

## Iwa (Character): The Thrust of Yoruba Traditional Ethical Discourse

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### **Abstract**

*The state of immorality in human society is alarmingly contributory to the spate of the insecurity of life and properties, the marital disharmony and every form of evils being witnessed in the society nowadays. The negligence of the society on the moral upbringing of its members occasions this alarming rate of immoral acts in the society. Unlike the ancient traditional society which stipulated ethical standards, preached and enforced its ethics, rewarded the adherence and punished the violation by its members and ensured a society maximally secured in all ramifications, the present day society is negligent about these and witnessing the attendant consequences. This work examined the unequivocal roles and emphasis on Iwa (character) played among the traditional Yoruba to ascertain a morally upright society as against the morally decadent society we have now. The work is qualitative in nature and made use of hermeneutical approach.*

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**Keywords:** Iwa, Character, Yoruba, Ethical Discourse

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### **Introduction**

Among the traditional Yoruba, a stronger emphasis is placed on good moral standard. The Yoruba frown at bad behaviours (immoral arts) and commend good behaviours (moral acts). Regardless of the contemporary increasing rate of immorality in the human society, the people do not condone any iota of immorality. The Yoruba define a morally upright member of the society as *Omoluabi*. Morphologically, *omoluabi* is a combination of – *Omo*(child) + *ti* (which) + *olu*(chief) + *iwa*(Character) + *bi* (gave birth to ).<sup>1</sup> In essence, *omoluabi* means a child given birth to by the chief of character: A person whose character is satisfactory to both the young and the adults is regarded as *omoluabi*. Thus, the chief end of home training (otherwise known as traditional education among the Yoruba) is to produce in every person the moral uprightness which will qualify him/

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Oluwatosin Banjo & Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi. “Reconsidering the Yorùbá Concept of Omolúàbí and the Peaceful Coexistence in the Society.” *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research* 6(5) (2023) 55. <https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-5NZMTXUP>

her into the league of *omoluabi*.<sup>2</sup> Central to the moral discourse of *omoluabi* among the Yoruba is *iwa* (character). Virtuous and vicious livings are premised around *iwa* (character), hence the prefix '*iwa*' (character) to the good and bad behaviours. The focus of this work is, therefore, to examine *iwa* (character) as the thrust of Yoruba ethical discourse.

### **The People Known as the Yoruba**

Yoruba is the name of a people and an ethnic group in Nigeria. The Yoruba live in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti States in Southwestern Nigeria and in Kwara and Kogi States in North-Central Nigeria. They also live in neighbouring countries like Benin and Togo Republics. The Yorubatribal clans include Oyo, Yewa, Awori, Egba, Ijebu, Ibarapa, Oke-Ogun,, Ife, Ijesa, Ondo, Ikale, Akoko, Ilaje, Ijaw, Idoko, Ekiti, Yagba, Igbomina, Owu, etc.<sup>3</sup>

The Yoruba “are bound together by language, traditions and religious beliefs and practices.”<sup>4</sup> The people also pay greater attention to their religion and are intertwined by their religion. This is corroborated by Bolaji Idowu as follow: “...The real keynote of the life of the Yoruba is neither in their noble ancestry nor in the past deeds of their heroes. The keynote of their life is their religion. In all things, they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principle of life for them.”<sup>5</sup>

The Yoruba are religious people. The religious expression of the people cuts across every sphere of their lives. The organization and interpretation of their beings and experiences are premised around their religion. Nothing among the Yoruba can be said to exist without religion. In essence, the Yoruba find meanings to their existence in their religion.

### **THE YORUBA AND THEIR ETHICAL DISCOURSE**

Like every human society, the Yoruba place high premium on the morality of the members of their society. The pursuit of the communal wellbeing of their society motivates the Yoruba ethical discourse. Among the Yoruba, it is assumed that the wellness of the society depends on the moral wellness of the members of the society. On the other hand, the inability of the members of the society to maintain moral wellness can cause the whole society to be at great risk. This stems out of their reverence for God and the belief that the wrongdoing of a members of the society can

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<sup>2</sup> G. O. Akanbi and A. a. Jekayinfa, “Reviving the African Culture of Omoluabi in the Yoruba Race as a Means of Adding Value to Education in Nigeria,” *International Journal of Modern Education Research*. 3/3 (2016), 13.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History* (Ibadan: University Press, 1980), 1. “Yoruba,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica Student and Home Edition (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010). N. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, edited by Francis Olu. Okediji and Oladepo O. Okediji (Ibadan: University Press, 1970), 29. A. O. Adesoji, “Contemporary Ethnic Nationalism and Hegemony Crisis among the Yoruba,” in Sola Akinrinade et al, *The Humanities, Nationalism and Democracy* (Ile-Ife: Faculty of Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, 2006), 211.

<sup>4</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Ikeja: Longman Nigeria, 1996), 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

trigger the angers of *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being of the Yoruba) and his lieutenant-deities which can bring evil consequences upon the entire society.

Invariably speaking, the Yoruba ethical discourse is both divine-centric and consequential. In other words, the Yoruba ethics has a connection with God. *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being of the Yoruba) is ascribed the originator and giver of the Yoruba ethical codes. Bolaji Idowu buttresses this by saying:

As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priests and diviners whom they believe to be the interpreters of the will of the Deity. Through all the circumstances of life, through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles, it is the Deity who is in control.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the above presupposition, in the traditional Yoruba, *Olodumare* dictates the moral conducts that are permissible in the society. All the members of the society must live in compliance with those moral codes which are dictated by *Olodumare*. Individual members of the society is compelled to live with the consciousness of the wellbeing of the entire society,<sup>7</sup> hence should adhere strictly to the moral dictates of the society. However, the breaking or violation of any of the ethical codes is consequential as it attracts the anger of God. The anger of God is not only vested on the offender(s) but upon the entire society which makes both the offender(s) and the whole community to suffer the consequences of the violation of any of the ethical codes by one or few members of the community.

In a nutshell, the Yoruba ethical discourse is religious based. According to Bolaji Idowu, “with the Yoruba, morality is certainly the fruit of religion. They do not make any attempt to separate the two.”<sup>8</sup> So among the Yoruba, “what religion forbids or condemns society also forbids and condemns, and similarly society approves those things which religion approves of and sanctions.”<sup>9</sup>

### **IWA (CHARACTER) AS THE BASE OF THE YORUBA ETHICAL DISCOURSE**

*Iwa* (character) is fundamental in the Yoruba ethical discourse. Among the Yoruba, *iwa* (character) and *ori* (destiny) are of equal status. *Ori*(destiny) is chosen from heaven. Both good and bad destinies are chosen from heaven. On the other hand, *iwa* (character) is chosen on earth. *Iwa* is supreme in Yoruba ethics. It is a determinant factor in fulfilling destiny and achieving success or

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Olatunji A. Oyeshile, “Traditional Yoruba Social-Ethical Values and Governance in Modern Africa.” *Philosophia Africana*, 6/2 (2003), 84-85

<sup>8</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 150.

<sup>9</sup> S. A. Adewale, “Crime and African Traditional Religion,” *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* XXVI/1-2 (1994), 54.

failure by man on earth.<sup>10</sup> Bolaji Idowu<sup>11</sup>, Wande Abimbola<sup>12</sup> and Banjo Akinlabi<sup>13</sup> gave a similar account of myth on *iwa* which depicts the success and failure of *Orunmila* based on his relationship with *Iwa*.

In the mythical narrative, *Orunmila* was married to *Iwa*. *Orunmila* was successful life and business enterprises. He was blessed with many children through *Iwa*. Ogbe Egunda, an *Ifa* corpus captures the productivity of *Iwa* in the following verse:

<i>E wa wo omo Iwa berere o</i>	Come and Behold the countless children of <i>Iwa</i>
<i>E wa w'omo Iwa berere o</i>	Come and behold the countless children of <i>Iwa</i>
<i>Iwa gbe dani</i>	<i>Iwa</i> carries children in her arm
<i>Iwa pon s'ehin</i>	<i>Iwa</i> carries children on her back
<i>E wa w'omo Iwa berere</i>	Come and behold the countless children of <i>Iwa</i> <sup>14</sup>

However, *Iwa* was an unrepentant dirty woman. After several warnings by *Orunmila*, who was irritated by *Iwa's* uncleanness, he (*Orunmila*) divorced *Iwa*. After sometimes, misfortune and failure befell *Orunmila*. *Orunmila* consulted the oracle on the cause of his misfortune and failure. The oracle declared to *Orunmila* that the ill-lucks befell him because he divorced *Iwa*. *Orunmila* was further informed that his marriage to *Iwa* was responsible for his fortune and successes. Immediately, *Orunmila* began a search for *Iwa* where he found her in the custody of her grandfather, *Olodumare*. *Orunmila* begged *Iwa* to return home with him but she refused.<sup>15</sup> The above myth reiterates the place of character of a person as a determinant factor of his/her success and fortune or failure and misfortune. Thus, lack of good character leads a man or woman to an effort in futility in his/her engagements in life and businesses.<sup>16</sup>

According to Labeodan, *Iwa* (character) can be classified into the ontological and ethical evaluative.<sup>17</sup> She explains that “ontological enables one to identify the quantitative existence of a person as revealed by his/her behaviour, the lifestyle or manner in which he/she exists in the world. The ethical evaluative represents as qualitative judgement of how good or bad is his/her *iwa*.”<sup>18</sup> Interestingly speaking, from above position, *iwa* (character) describes both the existence and quality of a man. This is corroborated by Dada in his account about *iwa* as follow:

<sup>10</sup> Wande Abimbola, *Awon Oju Odu Mereerindinlogun* (Ibadan: University Press, 2004), xv.

<sup>11</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 16

<sup>12</sup> Abimbola, *Awon Oju Odu Mereerindinlogun*, xv-xvi

<sup>13</sup> Banjo Akinlabi, *Atupale Ohun Enu Ifa* (Ibadan: Ebby Publishers, 2006), 57.

<sup>14</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> Abimbola, *Awon Oju Odu Mereerindinlogun*, xv-xvi.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

<sup>17</sup> Adekunbi Helen Labeodan, “Ori and Iwa as Embodiment of Yoruba Values,” *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* XXXVII (2006), 123.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*

In Yoruba society, *Iwa* (character) is not just fundamental to ethical principle. The word used or translated as character in Yoruba *Iwa* had its root in another word ‘*wa*’ to exist or existence. A person without *iwa* (character) is therefore seen as a non-being. It is *Iwa* that confers existence in a person. Hence, the popular saying among the Yoruba *iwa lewa omo eniyan* (character is the foundation of human existence).<sup>19</sup>

## **TYOLOGY AND DERIVATIVES OF IWA IN THE YORUBA ETHICAL DISCOURSE**

*Iwa* (character) is typified as *Iwa Rere* (good character) and *Iwa Buburu* (bad character).<sup>20</sup> Both *iwa rere* (good character) and *iwa buburu* (bad character) are described in the following words of Labeodan:

In the Yoruba society, good character is referred to as *Iwa rere*, which could also mean good nature, and a person with good character must have *Iwapele* – gentleness, while bad character is referred to as *Iwa buburu*. Among the Yoruba, someone that lacks good character also lacks moral and all the good qualities required of a normal person. While someone with good character is referred to as *Omoluabi* – a gentle man, a fine fellow, a person who embodies all the qualities appreciated by Yoruba.<sup>21</sup>

Among the Yoruba, *Iwa* (character) is seen as both the source of fortune or misfortune, success or failure. It also describes how an individual will be held by the members of the society. A well-behaved member of the society is held with high esteem while an ill-mannered person is looked down upon in the society regardless of his/her wealth and/or position in the society. Hence, there are derivatives which are associated with *Iwa* (character) either good or bad.<sup>22</sup> Among these derivatives are:

### **1. *Iwa Rere L’eso Eniyan* (Good character is the guard/security of human beings)**

The Yoruba hold that a man/woman who is virtuous in character, that is, who possesses good character is secured and protected from any form of harm. Such a person does not need any protective charm as any external form of protection; his/her character is enough a protection for him/her.

In another vein, *Iwa rere l’eso eniyan* is translated as “good character is the wealth for human being.” The Yoruba hold that a person with good character is a wealthy man/woman. It is presupposed that if a man or woman is good in character, he/she cannot be stranded both

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<sup>19</sup> Adekunle O. Dada, “Harnessing Traditional Yoruba Communal Values and Ideals for Self-Reliance and Development,” *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies XLI* (2009), 37-38.

<sup>20</sup> Abimbola, *Awon Oju Odu Mereerindinlogun*, XV.

<sup>21</sup> Labeodan, “Ori and Iwa as Embodiment of Yoruba Values,” 123.

<sup>22</sup> Read more on Iwa in Banjo & Afolaranmi. “Reconsidering the Yorùbá Concept of Omolúàbí”, 54-61.

financially and physically. People will rise to his/her needs by making provisions of whatever he/she needs available.

**2. *San'be Sun , F'apo Ro'ri, Iwa Omo Ni M'omo S'okigbe (One who sleeps girdled with knives and pillows his/her head in a quiver, it is his/her character that drives him/her to dabble in the magic of immunity)***<sup>23</sup>

In the opposite is the man or woman who is deficit in character. Any man or woman who possesses bad character is prone to danger. This makes him/her to live in fears of insecurity and being harmed. He/she resorts to seeking external means of protection by going about and always being with protective charms, arms and ammunitions to protect him/herself. This needless fear and search for external protection resorted to by a person with deficit in character is also substantiated by this verse of *Owonrin-Sedin*, an *Ifa* corpus below:

<i>E jo re, e je o sa</i>	Leave him alone, let him run away
<i>Iwa won ni I maa le won kiri</i>	It is their character that chases them about
<i>O da fun Aniwonikun</i>	So declares the oracle about <i>Aniwonikun</i>
<i>Ti yoo maa beru t'osan t'oru</i>	Who fears incessantly day and night
<i>O o je hu 'wa re</i>	Will you but practice good character
<i>O o je hu 'wa atata</i>	Will you but practice sound character
<i>Aniwonikun, ki o yee sa kiri bi ojo</i>	<i>Aniwonikun</i> , and stop running about like a coward. <sup>24</sup>

**3. *IWA L'EWA OMO ENIYAN (Character is the beauty of human beings)***

Character is associated with beauty among the Yoruba. Good character is more admirable than natural beauty among the Yoruba. Anyone who possesses good character but is deficit in natural beauty among the Yoruba is loved, cherished and admired more than a person who has natural beauty but lacks good character.<sup>25</sup> This is the more reason the young men who are searching for ladies to marry are admonished to consider the character of the intending bride over her beauty. They say this with the following derivative: *Iwa ni e wo, e ma tori ewa f'aya sile* (look after her character and never marry a lady because of beauty. It is assumed that a woman without good character regardless of her beauty cannot make a good but troublesome wife. For the sake of peace, young men are admonished to consider good character over beauty before the choice of a lady to marry.

<sup>23</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (n.p: SCM Press, 1993), 197.

<sup>24</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 162-163.

<sup>25</sup> Banjo & Afolaranmi. "Reconsidering the Yorùbá Concept of Omolúàbí." 55.

In support of the above maxim, the Yoruba hold that a woman can have a long lasting marital relation if she possesses good character. If a woman lacks good character, she will be chased out of her marriage. Such women blame destiny for their marital misfortune, hence the saying, *obinrin so 'wa nu o l'oun o m'ori oko w'aye* (a woman with deficit in character blames destiny for her marital misfortune).

### **PRESENT STATE OF MORALITY AMONG THE YORUBA**

Fundamentally, the Yoruba ethical emphasis is tailored towards producing responsible members of the society which is only possible with the possession of good character by the members of the society. It is presumed the society that is majorly populated by the well-behaved members will be free from insecurity, marital disharmony and every form of evils which accounted for the usage of the above maxims about character. Thus, the high premium was placed on *Iwa rere* (good character) as the prerequisite to becoming acceptable members of the society among the Yoruba.

However, this seems to be on a reverse now. The rate at which morality evades the Yoruba community at large in the present time is alarming. There is an unchecked increase in hooliganism, cultism, banditry, militancy and every form of devilish character which make the members of the community especially the young people to seek protective charms for external protection. Society in the present time lives in perpetual fears of attacks and counter attacks of these evil groups as the previous attacks had been calamitous. The society is as well engulfed by cases of marital disharmony and divorce in the present time because of irreconcilable differences among the couples. Sanity is now lost in marriages in the present time. There is overwhelming immoral state in the society occasioned by the loss of good character among the populace.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present decay experienced in the society can be traceable to the abandonment of the Yoruba indigenous ethical values. In the ancient times, the consciousness and enforcement of the ethical values with their attendant rewards and punishments ascertained the adherence of the values and the society that was maximally ridden of vices. The need to build a society that will be reduced of moral decadences requires a strict and vigorous inculcation of moral value in the members of the society at large.

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