
Existentialist Concerns in Africa: The Yorùbá Perspectives of Death and Suicide

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Abstract: Existentialist framework is a discourse which centres on the concrete existence of human being and his relations to others in the world. Meanwhile, African existentialist framework attempts to domesticate the recurring thematic issues of existentialism as it occurs within the space of Africa. Hence, this study attempts a critical examination of death and suicide in Yoruba perspectives. Death has been considered by some scholars as evil which renders life meaningless and hopeless. As such, death is seen not only as limitations to the struggles, strivings, and existence of human, but also as a phenomenon which closes the door of all possibilities. Consequently, death is finality. Against this background is the Yorùbá belief that death is a transition to a world beyond the physical. Hence, this study will examine the Yorùbá conception of death and contrast it to the Western thought. The examination of death in Yorùbá traditional thought shows that death is not finality and as a result celebrates the death of the aged. This however has an implication on the construct of human existence and morality in Africa. This study further interrogates the idea of suicide in Yorùbá traditional thought. It underscores issues such as the quality of life, the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of life and finally instances in which suicide is permissible. The Yorùbá adage of *Iku ya j'esin* is a construct which points out that even though life is precious and irreplaceable, nevertheless, considers death as a better alternative to shame. The value of life is therefore re-examined through the Yorùbá understanding of the quality of life.

Keywords: Existentialism, Death, Suicide, Meaningfulness, Meaninglessness, Shame

1. Introduction: Defining Existentialism and African Existentialism

Existentialism, which comprises of different arrays, contrasting, and conflicting thematic issues is not only peculiar to Western philosophy or put differently, Western culture. Although, the view that existentialism has a movement in the history of philosophy has its origin in the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, who are commonly referred to as the forerunner of existentialism cannot be undermined. And by implication, it may be correct to assert that Existentialism has its origin in Western thought. However, it is not correct to posit that it is peculiar and limited to the Western world. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Different existential issues are addressed from diverse philosophical viewpoints and cultures. This suffices to say that existentialism is not a homogenous discipline. In

fact, to assume that it is, is mistaken. Hence, as a discourse within the terrain of African Existentialism, it is imperative to start with the meaning and definitions of existentialism.

It is difficult if not impossible to give a concise definition of existentialism. This is because, existentialism answers to different conflicting strands and views which are diametrically opposed to one another. In fact, Sartre opines that the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all. [1] However, this does not imply that there is no commonality in the varying views espoused by the existentialists. Let us attempt some definitions of existentialism.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement purposely concerned to underscore the meaning of human existence on the one hand and the essence of human being on the other hand. Properly puts, Jean-Paul Sartre states that “existence precedes essence.” [2] Prior before the existence of existentialism, philosophy has been concerned with abstract thinking and theorizing which nonetheless has impact on the lives of humans. However, this is not to say that everything

about philosophy since the Ancient Greek period is abstract. Of course, this assertion is far from the truth. Socrates and some notable scholars like Epicurus, Zeno of Citium and the like have examined the meaning and purpose of human existence and have postulated different ways to live a meaningful life. However, the point here is, existentialism takes a bold step in concentrating and philosophizing on the nature and problems of human existence. The idea of existence from the definition considered above stresses the importance and significant of individuals in a world filled with despair, disappointment, disease, death, sickness, suffering, hunger, and injustice among others.

Monday Lewis Igbafen, quoting Kierkegaard states that existentialism is a doctrine that man is not part of an ordered metaphysical scheme, but that individuals must create their own being each in his specific situation and environment. [3] Kierkegaard, like Sartre, sees existentialism as a movement which examines and deals with the concrete nature of human existence; his meaningfulness and meaninglessness; his life and death and other related issues that revolved around the existence of humans.

In a similar view, Willliam Barret sees existentialism as a philosophy that confronts human situation in its totality, to ask what the basic conditions of human existence are and how man can establish his own meaning out of these conditions. [4] Berret's views of existentialism is evident in the work of the early existentialists like Martin Heidegger who considers the totality of human existence worthy of study as he grapples with the problem of being. For Heidegger, the meaning of being is problematic as it has been trivialized by previous philosophical thoughts (Pre-Socratic, Socratic, Medieval, and modern philosophy among others). For the existentialists, being is all that is. Being is examined from the perspective of authentic and inauthentic existence. In a similar view with Barrent's conception of existentialism, Joseph Omoregbe also sees existentialism as the philosophy of human existence, a philosophy preoccupied with what it means for a human being to exist. [5]

It is evident from the above definitions that existentialism is a movement which places emphasis on man's freedom, choice, responsibility, decision and concrete situations which confirms one's authentic existence. As such, the objectification of the self is rejected. It is clear that it rejects any philosophy that treated the subject as an object and the I as it. This without doubt is evident in the works of existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus among others.

Subsequently, African existentialism is a doctrine which examines different existential and concrete issues relating to the existence of people in Africa. The essence of this is to domesticate the idea of existentialism to unravel the problems and issues facing human existence and their responses in Africa. On African Existentialism, Igbafen notes that it is:

The array of issues which constitute the domain of African existentialism will logically include the questions of human life and existence, meaningfulness and meaninglessness,

death, individuality, community, freedom, choice and responsibility. Africans' conception of human existence and their peculiar reactions to their experiences of life and other related historical situations and conditions form the corpus of African existentialism. It does not need to be the same formulation among all African peoples and philosophers, though a common thread may run through them that give a coherent world-view on human existence which qualifies them as African existentialism. [6]

Thus, using the terms of John Macquarie, existentialism is concerns with different thematic issues which includes but not limited to issues such as death, suicide, freedom, the existence of God, authentic and inauthentic existence, anguish, and despair, among others, relating to human existence and his relations to the world.

The discourse of the existentialist concerns in Africa is specifically to critically examine two major existential issues – death and suicide, which has been a subject of controversy among the existentialists on the one hand and even among the people of African on the other hand. It is no gainsaying the fact that to examine the African perspectives of death and suicide is a broader discourse which is beyond the scope of this paper. This is premised on the fact that there are diverse and conflicting cultures in Africa. As a result of this, the Yorùbá culture will stand as a point of reference to represent the Africa culture in this paper. Hence, the research shall be concerned to examine the Yorùbá perspectives of death and suicide and in a way, compare it to the Western existentialists. Also, this paper shall considers the implications of the Yorùbá perspectives of death and suicide on human existence,

2. The Origin of the Yorùbás

The Yorùbá is one of the ethnic groups holding there source and origin to Ile – Ife, a town in Nigeria. This is not to say that Yorùbá is only found in Nigeria. Of course, this claim is far from the truth. The Yorùbá are also found in some other countries in West Africa, like Togo, Benin Republic and Dahomey. However, the largest population of Yorùbá is found in Nigeria with a population of ten to twenty million people across the Western part of Nigeria which include Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Lagos, Ekiti and Osun, out of the thirty-six states presently in Nigeria. The Yorùbá is also traced to countries outside the African territory. As such there are Yorùbás in South American, Caribbean, Brazil and Cuba. Segun Gbadegesin notes that in Brazil, the *Orisa* tradition of African is one of the important cultural relics that still tie the people to their African soil. [7] However, as noted above, the ancestral home of the Yorùbá is in Ile-Ife, Nigeria and each groups in the diasporas still traces its origin to this home (that is, Ile-Ife), where the culture is best practice.

Just as Nigeria is a multi-linguistic nation with more than two hundred and fifty different linguistic groups, the Yorùbá also has variants dialects of the Yorùbá language which are mutually unintelligible, albeit, Yorùbá is the common language spoken by the Yorùbá ethnic group. As cited by Gbadegesin, Samuel Johnson's account of the history of

Yorùbá notes that the Yorùbá originally came from the East, around Upper Egypt and were subjects to the Egyptian conqueror, Nimrod (*Lamurudu*) who was of Phoenician origin. [8] In a similar account by Muhammad Bello, the Yorùbá were descendants of the Canaanites, belonging to the family of Nimrod. [9] After the settlement of the Yorùbá in Arabia, a fight ensued which claims the life of *Lamurudu* and as a result, the Yorùbá were driven from Arabia which was a Moslem nation. After the death of *Lamurudu*, one of his sons, *Oduduwa* is supposed to have fled with his people to West African. Needless to say, Johnson believes that the original home of the Yorùbá is undoubtedly in the East. *Oduduwa* became the King at Ile-Ife and had the ambition to revenge the death of his father. However, his ambition does not come to fruition as he died before he could organise an army to avenge his father's assassination. Thus, history has it that his sons (that is, *Oduduwa* children) became kings throughout the Yorùbá Empire and *Oduduwa* was deified.

However, another account of the origin of Yorùbá contends that *Oduduwa* was the creator of the earth as designated by Olódùmarè. In other words, it is believed that *Oduduwa* came down from heaven through chain and he created the earth and Ile-Ife. Etymologically, *Oduduwa* means *odu ti o da iwa*. *Odu* means container or author, and *Iwa* means existence. Thus, *Oduduwa* means 'the container or author of existence; or that which creates existence'. This account shows some inconsistency in the account of the origin of Yorùbá. The accounts leave out some questions for further inquiry into the origin of Yorùbá. It may be asked, how can *Oduduwa* created the earth and at the same time fled the Arabia? Does *Oduduwa* created Ile-Ife only or the whole of the earth? If he created the whole of the earth, then it means that Ile-Ife will be the cradle of the entire world and historically, this is far from truth. In short, the account of the origin of Yorùbá lacks evidences and coherent explanations.

Oduduwa, in Yorùbá mythology, is believed to be the creator of the universe. Yorùbá believed that *Oduduwa* has his origin from the ultimate author of existence – that is, *Olódùmarè* who is also responsible for the existence of *Oduduwa* too. Moreover, Gbadegesin opines that there is much similarity between the Yorùbá world view and the Christian world view. Johnson, as quoted by Gbadegesin suggests that:

It might probably be shown that the ancestors of the Yorùbá, hailing from Upper Egypt, were either Coptic Christians, or at any rate that they had some knowledge of Christianity. If so, it might offer a solution of the problem of how it came about that traditional stories of the creation, the deluge, of Elijah, and other scriptural characters are current amongst them, and indirect stories of our Lord, terms 'Son of *Moremi*'. [10]

From the preceding analysis, even though there is variants account of the origin of Yorùbá which of course led to inconsistencies in accounting for the origin of the Yorùbá. However, the point remains that the Yorùbá are mostly represented by the Western part of Nigeria, and in part in the

diasporas. Common to all the Yorùbá is the Yorùbá spoken language, although, with different dialects of the language which are mutually unintelligible. Thus, the Yorùbá have some believes in common which include, the existence of *Olódùmarè*, life after death, reincarnation, and suicide among others. However, the next section of this research will underscores the Yorùbá idea of death.

3. African Conceptions of Death: The Yorùbá Example

The understanding of death in Africa has been conceived differently according to beliefs, cultures and different philosophical thoughts. The Yorùbá thought system as a point of departure conceives of death as a transition from the physical world to the spiritual world. That is, death is seen as the beginning of another journey into a world beyond. Unlike the belief in the finality of death (which of course is contestable), the Yorùbá believes that death is not finality. For the Yorùbá, death holds its ontological existence to *Olodumare*, the creator of all things. Aborisade Olanokunmi, quoting Bolaji Idowu, notes that "death was made to recall anybody whose time is up on earth is fulfilled." [11] The Yorùbá believes that death is inevitable and everybody that comes to this world will surely die one day. This is expressed in the Yoruba proverb that *awaye ma lo kan, ko si* (no one comes to this world without returning). As such, John Mbiti sees death as a process, which removes a person gradually from the physical existence on earth and the period after death within which the departed is remembered by relatives and friends who knew him. [12] That death is inevitable is not peculiar to the Yoruba thought system alone as this is also evident in the Christian belief that "a man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble." [13]

Meanwhile, this section is not only concerned with the meaning of death, but rather to examine critically the value, if any, of death among the Yorùbá people. The questions are: is death considered evil among the Yorùbá people? What is the difference between good and bad death? Is death meaningful or meaningless in Yoruba thought system?

Some existentialists notably, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus conceived of death as evil because it reveals the futility of human existence. Camus expresses a disdain attitude towards death because it is a limitation to human freedom of existence and reveals the futility of human struggles. Contrary to Yorùbá conceptions of death, which shall be discuss shortly, Sartre and Camus believe that death is the end of human existence and consequently, finality. It also closes the doors of all possibilities, aspirations and future. Camus, for instance, in his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus* argues from a physicalist viewpoint. He opines that:

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists

me – that is what I understand. [14]

The quotation above stresses the point that nothing exists outside the physical world. This assertion constitutes Camus's idea of absurdity where human struggles and strivings in the world ends with death. Absurdity sets in when one begins to think of his limitations and shortness of life in the world despite struggling to make life meaningful. By implication, Camus, as noted earlier, expresses a disdain attitude towards death and reject death as evil. In fact, if it is possible to avert death, he would have preferred to avert death. However, the inevitability of death is unambiguous and incontestable. Like Camus, Sartre believes that death renders life meaningless as it is antithetical to the meaningfulness of human existence. Igbafen, quotes Sartre that:

Death is never that which gives life its meaning. It is on the contrary that which as a principle removes all meaning from life. If we must die than our life has no meaning because its problem receives no solution and because the very meaning of the problem remains undetermined. [15]

The Yorùbá on the one hand considers death as good and on the other hand as bad. Ade Dopamu considers this as the categories (good and bad) of death. In his words, bad death includes those caused by anti-wickedness divinities (thunder, smallpox, and iron), those who die young and those who die childless. [16] Put differently, untimely death, unfulfilled life, and shameful death are considered as bad death. Premised on this, Yorùbá refers to the death of those who die young as sorrowful death (*oku ofò*). The death of the young ones is accompanied with tears, sorrowful songs, pity, mourning and the like. Their death is devoid of merriment, enjoyment, and happiness. Good death on the other hand is death at old age. Old age in this sense means a fulfilled life. Yorùbá gives reverence to old age. It is regarded as the age of relaxation and age of harvest. Harvest in this sense means a time when one will definitely reap what one has sown. The Yorùbá believes that the old ones are wise, experienced, and understand the nitty-gritty of culture and traditions. Hence, a Yorùbá adage says that “to come to this world and not live long is to live a wasted life.” As such, the Yorùbá believes that old age is a blessing. Consequently, death at old age is accompanied with merriment, enjoyment, and thanksgiving. The Yorùbá believes that “it is a good thing for the old ones to die before the young ones.” This is mostly put in Yorùbá prayer that “*gbogbo wa la o gbeyin arugbo wa.*”

It is also important to note that death in Yorùbá belief system also confers meaning to human existence. Meaning in this sense is contrasted to a meaningless life which is filled with suffering, hunger, famine, injustice, and diseases among others. The point here is that unlike the Western existentialist conceptions of death which is not only evil but also renders life meaningless, the Yorùbá sees death as partly meaningful and partly meaningless. From the latter, a meaningless life is an unfulfilled life. Not only unfulfilled, but a life full of suffering, pain, hunger, famine, and disease. From the latter, the meaningfulness of death from the Yorùbá viewpoint as earlier noted is explicated in the death of the old people who

have significantly live a fulfilled life according to the societal values. Igbafen explains this better that:

It is the same thing as saying that death is both a meaningful phenomenon and a meaningless thing. Death becomes a welcome phenomenon when a man is of age and has significantly fulfilled all or substantially all the goals or expectations valued by the society, such as childbearing, ripe age and reasonable achievement in the direction of personal, family and communal welfare. [17]

A further explanation of the Yorùbá conceptions of death is seen in the dichotomization and complementarization of the physical and the spiritual world. As noted earlier, Western existentialist, notably, Camus rejects the spiritual world for the physical world. By implication, nothing exist beyond the physical world and by extension, death is finality. However, the existence of the physical and spiritual world is pervasive and strong in African belief system. This is evident not only in the existence and belief in Witchcraft, Deities (*Orisa*), *Irumole*, *Iwin*, *Egungun*, and other spiritual entities and forces which are belief to control the affairs of the external world, but also in the ontology and metaphysics of ancestral worship. Not only that the physical is not the same as the spiritual, but they also complement one another. That is, there is an interlocking and interrelated relationship between the physical and the spiritual world according to Adebola Ekanola.

Another dimension to the issue of physical and spiritual world is exemplified in the Yorùbá conceptions of human personality. The physical elements of the human person include *ara* (body), *okàn* (heart), *opolo* (brain), *ifun* (intestine) and so on. The spiritual elements include *orí* (dual character) and *èmi*. *Èmi* has its direct source from *Olódùmarè* which subsequently follows that since *Olódùmarè* is a spiritual being and an imperishable deity, *èmi* which holds its origin directly to *Olódùmarè* is also spiritual and imperishable. Apparently, the body for instance which is physical houses the *èmi* which is spiritual. Even though, the physical and the spiritual are not the same, but they are related in the sense that they complement one another.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the Yorùbá traditional thought lays emphasis not only on the physical aspect of human existence, but more importantly, on the spiritual aspect of a human person. In corroboration, death in Yorùbá thought system confirms the existence of the immortality of the soul. The idea of immortality in the words of Ade Dopamu comprises of a change and continuity of life after death. That is, there is another life after the death of a person. Apparently, this is connected to the veneration and the worship (as the case may be) of ancestors in Yorùbá thought system. The Yorùbás believe that through necessary rituals and rites, the ancestor will protect and watch over them from heaven. John Mbiti, in his words has refer to the ancestors has the living dead. [18] Following this, death is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to attaining the “ancestorhood.”

If as argued above that death is a necessary condition but not sufficient in attaining the stage of ancestorhood, the

questions are, who are the ancestors in Yorùbá ontology? What are the requirements for attaining ancestorhood in Yorùbá traditional thought? According to Adesanya Oreoluwa Idris, he defines ancestors in Yorùbá ontology as the deified divinities that were once human beings (*Eda, Alaaye*) but who have come to assume the positions of divinities after death. [19] Dopamu, stating the requirements of attaining ancestorship opines that:

Within the African context, the Yoruba inclusive, the living dead are the ancestors. Not every dead person becomes an ancestor. Strictly speaking, therefore, a person who leaves no descendants cannot become an ancestor spirit. Also, children who die cannot become an ancestor since they do not achieve parenthood (sic). [20]

From the quotation above, not everybody who dies become an ancestor. Simply put, a bad or wicked person before death cannot be reinstated as ancestor. Ancestor is therefore reinstated on the basis of heroic deeds or services to the community rendered by a person while on earth. Ancestors, according to Francis Olawole, are therefore classified into family and community (generalised) ancestors. [21] It is important to note that as death opens another door of life (ancestor), it also shows that soul (*èmi*) is indestructible and goes back to *Olodumare* after death which logically affirms the existence of the immortality of the soul, an idea elusive in the Western existentialist.

Another significance of death to the Yorùbás is the belief that a person who dies goes home to rest. Suffices to say, a person is free from all the sufferings, hunger, famine, diseases, and injustices inherent in the physical world. As such, Sidney Hook refers to death as a “beneficent release.” The Yorùbá account of a meaningless life points to the fact that life is full of good and evil, and no matter how good a life is, one cannot escape evil things in life. The Yoruba believes that evil is a necessity. In other words, they believe that evil is inseparable from the world. This is further expressed in Yorùbá sayings that *tibi tire la da ile aye* (both good and evil are created in the world). Another saying is *eniyàn ko le gba ire, ko ma gba ibi ojo kan* (when a human receives good, he will surely receive evil one day). Oladele Balogun explicates this further that:

The Yoruba strongly believe that evilness is not diametrically opposed to goodness in the world; it is their conviction that the two are inseparable pair which are necessary for the smooth running and understanding of various events in the universe. Thus, the question of whether God has the power to overcome evil, but He is not willing, or is He willing, but He does not have the power, does not even arise in the first instance. [22]

The point raised above is that, if evil is as real as the tables and chairs in Yorùbá ontology borrowing from Egunluwa O. Oduwolé's words, then, death is deeply revered and valued in Yorùbá traditional thought because it frees the aged from evil in the world. Sidney Hook, quoted by Igbafe argues that:

To anyone aware of the multitude of infamies and injustices which men have endured, of the broken bodies and

tortured minds of the victims of these cruelties, of the multiple dimensions of pain in which millions lie on mattress graves or with minds shrouded in darkness, death must sometimes appear as a beneficent release, not an inconsolable affliction. [23]

Let us again reiterate the significance and values of death in Yorùbá traditional thought system. First, death is conceived as the end of life which closes the door on earth and opens another door which is the door of heaven. While the Western existentialists, notably, Sartre and Camus conceived of death as finality, the Yorùbás believe that life continues after death and humans merely change his/her abode. Another value of death is that, it opens the door to ancestorship. By implication, ancestor is impossible when one is alive. A person is reinstated as an ancestor after death. There is also a moral implication that follows from this assertion. The moral implication is explicitly expressed in the requirements in becoming an ancestor. The requirements basically are virtuous acts, heroic deeds and community service. Consequently, a wicked or bad person may not qualify to become an ancestor. Finally, the Yorùbá believe that death frees one from the suffering and meaninglessness of the world. One of the common sayings in Yorùbá when an aged person dies is that *baba tabi mama ti lo si ile lo sinmi*. This is euphemistically interpreted as the man or the woman has gone *home* to rest. Another value of death in Yorùbá ontology which shall be critically explicated in the next section of this paper is that “*Iku ya j'esin*” – death is a better alternative to shame. This shall be critically examined in the next section of this paper.

4. Suicide in Yoruba Ontology: A Critical Consideration

Suicide is an intriguing concept which has been a subject of controversies in various disciplines. Many attempts have been made by notable scholars to conceptualise the permissibility or otherwise of suicide. As a result, suicide and by extension its implications for human existence have been contested issues with varying and opposite views. This section will underscore the idea of Suicide in Yorùbá ontology and its connections to death in Yorùbá traditional thought. This section will also attempt to compare the Yoruba conceptions of suicide with the Western existentialist, notably, Camus's idea of suicide. Suicide etymologically comes from two Latin words, *Sui* (of oneself) and *Cidium* (or slaying). [24] Suicide is the termination or annihilation of one's existence. In another words, it has been described as an act of voluntarily and intentionally taking one's own life. [25]

Suicide in western existentialist taking from Camus's views is inherently wrong. As such, Camus disapproves the permissibility of suicide in any conditions of human life. As a point of departure from Camus's views, the Yorùbás believe that suicide is permissible in some circumstances. Prominent among the sayings in Yorùbá is that “*Iku ya j'esin*” – death is a better alternative to shame. Based on this, taking

one's life in the face of ignominy is honoured and respected among the Yorùbá people. This does not imply that the Yorùbá does not value life. In fact, In Yorùbá traditional thought, long life is a blessing and everybody prays to live long. This is evident in Yorùbá classifications of death into good and bad death. The death of the young ones, barren, and pregnant women are considered as bad and as such are accompanied with mournful and sorrowful atmosphere. The good death on the other hand is the death of the aged and elderly people who by virtue of their age are qualified to be reinstated as an ancestor. However, when a life becomes a burden; and dignity, honour, and respect have descended to depths, death becomes an alternative to restore ones dignity. Olufunke Adeboye, in her paper titled '*Death is Preferable to Ignominy*': *Politically Motivated Suicide, Social Honor and Chieftaincy Politics in Early Colonial Ibadan*, explicitly analysed the role of committing suicide in restoring social honour, dignity amidst impending ignominy among the political elites. [26]

Olufunke cited examples of political suicide in the early colonial period within a decade. In her words, she opines that "politically motivated suicide was a common occurrence in early colonial Ibadan. Within a space of ten years, three principal chiefs had committed suicide: Baale Dada Opadere (1907), Baale Irefin (1915) and Balogun Ola (1917). [27] The point here is, even though life is preferable and cherishable, at the brink of shame and ignominy, death is preferable to restore honour and dignity. Rather than face ridicule, Olufunke opines that "they made the most of disadvantageous situations and turned such around to earn for themselves respect and esteem in death instead of the original ridicule that would have been their lot." [28] In fact, Balogun Ola was more eulogised and praised as a patriotic leader who died honourably. Olufunke opines that an extra verse was added to his *oriki* (praise poem) in which he was commended for this act. The *oriki* goes thus:

Balogun-o-b'omo-je, o kare
Omo Akin! O kare! Omo Eso!
Omo a m'erin-gun, omo a m'erin-so
Omo Oyinyin, a ke bi i wura
Omo Ogbagba la'gun ja
Orun rere o! [29]

Balogun, you did not spoil your name, you have done well
Son of the brave! You have done well! Son of Eso!

The one able to ride on an elephant; the one able to tether
an elephant

Son of Oyinyin, he who shines like gold
Son of Ogbagba, victorious in war
Enjoy your rest in the afterlife.

Closely related to the Yorùbá adage of *Iku ya j'esin* – death is a better alternative to shame is that suicide is preferable than to dishonour, disgrace and stigmatised the family names and lineages. One of the common sayings of the Yorubaa is that *oruko rere san ju wura ati fadaka lo* – good name is better than gold and money. This shows that the Yorùbás cherish names (good) above material wealth because it signifies their identity, personality and status in the

community. Hence, the Yorùbás consider it as a responsibility and duty for anyone to protect his family names and avoid any dishonourable act which could ruined and stigmatised the family.

Another factor that influences the permissibility of suicide in Yorùbá traditional thought is predicated on the societal structures of the African community, with Yorùbá inclusive. It is unambiguous and unequivocal that African society is communally situated. An individual in African community is inextricably connected to the society from which his personality, identity, and beingness is defined and deeply rooted. Obviously, an individual does not have an independent existence as his existence is connected to and fused with that of the society. As such, Ifenyi Menkiti espouses that in the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties. [30] Reflecting on this, Mbiti writes that:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate... whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." This is the cardinal point of understanding of the African view of man. [31]

In a community where collectivity and belongingness is highly prioritised, the Yorùbá adage says: *ohun ti o deba oju, o deba imu* – whatever affected the eye, affected the nose. Based on this, an individual is responsible to the community and as such should avoid any dishonourable act that could dishonour his community. In this case, Aborisade Olasunkanmi submits that the fear of tarnishing collective honour can cause an individual who found him or her selves at a cross road to commit suicide to save the community from disgrace. [32]

From another perspective, quality of life is essential in determining the worth and value of a good life. It is misleading to understand the quality of life in the sense of material wealth only. Suffices to say, the quality of life is premised largely on a good health. The Yorùbás, according to Bolatito Lanre-Abass, describes such life as *aye irorun, alaafia, ati idera* (a healthy life devoid of pain and suffering). [33] Without doubt, the Yorùbá believes in dignity in good health. The Yorùbá adage *alaafia logun oro* (health is wealth) is a pointer to this fact. Suicide is thus permissible when a person is suffering from terminal illness (*aisan ti o gbo'gun*), and excruciating pain. This is mostly done to avoid disgrace and shame. In as much as the Yorùbá values life and longevity of life which as earlier stated above is one of the basic requirements for attaining ancestorship, quality of life cannot be compromised for a quantity of life (longevity of life). Perhaps, it may asked, what is the beauty of a prolonged

life in suffering, pain, hunger, and poor health? In response, Lanre-Abass posits that:

If we conclude that a particular life is generally better not lived than lived, perhaps because it is the life of a terminally and chronically ill person, then we should express our conclusion by saying the life is not worth living (*aye inira. Irora ati aini alaafia*). The Yoruba emphasize the value of good health from which conclusions about a life worth living is often drawn for them, nothing is as valuable as good health (*kosi ohun ti oto alaafia*). This is well captured in the saying that *Alaafia ni oogun oro* (health is wealth) without a good health many set goals in life cannot be achieved. [34]

Like the Western culture, freedom is also well pronounced in an African society. That the African society is notoriously communalistic is not to say that they are compelled to act contrary to their wish. Quite the contrary, the concept of freedom and autonomy is also a prominent belief in African society. Corroborating this view, a Yorùbá adage says *bo se wuni lase imole eni* (one determine one's faith the way one deem fit). Suffices to say, if a person feels that his life has descended to a depths and as such not worth living, then, he is free to end his life. Reflecting on this, Ali Mazrui opines that "suicide becomes respectable when the life which it ends (had) at once aspired to great heights and (is now) descended to such depths." [35] Thus, as long as one is free to protect and preserve his life, so also is free to terminate it when life is meaningless and not worth living. In the same way, Lanre-Abass emphasises the dignity and quality of life as a fundamental purpose of human existence without which life is meaningless and not worth living. [36]

5. Conclusion

This study has examined thus far the idea of death and suicide in Yorùbá ontology. It is however evident from the above analysis that the idea of death in Western existentialists, notably, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus is diametrically opposed to the African perspectives of death, Yoruba inclusive. Death as conceived by Sartre and Camus is evil and renders life meaningless and hopeless. As such, death is seen not only as a limitation to the struggles, strivings, and existence of human, but also as a phenomenon which closes the door of all possibilities. On a contrary view, death in Yorùbá perspectives is life affirming as it is a basic requirement in the reinstatement of an ancestor. Nevertheless, contrary to Western existentialists, the Yorùbá distinguishes between bad and good death. This presupposes that not in all cases that death is good. For instance, the death of a pregnant woman, barren, and young ones. However, the death of the aged who lived a good life is celebrated and consequently are venerated as an ancestors. That is, the dead are "living dead" in the world beyond. The Yorùbá perspective of death is closely connected to various issues in African metaphysics, epistemology, religions, and existentialism.

The Yorùbá perspective of death is significant for human existence on various reasons. First, it points out that African notoriously believe in immortality. That is, the idea that there

is life after death and a death in the physical world occurs for the purpose of change and continuity in the world beyond. By implication, death is not finality, but a transition to another journey beyond. Second, it stresses the need for a good moral conduct in the society. This border on the issue of veneration of the ancestors. It is only a person who has done something heroic that is celebrated and venerated. Another significant is that it shows that there is a connected and interrelated relationship between the physical world and the spiritual world. This is conspicuous in ancestor's interference in the affairs of the living on earth.

This study has also examined the concept of suicide in Yoruba existentialist framework. The study shows that even though the preservation and the longevity of life is cherished and adored in Yoruba traditional thought, it however relinquished the longevity of life for a quality life which is fundamental for the purpose of a meaningful existence. Hence, unlike Camus rejections of suicide in any human conditions, Yorùbá believes that suicide is permissible in some cases when all necessary qualities of a good life are absence. *Iku ya j'esin*, a Yorùbá adage that prioritizes suicide over shame is the belief that some suicides are honourable. *Iku ya j'esin* in traditional Yorùbá thought is also expressed in Igbo culture as *odi ndu onwu ka nman* (one is better dead than alive). [37] Suicide, although an anti-social behaviour is not totally condemned in Yorùbá traditional thought.

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