

# A Lombrosian Interpretation of Yorùbá Concept of Destiny

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## Abstract

*The concept of destiny in Yoruba thought system has generated intense scholarly debate for years on end, bordering on whether such a thing exists at all, and if it does, it raises the question why should an individual be praised or punished for actions seemingly outside their control. Some scholars see the many ideas of how destiny is acquired as confusing and therefore concludes that it is a metaphorical concept, while some allude to the belief that in spite of many sources of destiny the inner ori is solely responsible for human destiny. The aim of this paper is to connect the three sources of destiny in ways that is faithful to commonsense with the objective to express or show Yoruba metaphysical intelligence. This shall be done through a careful analysis of the concept by using Cesare Lombroso's theory of positivist criminology to make sense of ori and the idea of human destiny. The paper concludes that an interpretation of destiny must acknowledge the ontology of interrelatedness of the physical and the spiritual in Yoruba traditional thought system.*

## Introduction

The concept of *ori* in traditional Yorùbá thought system needs revision due to the controversies surrounding its consistency and commonsense understanding. There has been an oversight between the belief that *ori* is the bearer of human destiny, personality and life course on the one hand (Gbadegesin, 2004: 314), and the role of genetic and environmental factors on human personality on the other (Ekanola (2006). Whether Yoruba idea of destiny tends towards determinism or freewill position is a subject of debate that has not been exhausted. It is this intellectual gulf that this essay attempts to address.

This paper employs the method of logical analysis and hermeneutical interpretation in order to argue that *adayeba* which is one of the mediums of acquiring a destiny accommodates genetic and social factors. This interpretation will make the notions of *ayanmo*, *akunlegba* and *akunleyan* more meaningful. This work debunks the stand of Ekanola (2006) who takes the whole Yorùbá account of acquiring destiny prenatally as metaphorical. His mistake stems from a fusion of philosophical postulation with common street opinions. This study counters that such a move not only strips the Yorùbá of their metaphysical intelligence, but also renders uncharitable their belief system. In reaction, we borrowed from Okoro's (2011) notion of "integrative metaphysics" on the African view of the corporeal and the incorporeal dovetailing into each other.

This is necessary in order to indicate that whereas every individual may choose their *ori* prenatally, the role of the environmental or communal relationship and genetic factors cannot be wished away without diminishing the Yorùbá metaphysical intelligence.

### ***Ori* in Traditional Yorùbá Worldview: A Critical Exposition**

Literally, *ori* in the Yorùbá means head, the physical head which houses the brain and upon which human hair grows. However, when the Yorùbá speak metaphysically, “the concept enters the fray as one of the entities that make up a human person” (Ofuasia, 2016:186). Gbadegesin, expatiates:

It refers to the physical head, which is considered vital to the physical status of a person. It is, for instance, the seat of the brain. But when a typical Yorùbá talks about *ori*, she is, more often than not, referring to a non-physical component of her person. For there is a widely received conception of an *ori* as the bearer of a person’s destiny as well as the determinant of one’s personality (Gbadegesin, 2004:314).

The view expressed by Gbadegesin above indicates that the concept *ori* (head) is more than a physical attribute of a person. This is supported by other African scholars (see Idowu, 1962; Ekanola, 2006; Abimbola, 1976; Balogun, 2007; Oduwole, 1996). For the Yorùbás, a human personality is composed of *ara* (body), *emi* (life-force or soul) and *ori* (Ekanola, 2006:46; Gbadegesin, 2004:314). However, there are other spiritual elements tied to the overall constitution of the human person. *Owo* (spiritual hand) and *ese* (spiritual leg) have been added as the elements that make up the complete Yorùbá view of the person (Abimbola, 2006; Balogun, 2007; Ekanola, 2006). However, *ori*, the spiritual head has come to be synonymous with destiny, as Gbadegesin (2004:314) conveys in that excerpt. In other words, *Ori* is usually typified as the carrier of the destiny of man.

In Yoruba creation myth Obatala or Orisanla, one of the primordial divinities in the Yorùbá world-view (fond of drinking palm wine) fashions a human body (*ara*) out of clay or sand. Meanwhile, Olodumare (the supreme deity) gives life-force or soul (*emi*) to the “craft” of Orisanla. The animated *ara* then proceeds to *Ajala*’s abode (another primordial divinity who makes *ori*) to make a choice of *ori*. It is in this sense that *ori* becomes the carrier of human destiny. *Ori* refers to the experiences and life course that a human person would encounter on Earth. The selection process of an *ori* in Ekanola’s view, has three important aspects. Firstly, freedom to choose an *Ori* is assumed. Secondly, the *ori* selected determines the life course and personality of its possessor on Earth. Third, each individual is unaware of the content or quality of the chosen *ori*; that is, the person making the choice does not know if the destiny embedded in an *ori* is good or bad (Ekanola, 2006:41). These points are substantiated in the works of other scholars such as Abimbola (1976); Morakinyo (1983). Destiny, *ori* may be acquired through any of the following ways: *akunleyan* (that which is chosen

while kneeling); *akunlegba* (that which is received while kneeling); *ayanmo* (that is which is affixed to oneself); and *adayeba* (that which is encountered in the world) (see Gbadegesin, 2004; Ekanola, 2006; Balogun, 2007; Idowu, 1962). With each of the ways of acquiring a destiny subtly stated, it is not inappropriate to question the place of social, genetic and biological factors.

However, before engaging with this task, it is imperative to illuminate or clarify that the concepts of *akunleyan* and *ipin* represent the same idea of choosing from multiple choices, while *akunlegba* and *ayanmo* indicate the idea of bestowment, where choice is absent. As a consequence, it is incorrect as held by Ekanola (2006); Abimbola (1976); and Morakinyo (1983) that there is always freedom and choice surrounding the process of acquiring a destiny.

Another belief that needs alteration in previous literature is that both *akunleyan* and *akunlegba* were done while kneeling. The word *ikunle* literally means kneeling down, but in the hermeneutic sense it connotes respect, without-struggle or humility. When a Yorùbá says *Ikunle ni mowa* (“I’m on bended knee, in supplication”), they may be standing or bowing without necessarily being prone on the ground. This is more glaring when a Yorùbá elder says *Ma duro le mi lori*, which literally means “Do not stand on my head.” People do not stand on the head of others literally, but standing while a superior or elder is talking indicates lack of respect or humility. A child is expected by this belief to show remorse or humility by being on his/her knees or other courteous behavioural patterns expected, when being advised or reprimanded. This clarification is necessary as a pointer to our position that *akunlegba* and *ayanmo* are actually the same, since they both indicate exercises that were done by a superior to a lower person with total humility and an inability to reject.

Pertinently, it would be interesting to note that Ekanola (2006) and Ofuasia (2016) counter the allegory surrounding how destiny is acquired. For them, even before proceeding to pick a destiny at Ajala’s abode, some limitations already beset the entity from Orisanla. Ekanola argues:

For instance, it appears that physically deformed people have their destinies and personalities determined by their deformed *ara* (body) and not by any prenatal choice of *ori*. In the Yoruba culture, people like the *abuke* (hunchback), *aro* (cripple), *afin* (albino), and *arara* (dwarf) are all called *eni-orisa* (special people of the gods). They are denied, by virtue of their physical deformities, the full opportunities open to normal people (Ekanola, 2006:42).

In a parallel mold, Ofuasia proffers:

... Orunmila would have no idea of women suffering from *Mullerian agenesis*, for instance. This is because he did not witness Orishanla, omitting the womb during his sand or clay session of such women. Neither is Orunmila able to recommend that couples with AS genotype ought not to copulate to avoid a high mortality SS offspring. (Ofuasia, 2016: 196)

If the claims of these scholars are true, then it is necessary to review how one acquires destiny in a way that is consistent with lived experience. In other words, the role played by the biological and the social factors of existence need to be reconciled with a destiny allotted prenatally. It is in reconciling these different factors that this work is rejecting Ekanola's (2006) position of nonintelligibility of Yoruba idea of destiny. Hence, it is necessary to argue for the metaphysical intelligence of the traditional Yorùbá by giving new interpretations that remain faithful to the Yorùbá worldview and consistent with their metaphysical reality. In this vein, this essay calls for a reinterpretation of *akunlegba* and *adayeba*.

### **Spiritual, Genetical and Environmental Strand of Ori Acquisition**

Instead of taking the allegory of *ori* acquisition as “metaphorical” (Ekanola, 2006), this study posits that the “dualistic monism” of African worldview on the one hand, and Cesare Lombroso's theory of crime on the other, may prove beneficial in a holistic comprehension of destiny, that is faithful to Yorùbá thought system and contemporaneous reality. However, before delving into this, it would be helpful to state that *adayeba* literally means the kind of “destiny that is encountered in the world.” It depicts that which all of us shared as occupants of the world or the same society because of interrelatedness or interactions. For instance, individuals like Ojo and Aina may have personal destiny however by virtue of being members of the same family or environment there is bound to be influences of one destiny on another. Whereas this strand of destiny-acquisition does not underestimate or diminish the spiritual aspect of acquiring destiny prenatally, it remains faithful to how genetic and social upbringing also contribute to shaping the character of the human personality in question. It is on the basis of the above that we term *adayeba* as social destiny. *Adayeba* clearly more than any other way of acquiring destiny, accommodates the dualistic view of African reality. What then is the dualistic nature of reality for the African? In the words of Okoro: “The African thought system (be it in the area of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics or logic) operates on the law of duality, not dualism” (Okoro, 2011:124).

[t]he African metaphysical system is integrative on the ground that its dualistic nature allows for a plurality of views. We also said that this integrative metaphysics bears similar if not the same characteristics as Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. Traditional Africans also conceived phenomenon in a cosmological double of “spirit force” and a “material essence” (Okoro, 2011: 125).

Okoro's contention is amplified in the comment of Anyanwu that:

When the African looks at a tree within the assumptions of his culture, he sees and imagines a life-force interacting with another life-force. He sees the color of the object (tree), feels its beauty, imagines the life-force in it intuitively grasps the interre-

relationships between the hierarchies of life-forces. If he did not do this, he would not have concluded that spirit exists in the world. He does not see spirit with his eyes, nor is it a rationally and theoretically postulated concept like atoms and electrons. (Anyanwu, 1981: 95)

It is instructive from the above that it is common among traditional peoples (Greeks or Africans) to conceive of reality in terms of a cosmological duality. However, contrary to the Greeks, Africans do not conceive the dualism of reality as separated in a distinctly monistic manner. In this vein, while spirit and matter can be distinguished, they cannot be separated because of the complement that exists between the physical and the spiritual. For Africans, spirit and matter operate the law of inclusivity, of symbiosis, and of interpenetrability (Okoro, 2011: 125). The implication of the foregoing is that the mind-body dualism problem which generated controversies in the history of mainstream and dominant Western philosophy would be alien to African belief.

If the foregoing is correct, then one can argue successfully that *akunleyan*, *akunlegba* and *adayeba* complement each other in a holistic interpretation. This saves the framework from the metaphorical interpretation recommended by Ekanola (2006) on the subject of prenatally acquired *ori*. On one hand, *akunleyan* from Ajala represents spiritual destiny, *akunlegba* from Obatala represents (fixed bodily structure) material or physical destiny, while *adayeba* indicates how social influences and interactions align for proper actualization of goals or success.

Lombroso's theory of crime explains robustly how individuals born with genetic or biological defect (*akunlegba*) necessarily engage in crime, but posits that they would not be able to manifest this criminal behaviour if social conditioning (*adayeba*) does not influence them.

It should be stated categorically that Lombroso's theory of crime is a biological theory, which attempts to incorporate the social and biological factors in the production of crime. Lombroso explains that the social causes of crime were simply the stimuli which called forth the organic and psychical abnormalities of the individual. These abnormalities are latent in the genetic and physiological make-up of the individual.

Whereas Lombroso's theory focuses on the biological cause of crime, we glean that his theory may say more on the causes of individual failure or success. For instance, if one's *ori* determines one to be a basketball player, such destiny will not be realized if the society one belongs to does not create the environment for playing the game. So, both good and bad behaviours have pre-natal roots but they become manifest when society stimulates them. Perhaps that is why a Yorùbá aphorism says *Akunleyan ni adayeba. A kunle ayan ipin. Ade aye tan oju nkan gbogbowa* ("That which is chosen prenatally is what is met on earth. We chose our lots with humility but we come to the earth and become impa-

tient.”) One mistake with the interpretation of the aphorism is the assumption that “*ni*,” which serves as a copular between *akunleyan* and *adeyeba* represents equality or sameness. This could be correct in some instances, but for us in this case “*ni*” connotes “to have a relationship with.” For instance, to say *olopa ni ijoba* (police is government) does not mean “police is equal to government”; rather, it signifies that police has a connection to government or are aides of government. So, this proverb in a way connects the prenatal with the postnatal, with the belief that social conditioning or social destiny will aid the realization of prenatal destiny. However, human beings are always impatient when the social condition that will be responsible for the materialization of the prenatal destiny is not in place. An invalid from Obatala can choose a destiny of being a basketball player but he/she will need to live in a society where technology can aid the playing of basketball for the disabled. The converse is also conceivable if the social condition that will materialize a specific destiny is in place, the physical bodily condition must conform to this social condition. This could explain why some people do not become successful until an unfortunate event or condition befalls them.

Lombroso exposes the relation between social and even climatic factors, on the one hand and the lure or repression of crime in human personality on the other. In the words of Ellwood:

With a wealth of learning which amazes, Lombroso discusses successively meteorological and climatic influences in the production of crime, the influence of geographical conditions, the influence of race, of civilization, of the density of population, of alcoholism, of education, of economic conditions, of religion, of sex and age, of civil status, of prisons and of political conditions. (Ellwood, 1912: 716)

Lombroso’s theory is that crime is primarily due to biological or organic conditions but there are other secondary conditions (Ellwood, 1912:717). In other words, Lombroso traces the psychological and social defects of the criminal to biological causes. For Lombroso, the perfectly normal individual from the biological angle, would never be a criminal. Social circumstances, in other words, could not create a true criminal out of a naturally honest or normal man, although social circumstances may be necessary to call forth the latent criminal tendencies in the abnormal or degenerate individual (Ellwood, 1912:711). Lombroso admits that these criminal tendencies are found regularly in the normal child, and rightly says that “the most horrible crimes have their origin in those animal instincts of which childhood gives us a pale reflection” (Lombroso, 1911: 368).

Lombroso believed, in other words, that the criminal was essentially an organic anomaly, partly pathological and partly atavistic. The social causes of crime were at most, according to Lombroso, simply the stimuli which called forth the organic and psychical abnormalities of the individual to thrive.

Lombroso's thoughts on crime have far-reaching consequences when one tinkers with the notion of *adayeba* in traditional Yorùbá destiny-acquisition patterns. This is because even when an individual has made a choice of *ori*, before coming to the world, the society into which the child would be born, the genes of the parents as well as other factors, play crucial and corpulent roles in character and personality formation. A child born with the destiny of being a great footballer should be born into a family that loves football or which allows a child to express themselves freely. If not the child may not realize the destiny because a social condition is missing. This line of thinking is further corroborated by Sogolo, who expounds that:

The mind of the African is not structurally different from that of the Westerner. . . . The truth is that both are similarly marked by the same basic features of the human species. The difference lies in the ways the two societies conceive of reality and explain objects and events. This is so because they live different forms of life (Sogolo, 1993:74).

From the above, it becomes translucent that prenatal and spiritual acquisition of destiny is not enough. One has to factor in the social and biological dimensions to personality and life course. *Adayeba* therefore makes the case very explicit for the possession of destiny that is faithful to the Yorùbá metaphysico-religious tradition that sees a relation between the individual "I" and the communal "We"; the physical and the spiritual; biological and sociological factors.

## Conclusion

The main thrust in the foregoing is that the perception of destiny in Yorùbá thought system has three aspects: personal (spiritual), biological (physical) and social. We have argued in the above exposition that the three are not in conflict as believed in some quarters. The biological destiny is first point of call which to a high degree is related to the spiritual, which is the second. These two are not realizable if the social conditioning in the world or the society which is the last point of the individual does not stimulate them. The Lombrosian interpretation, as evinced in the preceding pages, bridges this intellectual gulf, hitherto omitted by scholars on the subject of destiny.

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