.

Is this to say that religious motivation of morality in traditional thought does not serve any heuristic purpose for development in contemporary times? The response to this is not affirmative. This is simply because the meaningfulness of the ontological existence of the typical African as argued previously is entangled with ancestral, spiritual and communal identity or essence. That this contributes to the African moral, political and social consciousness can hardly be denied. In the case of traditional Yoruba thought, the predominant trend of taboos, beliefs in *irumale* (manifold spirits), *agbagbaa* (elderly) and conceptual injunctions like ‘*agba jowo la fi n s’oya*’ (- solidarity or cooperation is the soul of unity) explicates this. This implies that while traditional Yoruba thought on morality is not solely religious, it cannot be dissociated from religious undertones since this is also core to the consciousness of the existence of self and others in the society (environment, gods, deities, ancestors and so on). This also enacts the cogency of including humans and non-human entities as subject of morality for co-existence and development in traditional Yoruba thought. This view is expended in for instance a Yoruba moral proscription hinted previously, that circumscribes relationship of the environment, inhabiting spirit and human, which goes thus: *a ko gbodo fi ada sa ile lasan, ki omo onile maa baa binu si eni naa* – we (humans) must not use the cutlass to till the bare ground (environment) so as not to incur the wrath of the earth goddess (inhabiting spirit). As earlier argued, traditional Yoruba thought of morality of this ilk does not conform with the ‘is-ought’ distinction of morality pervasive in Western thought and that the cited instance above exudes moral concern for environmental conservation and order, incited by moderation between humanistic and spiritual accordance is evident.

This context of moral proscription in traditional Yoruba thought convey the humanistic impetus for social order, human flourishing and development albeit this may coincide with acknowledged beliefs in certain practices, circumstantial deities or accomplice of gods/goddesses. The instance of *magun* that has been previously cited (thunderbolt) and *eewo* (taboo) like *obirin ko gbodo foju booro*, indicate the extent to which the Yoruba community employ consequential maxims often incited by fear of infliction or affliction by the gods or spirits in shaping actions and inactions that have implication for both personal and social survival, well-being, integrity and identity.

This is projected on the basis that such maxims assert the moral status (as immoral or moral) of a person who flouts the social or cultural expectations of fidelity (to spouse; as in the case of *magun*) and regards for order (as in the case of *oro*).

Concluding Remark

In lieu of the foregoing, there is indeed no gainsaying that traditional Yoruba thought of morality is religio-humanistic in nature, and that when rightly conceived in this sense, its basis for appropriating development in contemporary times would be indubitably appreciated rather than allude to the contradictions that hold sway in the religious to secular dichotomy of morality. In this discourse, the basis of morality in Yoruba thought has been inquired. Effort has been made to underscore the argument that Yoruba (African) notion of morality (right and wrong regarding judgment of character and conduct) is founded on the synthesis of secular and non-secular outlooks of reality; relations and experiences of humans to fellow humans, environment and non-humans and that this impact a drive for human and social development has been advanced.

Drawing on Oyeshile's analysis of Yoruba moral system, the work follows suit that the basis of morality in traditional Yoruba thought is religious and secular; conceptualized as religio-humanistic basis in the paper. It refutes the exclusive stance of religion or secular basis of morality in traditional African thought and argues that appealing to either of this would fraught the discernment of pragmatic choices and actions in contemporary situations and development. The paper advance that the religio-humanistic basis of morality proffers a progressive impetus for development since it is inclusive of humanistic and religious rationale conducive for development in contemporary times. It illustrates the utility of this basis in discerning development efforts to address life choices, governmental crisis and vices in contemporary Africa with some emphasis on the Nigerian situation. In all, the paper submits that morality in traditional Yoruba thought is compatible with religio-humanistic stance, which when appropriated in moderate proportions would proffer an upward trend for human and social progress or development.

Endnotes

1. Odera Oruka has succinctly captured this skeptical taint about African philosophy, when he noted that:

One cannot rationally combine a belief in the universality of philosophy with a belief in African physics, African mathematics or African philosophy. What we should correctly talk about is not African philosophy but rather African specific issues in philosophy... But it does not mean that a philosophy which is Greek cannot for example be British, American or Indian.

This implicitly extends to the reasoned ground of the contentions about the plausibility of an African morality. See Oruka, O. 1989. 'Principles of African Philosophy' in S. Oluwole, (ed.) *Readings in African Philosophy: An Anthology*. Lagos: Masstech Publications, pp.132-133.

2. The impression that the religio-deterministic foundation of African morality is not elaborate enough to proffer a theory of humanism, which Bewaji challenges is a consequence of Wiredu's assertion about African (Akan) notion of morality;

It has often been said that our traditional outlook was intensely humanistic..., it seems to me that as far as the basis of the traditional ethics is concerned, this claim is abundantly justified. Traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-supernaturalistic. Not that one can find in traditional sources, elaborated theories of humanism.

See Wiredu, K. 1980. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: CUP, p.6.

3. *Agba'jowo la fi n sanya* – solidarity or cooperation is the soul of unity, is a Yoruba injunction that asserts the significance of co-existence, cooperation and solidarity in social development.
4. For Hallen (2004: 299-301), among the Yoruba, *imo* is the sole category of experience or proposition entitled to be regarded as certain and true (*ooto*) while Igbagbo (belief/believe) is in principle open to empirical testing, verification and possibly true by virtue of education in the light of testimony, exploration, discussion or reflection (*iwadi*).

5. This stance could be attributed to the claims of Idowu and emphasis by Makinde that morality is derived from the nature of God (himself) since Yoruba thought attunes to the creationist thesis or theory of the role of Supreme Deity (Olodumare) in the creation of man; in whom morality is innate and created. See Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longmans, pp. 145-146; Makinde, M.A. 1988. 'African Culture and Moral Systems: A Philosophical Study'. *Second Order I*: No. 2, p.2.
6. The emphasis of the first aspect of this Yoruba saying regarding the *oro* taboo for women is the paper's. This is to indicate that Familusi's rendition of only the second aspect of the taboo may render a distortion in the full grasp of the saying, especially for an interested or curious non-Yoruba language user.
7. On this view, Oyeshile (2007: 90 – 91) archived illustrations from Odu-Ifa corpus like Ogbe – Egunda and Irete – Idi to show that morality in Yoruba society is rooted in the people's conception of Olodumare (Supreme Being) or deities as the source. Ogbe – Egunda and Irete – Idi verses below for instance establish the relatedness of Orunmila (god/deity of divination in Yoruba belief) with morality (*iwa* and *iwa pele*);

Ogbe – Egunda:

E wa womo Iwa berere o

E wa womo iwa berere

Iwa gbe dani

Iwa pon se hin

E wa womo iwa berere

Come and behold countless children of Iwa

Come and behold countless children of Iwa

Iwa carries (children) in (her) arms

Iwa carries children on (her) back

Come and behold the countless children of Iwa

Irete – Idi:

Iwa pele l'okun aiye

Fi ro peti l'owo eni

O da fun Orunmila

Ti o n lo fi iwa pele

Gba okun aiye lowo okan-le-ni-irinwo male

Gentle character it is which enables the rope of life
To stay unbroken in one's hand
So declares the oracle to Orunmila
Who by means of gentle character
Was going to win the rope of life from the four hundred and one divinities.

8. By external moral accretions, we refer to the moral lessons that could be drawn from infusion of predominant foreign religions like Christianity and Islam. Though this is not the focus of the paper, we do not underestimate some of the significant roles that these religions have played in the development of developing nations. In fact, in this direction, Ogbonnaya has delivered an exposition of the impact of Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), especially Christian and Islamic ones in Nigeria like FOWMAN (the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria), CAN (Christian Association of Nigeria), CRUDAN (Christian Rural and Urban Development of Nigeria), JDPC (Christian Justice Development and Peace Commission), NASFAT (Nasrul-II-Fathi Society of Nigeria), that have vitalized the possibility of poverty alleviation through charitable works, health services, education, vocational training centers, installation of boreholes, empowerment and emancipation of women, rehabilitation of children and orphans, provision of employment, rural – urban welfare et cetera. For details; see Ogbonnaya, J. *Religion and Sustainable Development in Africa: The Case of Nigeria*. Retrieved from www.saintleo.edu/media/.../religion_and_sustainable_development_in_africa_final.pdf... Accessed May 18, 2016. Importantly, what constitutes the interest in this paper is the point that the rubrics of traditional moral thought embedded in African religions is often discounted and considered inconsequential for development in contemporary times.
9. 'Abiku' in Yoruba belief are children believed to be destined to die at birth or later moments (unknown; could be at tender or adult age) much after being born. That a number of this case may not be a function of the belief in the kindred spirits of *Abiku* but one of genotypic combination like AS is possible.

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