

## “ARHIALUSI” – COSMIC JUSTICE IN THE SOCIAL ETHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE IULEHA PEOPLE OF EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*The belief in a primordial cosmic justice - arhialusi is a present day reality in Iuleha (Edo) traditional moral psyche. This belief holds that humans play active roles in shaping their lots in life. It connects a persons present woes to moral wrong(s) of his previous existence. It is the concern of this paper to take a phenomenological exploration of this belief in arhialusi emphasizing it social implication among the Iuleha people. The methodology adopted is qualitative, phenomenological and historical. Data were obtained mainly through in-depth interview and non-participatory observation methods. The paper discovered that arhialusi is a cosmic law of retributive justice which seems like the Iuleha version of karma. It unveils also that this belief is anchored on Iuleha notion of the never-ending process of life hence, inextricably tied to their belief in reincarnation. It is the finding of this paper also that awareness of this cosmic law serves as regulatory mechanism for self and social control. This is because it showcases the result of immoral acts of a previous life as well as checkmates the evil conduct of individuals in the present world. The paper uses arhialusi not only to explore the African concept of causality but also to emphatically maintain that not all phenomena could be explained empirically. It thus posits that belief in arhialusi is one of the ways the Iuleha people (Africans) ascertain the ultimate cause of reality, checkmate vices and promotes virtuous conduct in their society.*

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**Keywords:** *Arhialusi, Cosmic, Justice, Reincarnation, Ethical consciousness*

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### **Introduction**

In spite of modernization and the influx of Western ideas, certain primordial convictions still endure among the postcolonial Iuleha (Owan) people of Edo State in southern Nigeria (Solomon Ikhidero, 104). One of such is the idea and experience of a cosmic carryover of the effects of actions of individual from a previous existence into their present life. This, they call *Arhialusi*. *Arhialusi* among the Iuleha people is a metaphysical cosmic force more or less like a man's response to an external stimulus triggered by his performance in the previous life. Such cosmic carryover of the effects of human action is inherent in the moral consciousness of many African societies. Felix Airoboman captures this fact in his explanation of the concept of destiny among the Esan people that; the individual's destiny in the present existence is inseparably linked with his past existence and his future state of existence will be affected indispensably by his actions in the present existence. This he says, depicts the belief in the operation of Karma; the unerring law which adjusts effect to cause, on the physical, mental and spiritual planes of being. And it is embedded in the Esan expression *ebakoleane*, which means *what is sown, is what is reaped* (222). Matthew Izbili

reiterates also that there exist various understanding of the concept of the soul among different cultures, ethnic groups, and religions (105). The idea of destiny in African Traditional Religion and philosophy is the realization of this world in a future time. African religion, he states further, is a kind of humanism, in which, moving away from man, only to return to him, seizes in the course of its voyage all that is not of men itself, and which surpasses him (Izibili, 105).

To this end, the traditional thought system of the Iuleha people is replete with spirituality, redemptive values against evils, misfortune and anxiety. They believe that nothing happen by chance. Occurrence of events are attributable to forces which include those of Deities, Divinities, Personal Guarding spirits and even a man's own hand or arm. These diverse categories of causal agents are believed to be responsible for whatever happens in areas of marriage, economy, health, morals, hazards and politics. To the Iuleha people, spiritual or metaphysical issues are attempts to understand the universe by means of logical investigation of reality rather than an empirical inquiry based on sensory evidence. This paper is therefore a phenomenological investigation into the Iuleha belief in *Arhialusi*. The basic aim is to understand the extent to which the belief in this eternal and immutable cosmic law has shaped the moral rectitude of this traditional society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several approaches have been propounded towards a better understanding of the true nature of metaphysical reality. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological principle serves as the theoretical foundation for the proper analysis and understanding of this spiritually originated law embedded in the Iuleha belief in *Arhialusi*. The phenomenological approach to the study of religion has attracted scholarly attention in recent years. This is not unconnected with its central tenets which encourage a researcher not only to refrain from evaluating religious phenomena but to cultivate empathy towards the believer's point of view when describing such phenomena and avoiding all forms of reductionism (Ezra Chitando, 301). Phenomenology primarily focuses on the description of how believers understand their own faith. It is the ability to view reality from the point of view of the participants.

The goal is to achieve the intuitive apprehension of the essence of such a phenomenon. Even though it has also receive its fair share criticisms<sup>1</sup> it is still preferred and continued to be adopted as the ideal principle in the study of the indigenous religious practices especially of the African people.

### **Who are the Iuleha of Edo State?**

The Iuleha are among the Edoid speaking groups occupying the Northern fringe of Edo State, South-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria (Ikhidero, 103). Iuleha clan is the single largest conglomeration of community in Owan West Local Government Area of Edo State, in terms of size and population (Omon Osiki, 50). Although Iuleha is part of the larger Edoid-speaking group, which has probably occupied its present site for upward of three thousand years (Osiki, 50), the people have a common ancestral belief that distinguished them from other Edoid speaking groups and which served as a unifying factor among them. *Irimo*, believed to be their progenitor occupied a significant position in the unity of Iuleha people, especially with respect to traditions of origin, migration and settlement. It also determined, to a very large extent, the traditions, customs and norms of Iuleha people (Omo Amu, 5).

<sup>1</sup> Many critics have dismissed the approach as idealist and unscientific. Some critics claim that advocate of the phenomenological principle have not succeeded in clarifying many practical and theoretical issues. It does not describe a specific method, but connotes a particular attitude; this makes it too loose and limited as an approach for ascertainment of academic fact. Hence, such a method should not be adopted in the study of African religion.

According to oral tradition, the progenitor of the the Iuleha people, *Irimo*, is believed to have migrated from Ile-Ife via Benin or directly from Ife before settling down in Iulehland after a brief sojourn in *Uokha* (Onaiwu Ogbomo, 225) a community believed to be the first and earliest settlement in *Ivbiosakon* area of present day Owan East in Edo North. According to Olu Akhigbe (a respondent from Okpuje-Iuleha) *Irimo* is believed to have had three sons that became the founder of the three sub-clan of Iuleha, namely, *Eruere*, *Aoma* and *Okpuje*, in order of seniority and based on customs and traditions.

It should be added that majority of Ivbiosakon (Owan) communities and inhabitants claim descent from Benin. However, it appears according to Osiki that Iuleha is the only clan that claims descent from Ile-Ife (50). This is affirmed by Ohikhokhai's position that "the traditions of origin of Owan people are many. In general, it would appear that the people are of three types – the migrants from Benin who constitute the largest group...; the migrants from Yorubaland and the aboriginal people of whom little is known. He states further that; of the eleven Owan communities, nine namely; *Uokha*, *Igue*, *Ora*, *Ihievbe*, *Ivbi-Ada-Obi*, *Ozalla*, *Otuṣ*, *Evbo-Mion* and *Emai*, trace their origin to the Benin Kingdom. On the other hand, few wards of *Uokha*, *Otuṣ*, *Iuleha*, and *Ikaṣ* have traditions which claim migration from Ife (cited in Osiki, 52).

The Iuleha people are uncompromisingly religious. A respondent to this study Pa Atokhaimen Eguaoje explains that Iuleha people believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, ancestors, reincarnation, witchcraft, sorcery, and *Arhialusi*. The Iuleha ontological account of reality as is the case of many African societies is generally known to be a holistic one because of the manner in which it interlocks both sensible (material) beings and non-sensible (immaterial) beings together as parts of one holistic world having a reciprocal influence on each other. Elvis Imafidon affirms this when he maintains that, in an African ontology, everything is taken as being; nothing exists that is taken lightly (3). The belief is that there is reason for whatever is. Though man may not immediately know why a thing is created, they all serve a purpose. Being is therefore conceived as the range of existent things arranged in an ontological hierarchical order.

It was gathered from respondents' explanations that among the Iuleha people, it is generally conceived that *Oselobua* (The Supreme being) is at the apex of the ontological hierarchical order of being. He is believed to be the creator of the universe and all beings therein. Morality, from the perspective of the Iuleha people flows from *Oiselobua*. He is the people's idea of the holy and the morally good in the community. He ensures that the moral norms of the society are strictly adhered to and He dispenses retributive justice through the divinities/spirits such as *Olokun*, *Ayelala*, *Adaobi* and the ancestors (*obazu*, *era-eruere*, *oyangbe*)

The religious practices of the Iuleha people recognize two practitioners: The Priest (*Ohen*) and The Diviner/Herbalist (*oboh*). A priest in African indigenous societies is a man or woman who is made to pass through a long series of initiation rites. This will make him ready to perform a wide variety of ceremonies. He also communicates with his or her patron deity through trance. The diviner/ healer is often a man. He is specialized in magical activity such as curing, divining, handling witches or administering ordeals. The *obohs* provided the people with herbs, charms, talisman and other medical attention for good health and also for protective and preventive medicine after divination, or application of magic because of their natural tendency towards religion (Osezinegbe, 18) Without any equivocation, in their spiritual, rational and corporate existence, the religious beliefs of the Iuleha people is the will and précis of their life and possession. The tenets of their religion provide them with shared values, cultural altruism and responsibilities. Indeed, their religion accounts for the peculiar

features of the individuals concerning the universe, which encompass the physical reality. The wonder of the thick forest, the power of the rivers, the magnificent rocks and high mountains with the corresponding mystery of the human person all manifest a supreme power behind these physical realities.

### ***Arialusi* (Cosmic Justice) in Iuleha Belief**

The culture of a people is usually a reflection of the body of beliefs, and mores expressed in their language, religion, dances, arts and crafts, dress, music, houses, customs, traditions, etc. (Izibili, 107). Central to Iuleha cosmology as respondents explains is the belief in a tri-dimensional concept of the human existence rooted in their belief in reincarnation. The pre-existent state of man is called *Arhialusi*. And it is believed that an individual's deed or actions in *Arhialusi* whether good or evil determines his fate in his present existence - *Arhia'ona* in the present life. In this continuous circle of cosmic justice, an individual needs to live a good life in this present to guarantee a better fate in *Arhia'ovbere* (next existence). This simply laid credence to the African belief that life does not end at death. There is life even in the hereafter.

*Arhialusi* can thus aptly be defined as the totality of human actions sown in a previous existence and their attendant reactions in present state, all of which spill over to the future if not checked (Akita Alamu 155). It is generally attested to by the Iuleha people as affirmed in the statement of Alamu that when an individual flourishes in the present existence, it, means that the individual's previous life was lived in good conduct hence the attendant good effects in his/her present state. In the same vein, it is the belief that when a particular society experiences boost, it goes to show that the previous existence of this particular society was lived in good conduct, having upheld the complete ethos, norms, "dos" and conventions of that particular society (155). To this end, *Arhialusi* is the law of retributive justice in Iuleha belief. It is a generational curse and anti-social behaviours, which are intimately linked with the misdeeds of the deviant in his or her previous life. It is a cosmic law of justice, which holds that one's present life is determined by the performance in the previous existence. It pays one in one's own coin. It is a similar in concept to the Law of Karma in Hinduism (Alamu, 166).

The point is that the principle of inter-penetrability of forces espoused by African metaphysics does not make a clear cut distinction between the physical and the spiritual. This point is substantiated by John Mbiti who opines that within the African metaphysical cosmos: "The physical and the spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe. These dimensions dovetail into each other to the extent that at times and in places one is apparently more real than, but not exclusive of the other" (70). God did not only create the material universe, but also established cosmic laws to govern its. For the Iuleha Oselobua created things in an ordered fashion, and made an orderly and harmonious world where everyone could perform his /her own duties (Igbuan Ojeonu, n.p). Within the ambit of Western metaphysics, causality is viewed from a this-worldly standpoint. In fact, causality is seen as a physical order of reality which is perceptible and can be rationalized. On the other hand, African metaphysical notion of causality is agentive. Ancient Africans viewed causality from other-worldly perspective. The traditional African understanding of causality is religious, supernatural, spiritual, mystical and mythical.

### ***Arhialusi* and Reincarnation**

The idea of reincarnation is relevant and fundamental the African perception of death, afterlife and indeed, *arhialusi*. It is a commonly held belief among Africans that man present existence in the world is temporary. For the Iuleha people, this world (*agbon*) is a place where man came to fulfill his chosen destiny. No matter how long man stays in this world,

death will certainly come as a necessary end of man's physical sojourn on earth. When a person dies, the traditional Africans do not say that the "soul" of the dead has gone to the spirit world but the whole man. The Iuleha see death as a migration of the real man from his physical body into the ancestral world hence the saying *ole'deba ivbierha gho* – he has join his ancestors.

Essentially, Iuleha belief in reincarnation is well established, and this directs the activity and explanation in living life and after death. The Iuleha believe that a person in the ancestral realm after some time reincarnate in his children. This is perhaps, clearly seen in the personality and character of the new person. The concept of reincarnation in Iuleha belief according to Bosede Esechemehimi is also notice in the lives of spirit children called (*ate're*), what in Yoruba belief is known as *Abiku* etc. These are children born to die and reincarnate continuously to cause the parent pain. Many of them are identified with the scars on their bodies. They usually behave abnormally as a result of their previous deeds.

Reincarnation according to Andrew Uduigwomen encompasses procreation and rite of remembrance accorded the departed member of a family. To him, these are moral virtues and are wrapped in the goal of continuous existence that provide for immortality (75). The exhibition of moral virtues here and now calls for good reincarnation and continuity in the lineage of existence. One of our respondents (who is a diviner) explains that it is a common belief among the Iuleha people that the spirit world is a replica of the physical world, where there will be carry-over problems, challenges from the physical world to the spiritual world. The good man will remain good while the evil person will remain evil. The implication of this belief is that the thief will remain a thief, the prostitute will remain a prostitute, and the wicked will remain wicked with the righteous remaining righteous

The Iuleha people thus believe as reflected in *arhialusi* that sometimes, a reincarnated ancestor would be accused of having done some havoc in their first life; then now that he/she has come again, sacrifices are to be made to appease the gods for mercy. As many that have the orientation that whatever mistakes they make now will be corrected in the next world when they reincarnate, should better face the life they are privilege to have now and live their print in the sand of time.

### **Implication of *Arhialusi* to Iuleha Socio-ethical Consciousness**

African laws and moral norms, as Okafor rightly observe, are deeply rooted in African Culture and tradition, which are inseparable from the African ontology. The African concept of "dos" and "don'ts", are therefore an expression of the African worldview and ontology (30). Kwame Gyekeye, defines morality as a set of social rules and norms intended to guide the conducts of people in the society. These rules and norms emerge from, and are anchored on people's belief about right and wrong conducts or good and bad character. John Onimhawo emphasizes this in his assertion that, the central concern of ethics is "the good life", "the life worth living". Every human society has their set of idea about "the good life" or what is good or bad. In order therefore, to emphasize the "good" – that is pro-life and de-emphasizes the bad that is anti-life, mechanism for social control and corresponding sanctions are put in place to discourage the bad and immoral actions in every societies (162). *Arhialusi* in Iuleha belief can aptly be tagged as one essential mechanism for social control in Iuleha society. The tenets of the belief is encapsulated in moral virtues and transformation

The power to discern and punish evildoers is one of the incontestable attributes of the Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion (Mercy Idumwonyi and Solomon Ikhidero, 129). However, the belief in *Arhialusi* according to Alamu is sociologically seen as a generational curse platform without reference to the Supreme Being (*Oselobua*) (155). In other words, *Oselobua* does not interfere with the workings of *Arhialusi*. Rather *Arhialusi* is a

natural and social mechanism to showcase the result of immoral acts and as well as checkmate the evil conduct of individuals in the society. The outcome of *Arhialusi* on this note is human-induced. The Supreme Being is totally exempted from influencing or being responsible for *Arhialusi*. Anyway, God is never brought to this phenomenon. Alamu maintains that it cannot be described as fate or man's lot in life. It is a human free will, act and responsibility. He puts it succinctly thus;

“It is worthy of note that in Edo milieu Osanobuwa does not destroy or remove human freedom in a providential sense of His care, love and justice. Human individual does evil acts because he/she chooses to do so or to desist from doing so. *Arhialusi* inflicted on himself/herself and probably on others is a product of the noble freewill that he/she has: to do or not to do. In other words, freewill entails responsibility. And responsibility is a great act of honour, deserving praise when well executed, and deserving blame and being culpable when badly executed. There is no forgiveness within the province of *Arhialusi* Nothing can prevent the effect of a cause. Whatever a person sows, he/she must reap.”(16)

Sequel to the above, *Arhialusi*, as many of the respondents to this study strongly maintain, is a spiritual mechanism to checkmate human conduct with attendant result in its full capacity. Some respondents describe it as *arobosi* and *Obọ'arehoo* – what a man has causes/seek with his own hand. One of our respondent, Bosede Esechemehim gave the instance of a relation who found it difficult to settle in marriage. Every woman he attempted to settle with eventually abandoned him. It was later discovered through divination that it was the result of his wicked act to a woman in *arhialusi*. This respondent thus describes the concept of *Arhialusi* as *ebakọ* - ‘reaping what you sow’. To this end, the people strongly believe that it is nature that acts, *Arhialusi* is not a judgement or reward from Oselobua, rather it is bad act or deed that automatically brings bad effect or result. The above assertion also confirms that the effect of *Arhialusi* can be discerned through divination and can be discontinued through the performance of rituals, ceremonies, rites and offerings.

*Arhialusi* as we have seen is purely a natural phenomenon governed by natural laws that act automatically with complete justice. It is believed to be a spiritually originated law; an extended expression of natural acts. *Arhialusi* has the knack to harmonize and influence the gods, nature, weather, harvest and enemies through right intent. In fact, *Arhialusi* relates to the individual's action with questions of morality, responsibility, reward and punishment. Joseph Omeregbe, in his analysis of a related concept (karma) in Eastern Philosophy says that it is in the final analysis not deterministic as it appears to be. The victim may not be in control of what is happening to him/her in his present life, but he or she is reaping what he/she has sown in the previous existence. The evil is done freely; it is the consequence of it that is not free. The cause is freely brought about, but the effect is automatic and inevitable, whether one likes it or not. Hence Omeregbe maintain that, “he who chooses the cause indirectly chooses the effect as well (17).

This moral dimension of *Arhialusi*, hinged on cosmic justice, also plays out in the African belief in the criteria for acceptance of the dead into the hood of the ancestors. It is believed that admission into the hood of ancestors is determined by the way the deceased lived his life and how he died. These are strong – determinant factors in the ancestral land. In other words, an ancestor is qualified by the way he lived his life. Was he generous while on earth? How religious was he? Did he fight for the justice of others? etcetera. All these and other moral factors will determine whether the deceased will become an ancestor or not.

An ancestor, enjoin powers of the creator and other celestial deities. This possession enables him to influence his living families and clans positively. He brings the dividends of the Great Beyond like peace, protection from the attack of the evil ones and fortunes to his families.

There is a depravity for some to become ancestors after death. They are denied the comfort and the homeland because their earthly lives fell short of good habits. They may on earth be connected with evil spirit like witchcraft, sorcery, criminal or murderer etc. Such personality spirit wanders about as a ghost and he causes havoc to his family members. These personalities are not qualified to become ancestors.

The consciousness of *Arhialusi* as many respondents explains, propels individuals to faithfully and dutifully perform religious actions, by eschewing excessive materialism, sinful behaviour, evil duties, unprofitable obligations and conducting religious ceremonies. *Arhialusi* is quite religiously appealing because it has meditative powers to attach oneself to good deeds by securing the blessings and favours of the gods and of nature.

Indeed, the African concept of man is that of a being in relation. The idea of interdependence is discovered in the concept of *Arhialusi*. In the Iuleha scheme of things, as is also applicable in other African societies, the wellbeing of the individual depends on the help and goodwill of his fellow being in the society. The people conform to social and religious norms to avert calamity both individual and collective to enhance economic prosperity and better future life. Stringent measures are put in place to curtail social misfits.

From a social context, it is observed that the effect of *Arhialusi* is not only felt by the offender but by his extended family and by extension the society at large. This brings about solidarity in suffering which invariably is praxis of African humanism. This is what Airoboman meant when he emphasize that any act by one man or group of men is capable of reflecting in the life of the whole community (223). This is why stringent measures are put in place to curb excesses and to encourage or ensure moral uprightness to attract blessings to the community. This is also why when the ontological balance or harmony has been disrupted either by one person or group of persons, in most cases; it is the concern of all to expiate the evil to avert doom.

Undoubtedly, there is a collective aspect of *Arhialusi*. This is affirmed in Alamu's statement that communal *Arhialusi* is prevalent in Edo. Atokaimen Eguaoje made this clear in his assertion that when a family member is going through any difficulty, it is the concern of his entire kinsmen. He stated that when a particular set of failures, suffering and misfortune is observe in the life of a family member, that family needs to swing into action. This is because such peculiar misfortune has the tendency of stigmatizing the entire family. He explains that the first necessary step to take is to consult the oracle. When it is discovered that it is the effect of *Arhialusi*, The necessary rites, rituals and sacrifices would be promptly done to discontinue its effect.

Our lives and actions are always interconnected with the lives and actions of others in dynamic interrelations. At times, it is certainly difficult to detach our own actions and their effects from those of others. In other words, *Arhialusi* is thus also a wholesomely social concept, since it implies the manner in which it affects the lives of people as a result of interconnectedness of all reality. Through this medium, communities are brought together religiously, just as the clan prospers collectively. In the same vein, it also has meditative wherewithal to attach itself to bad deeds resulting in endless suffering individually and collectively. This also ensures setbacks not only for the individual but also for the entire community.

### **Removing the Effect of Arhialusi**

It is believed that the effects of *arhialusi* could be checked and probably removed. One of our informant commented that, events in the individuals' personal history are the first determinant factors of ascertaining if such individual is suffering under the influence of *arhialusi*. Many respondents explains that the effects of *arhialusi* can be revealed by means of divination. The individual or members of his/her family usually consult a diviner to know the source of his/her misfortune. The Chief priest (*ohen*), according to Alamu usually assume primary responsibility for the discontinuity of the effects of *arhialusi* in the life of an individual. They carry out the propitiation rites and mediate on behalf of the individual. It is a fact that individuals are clearly instructed to be responsibly concerned with good personal conduct and not to expect the priesthood alone to secure and safeguard their *arhialusi* through the performance of sacred rites. The Priest/diviner– *Ohen* prescribes also the items and the sacrifices, rites, rituals and offerings demanded by the gods to remove and change the consequences of *arhialusi*. Through the prescription of the oracle, the appropriate rites, rituals and sacrificial offerings are done. Alamu notes that the rituals are good and are apparently anchored on evaluation of actions based on ritual exactitude; good being equated with the correct performance of the rite, while bad with the incorrect performance of the rite. Thus, the ritual is indispensable for sustaining a spiritual force-field strong enough to ward off spiritual forces and entities that torment, confuse and misguide affected individuals.

### Conclusion Remarks

*Arhialusi* in Iuleha in the Iuleha perception causality is religious, supernatural, spiritual and mystical. It is the spill-over effects of human actions from a supposed previous existence. This, in the realm of empiricism may be considered irrational. However, the life-line of African metaphysics is that causality cannot be rationally and empirically perceived or conceived, but only spiritually intuited through the consultation of the supernatural. The reality of *arhialusi* transcends the way we perceive with our senses. It is a belief which stems from the fact that Africans regard the sensible and the supersensible world as part of a seamless whole where constant action, interaction and reaction takes place.

Conclusively therefore, the *Arhialusi* in its totality is real to the Iuleha moral psyche. It is one of the Iuleha traditional regulatory mechanism for social control. Its tenet lies in the principle of “reaping what you sow”. Hence, just actions, moral and good virtues produce just reactions, good fruits and higher rebirth. In the same manner, unjust actions, immoral and wrong virtues produce unpleasant reactions, bad fruits and low rebirth. Its modus operandi lies in the acceptance of a corrective process of experimentation with our own experience, and this presupposes our readiness to admit openly our errors and learn/abstain from them.

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