

Original Paper

The Supreme Being (God) and Man: Who Is to Blame for Bad Destiny?

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Abstract

In Yoruba traditional thought, human destiny has a mysterious power that controls human events. It is believed that every person has their life history before coming to the world. This implies that anything one does is not something done out of free will is done in fulfillment of a preordained or preordained sequence of events. However, Yoruba has such a controversial understanding of the meaning, nature, relevance and reality of the concept of destiny (ayanmo), which has long elicited philosophical interest. While various metaphysical interpretations have been given for this issue, it could be said that most of these interpretations may be seen in four forms: fatalism, predestination, soft-determinism and hard-determinism. However, less emphasis has been placed on man's free will in determining destiny. Who is to be blamed for bad destiny between the Supreme Being (Olodumare) and man was not completely resolved. Therefore, this paper re-examines who is responsible for the bad destiny suffered by man, between God and Man. Having used critical analysis, this paper argues that in the light of human moral responsibility, character, afterlife, justice and judgment, there is a shared responsibility between Supreme Being (God) and the man on the bad destiny suffered by man.

Keywords

destiny, man, Ori, and supreme being (God)

1. Introduction

In Yoruba traditional thought, human destiny has a mysterious power that controls human events. Balogun writes that “destiny or predestination is the belief that whatever happens or that will happen in the future has been preordained and happened according to an earlier master plan.” (Note 1) It is the belief that every person has their entire life history written before coming to the world, which implies that anything one does is not something done out of free will. Still, something is done in fulfilment of preordained history. (Note 2) Such a belief as this is usually accredited to a Divine Mind or Supreme Being, who is said to have pre-existentially fixed all the events that could and would take place in a man’s earthly existence. However, the Yorubas have such a contentious understanding of the meaning, nature, relevance and reality of the concept of destiny (*ayanmo*), which has long elicited philosophical interest. While various metaphysical interpretations have been given for this issue, it can be said that most of these interpretations may be seen in four forms: fatalism, predestination, soft-determinism and hard-determinism. However, less emphasis has been placed on man’s free will in determining destiny. Who is to be blamed for bad destiny between the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*) and man is difficult. Therefore, this paper re-examines who is responsible for bad destiny between God and Man.

2. The Concept of Human Personality and Destiny in Yoruba Traditional Thought

In Yoruba traditional thought, a human person is equally a tripartite composite. (Note 3) The parts are *ara* (body), EMI (life-giving element or soul) and *ori* (spiritual head). The body or *ara* is the principle of individuation in the human person. It comprises both the internal and external, material and tangible components of the human person. The parts are *ara* (body) and EMI (life-giving element or soul). The body, *ara* is the principle of individuation in the human person. It comprises both the internal and external, material and tangible components of the human person. This component is what is left behind when a person dies. There is no single Yoruba Word to designate the term soul. There are three terms in Yoruba *okàn*, *orí* and *èmi*, which are used as equivalent to the word soul, depending on the context. The term “*okàn*” means “heart” in English. In this regard, the Yoruba view “the heart from two perspectives: the first is the material heart that human beings have in common with the lower animals. This is the material heart that supplies blood through the veins into the other part of the body and, thus, makes all animate objects alive.” (Note 4) The second is the nonmaterial heart.

However, Awolalu and Dopamu write that this material *okàn*, is regarded as an accurate representation of the other *okàn*, which is essentially immaterial and invisible. (Note 5) This immaterial *okàn* is the seat of intelligence, thought, action, emotion and psychic energy. (Note 6) Dopamine points out that *okàn* is also used to denote that part of the man called *iyè* (mind, mentality or rationality). (Note 7) We should point out that the word *okàn* is used in different ways but mainly in a symbolic manner, such as *okànrèti lo* (He is buried in thought): *okàn mi sopéyòòwá* (my mind tells me that he will come or I think he will come). (Note 8) The critical thing in all these expressions is that the *okàn* referred to here is the immaterial *okàn*.

Ori is another Yoruba term used to represent the word “soul”. (Note 9) In Yoruba philosophical thoughts, *orí* is presented in two forms like *okàn*. *Ori* means head. But when the Yoruba speak of *orí*, they are not referring to the physical and visible head; instead, they speak of *oríinú*, each individual’s inner or metaphysical head. The word *ori* is used in different contexts, like *okàn*, metaphorically. *Ori* is viewed as an important element of a man that cannot be overlooked. It is for the Yoruba the determinant of soul. Awolalu illustrates the significance of *orí* as the person’s guardian or protector through the advice given to a bride. (Note 10) It is believed in Yoruba tradition that a newly married woman is instructed to take *orí* along to her husband’s house, not just beauty. This is because beauty is fleeting, but *orí* abides with one in the husband’s house, “*Múorí lo, máàmúewà lo: ojòlewà n bo, orinibánigbéléoko.*” (Note 11) *Ori* is seen as the essence of human personality.

Further usage of *orí* among the Yoruba confirms that they think of *orí* as the soul, human’s double, a semi-split entity or a person’s guardian angel. (Note 12) That is why scholars such as Gbadegesin notes that “*Ori* is the bearer of a person’s destiny as well as the determinant of one’s personality.” (Note 13) He further explains that;

Destiny is the preordained set of life outcomes, 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, its controller, the rationale for the claim in the second story; no *orisa* blesses a person without the consent of their *ori*. 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. (Note 14)

The Yoruba believes that a fortunate person should be described as *Olóri-ire* (that is the one who possesses good *ori*) whilst one who is unfortunate is regarded as *Olóriburíkú* (one who possesses a bad *ori*). It is also the belief that a person embarking on a journey be wished as such: “*Kíoríkí ó sìn é lo ò*” (May *orí* go with you). Parents are also seen praying for their children, hoping that their *orí* will affect them positively. Awolalu points an example that Yorubas have the habit of also saying “*Orí mi á sìn é lo*” (May my *orí* go with you). (Note 15) In other words, may my *orí* guide you and bless you. This is mostly done when people want to embark on significant projects. In another instance, if a person miraculously escapes from harm, he will say: “*Orí mi yom?*” (my *orí* saved me). And when accomplishment has been attained, the Yoruba say: “*Oribá mi sé?*” (my *orí* has enabled me to do it). The illustration here is endless and cannot be exhausted. (Note 16)

The point of note in all the above illustrations is that human beings have a soul. This soul is what the Yoruba called *oríinú*, making them rational, conscious, responsive and responsible. It is this “*oríinú*, as personality soul, that differentiates human beings from animals and makes humans to be capable of knowing their maker, *Olódùmarè*, the Supreme Being.” It is the *Oriinu* that is responsible for human personality. The point crucial to this study is that *ori* is viewed as an immortal and immaterial part of a human being. Generally, from the Yoruba perspective, a person is made up of three parts: *ara* (body), *èmi* (the life-giving element called soul), and *oríinú* (inner head). It is important to note here that “the

Yoruba tripartite human composition is not to be confused with the Platonic tripartite soul, where the harmonious tripartite soul is responsible for human personality as just or unjust person.” (Note 17) According to Idowu, “It is the *èmi* that gives life to the whole body and therefore can aptly be described through its causal functions.” (Note 18) Therefore, the presence of *èmi*, or its absence from the body, helps determine whether a person is alive or dead. Accordingly, *èmi* can be regarded as the life force. Abimbola asserts that the invisible spiritual element of human personality-*èmi*, has its “physical realization in the human head, and *esè* (leg), which is also known by the same name on the physical plane.” (Note 19) Although many scholars of Yoruba culture and philosophy agree that *èmi* is the Yoruba term that best corresponds with the Greek word ψυχή (*psyche*). Translated soul in English, from the various description of the word *emi*, it is apparent that the word *èmi* does not correspond with the Platonic tripartite soul. *Orinú*, the personality-soul, has a corresponding meaning to Plato’s tenet of the soul. While *èmi* is regarded as the life force and described by Oladipo as the “undying part of man which is given directly by the creator before man is born into the world,” *orinú* is responsible for the personality of an individual. It is *orinú* that makes a man what he is, a just or an unjust person. *Èmi*, on the other hand, is regarded as the “seat of life,” life force. Thus, the choice of a good *ori* in heaven brings success, while a bad *ori* brings failure to its bearer on earth.

3. The Mythological Origin of *Ori*

Since it is believed that *Ori* is the bearer of a person’s destiny and the determinant of one’s personality, it is essential to understand the origin of *Ori*. According to Yoruba mythology, *Ori* of any individual comes into existence at the creation of that individual. At the moment of creation, every person goes to *Ajala*, the entity or being that moulds heads and *orito* choose their *ori*. It is instructive to note that after choosing their *ori*, the person passes through *omi-igbagbe*, water of forgetfulness, before arriving on earth. However after choosing their *ori*, the individual goes to *Olodumare*, who confirms whatever *ori* one has chosen before passing through this water. The witnesses of the act of choice of one’s destiny are *Olodumare* and *Orunmila*, the arch-deity. It is worth noting that *Orunmila* is the deity of divination in Yoruba religious practice. This is perhaps because he saw what every person chose before travelling through *omi-igbagbe*. (Note 20)

Scholars have noted that the process of receiving one’s *ori* is known as *ayanmo*, that which is attached to a person. Idowu points out that people can acquire their destiny in three ways: first, they can kneel down and choose it. This is rendered, in Yoruba, as *akunleyan*, that which is choosing while kneeling. Second, they can be given while they kneel. In Yoruba, this is rendered as *akunlegba*, which is received while kneeling. Third, *Olodumare* may just affix the destiny on the person. This is the one called *ayanmo*. (Note 21) *Ori*, for the Yoruba is located on the forehead, and it is also known as *ipin* (a person’s share in life) or *oke-ipori*. As *oke-ipori*, it is considered a person’s god, an *orisá* (a lesser god). (Note 22)

Accordingly, the *ori*, in-so-far-as it is located on the forehead, has to be taken care of. If one’s *ori* is

happy, good and beautiful things will happen to the person. The simple way to do this, for the Yoruba person, is to take good care of one's head. As an *orisá*, one's *ori* is responsible for what happens to the person. The *ori*, therefore, carries a person's *existential manifesto*. Whatever a person is or becomes is a function of the operations of their *ori*. Again, it should be borne in mind that everyone is believed to have chosen their own *ori*. Thus, choosing a good one implies success and fortune and the person who has such an *ori* is referred to as *olorirere*, one with a good head.

The choice of a bad *ori* implies bad fortune and failure. The person who possesses such is called *oloriburuku*, one with a bad or unfortunate head. From the preceding, an understanding of destiny seems to arise, making it understood as meaning that the human person is determined absolutely. Here we see a clear case of essentialism: essence precedes existence. The claim is that "every person has his biography written before coming to the world." (Note 23) This understanding is what Oladele Balogun refers to as hard determinism. (Note 24)

4. The Supreme Being (God) and Man: Who Blame for Bad Destiny?

From Yoruba traditional thought, it seems that the whole lot (destiny) of a man has been predetermined by the Supreme Being. In this regard, it is believed that there is absolute determinism. It is understood that destiny is such an unalterable affixation of whatever one has chosen in the presence of *Ajala* or *Olodumare*, hard determinism or fatalism is involved. This means that what was chosen or affixed on the person at the choosing or reception remains the blueprint of the individual's life. So, whatever human persons do, they are not in control, and could not have done anything more or less. Hard determinism is implied when destiny is interpreted as meaning that the human person is caused, constrained and conditioned by the efficient cause. It is such that the individual appears to exist simply to be used as robots simply to do the bidding of their cause. Such a doctrine rebuffs the idea that the human person is free or possesses free will. Every event in the human person's life is understood here to be out of the control of the individual. (Note 25) In this regard, the blame for bad destiny cannot be ascribed to man but to the Supreme Being.

In the view of this paper, it is the perspective of "hard determinism" that gave rise to the school of thought that viewed destiny as fatalism. The idea of viewing destiny as fatalism presupposes that destiny is understood as meaning that whatever actions humans perform was meant to be that way and nothing otherwise. Hence, there is no need for any personal effort to realize or change any destiny, what is going to be is going to be, *qui sera sera*. Everything that happens is seen as unavoidable. Nothing, for such persons as the hard determinist and the fatalist, can make an event happen in this world other than it would. For some Yoruba thinkers, not even the divinities, *orisás*, as powerful as they are, can change what had been predetermined. The fatalists advise then that human persons have to try to understand their lot and adapt accordingly. For them, it is a fruitless act trying to alter one's destiny because it is not possible. Thus, their creed is, "Resign to fate." (Note 26) There is nothing like chance or luck; neither is there anything like freedom. Thus, moral responsibility is a mirage. Some fatalists

even go to the extent of posting that the said choice of one's *ori* before *Olodumare* or *Ajala* was not a choice but an activity engineered by and influenced by some superior force to the individuals.

This position leaves one with many questions to ask. If some superior force determines the human person, is there a purpose for which the human person was made? Are human beings the only ones determined? What differentiates the human person from a mere stone if the former could be said to have been determined? If the fatalists maintain that humans are determined, will the state just punish criminals? Should a person be praised when they exhibit some heroic or praiseworthy actions? It is interesting to note that the fatalist thought seems to crumble like a pack of cards when we consider the human experience of offenders and great people being punished or set as beacons, respectively. (Note 27)

However, there is a middle ground in all these arguments; the school of thought viewed destiny as soft or moderate determinism. This school of thought alludes that humans have free will to determine their destiny to some extent. (Note 28) This means that in the realization of human destiny on earth, the human person is not constrained. This aspect of non-constraint offers room for the exercise of free will and freedom. As a result, moral responsibility is possible where destiny is considered in a soft-deterministic sense. Thus, in the view of this school of thought, human beings may be accounted responsible for bad destiny.

It can be seen that only this school of thought gives room for the possibility of moral responsibility. This position has some implications for the alterability of destiny. This means that the human person has to make their helpful life and morally praiseworthy. This also means that the human person would be rewarded or punished for their every action. This is the heart of moral freedom: humans are free to do or not to do as they are supposed to. The freedom to do or not do as one ought is the basis of moral responsibility. However, this freedom is not absolute, just as the determinism that permits it is not. That is why humans can be punished for failing to do well. (Note 29)

This paper's position is that man, and the Supreme Being are both culpable in determining destiny. Regardless of the means at which the destiny is affixed to a man, according to Yoruba traditional thoughts, the person still has the responsibility of consulting *Ifa* oracle to know his lot on earth. It is believed that this consultation and proper sacrifice to one's *ori* may deliver one's good fortune (destiny) on earth. It may be argued that destiny is affixed from the moment of creation. There is a place of character (*iwa*), which is man's moral responsibility. It is baseless to assert that a man does not have control over his destiny and that he is at the mercy of the gods or *Olodumare*. Thus, the blame for bad destiny is a shared responsibility between the Supreme Being and man. This paper's view, therefore, tilted towards the soft-determinism of Balogun.

5. Conclusion

The matter of destiny is one of the central thoughts regarding human personality in Yoruba traditional thoughts. While diverse interpretations have been given regarding Yoruba's understanding of it, it is

evident that the majority of the scholars supported hard-determinism and fatalism. However, the school of thought of soft-determinism is most suitable if we consider the Supreme Being's moral responsibility and free will of man. In the light of the afterlife, justice, punishment and rewards, it will be fallacious to assert that man has no control over his destiny and that nothing he can do, whether good or bad, can alter it. If one thinks as such, that means his character or moral stance is not necessary. The whole blame for bad destiny is now shifted to the Supreme Being. This implicates the Supreme Being and puts question marks on his integrity to judge mortals. It also puts strain on the moral responsibility of man. In this regard, the logical position to take is that of soft-determinism in the view of this work. Therefore, it is asserted that regardless of the reception process of destiny, man and the Supreme Being are both responsible for bad destiny.

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Notes

Note 1. O. A. Balogun, "The Concepts of *Ori* and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation," *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2007, 116-130.

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